WILLIAM GADDIS

THE RECOGNITIONS

INTRODUCTION BY

TOM McCARTHY

WILLIAM GADDIS (1922–1998) was born in Manhattan and reared on Long Island. He attended Harvard during World War II, but left without a degree in 1945. He was a fact-checker at *The New Yorker* for a little over a year, during which time he began writing short stories. In 1947 he embarked on a course of travel, living in Mexico, Panama, Spain, and France, while starting his first novel. *The Recognitions* was published in 1955 to largely negative reviews, though it found an underground following. Over the next twenty years, Gaddis was employed by various companies as an industrial writer, and taught part-time while working on his second novel, *J R*, which was finally published in 1975, winning the National Book Award. Ten years later he published his third novel, *Carpenter's Gothic*, which was also well received, and nine years later published his fourth novel, *A Frolic of His Own*, which won the National Book Award in 1994. Just before his death in 1998 he finished a novella, *Agapē Agape*, which was published in 2002 along with a collection of his essays, *The Rush for Second Place*. He was the recipient of grants and awards from the Rockefeller Foundation, Guggenheim Foundation, MacArthur Foundation, and Lannan Foundation, and was a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. His letters were published in 2013, and his work has been the subject of more than a dozen books and numerous essays. In addition to *The Recognitions*, New York Review Books also publishes *J R* as part of its Classics series.

TOM MCCARTHY is the author of four novels—*Remainder*, *Men in Space*, *C*, and *Satin Island*—and several works of criticism, including *Typewriters, Bombs, Jellyfish* (2017), a collection of essays published by New York Review Books. In 2013 he was awarded the inaugural Windham-Campbell Prize for Fiction by Yale University. He lives in Berlin.

WILLIAM H. GASS (1924–2017) was a novelist, short-story writer, essayist, critic, and professor of philosophy. NYRB Classics reissued his book-length essay *On Being Blue: A Philosophical Inquiry* and his short-story collection *In the Heart of the Heart of the Country* in 2014.

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INTRODUCTION

From Deeds to Seeds and Back Again

What better place to start than with a repetition—with a double repetition, one whose innate non-originality pulls the rug out from underneath all claims of "starting" or originating? I'm thinking of the hapless Otto, one of this novel's many would-be writers. While his contemporaries sign other authors' books, or slip their DIY dust jackets over these, or delude themselves into believing that they've penned the first lines of the *Duino Elegies*, Otto at least gathers enough snippets of overheard wisdom to patch together into his own play. The problem is that his potential publisher-producers, on reading the manuscript, find it so familiar that they're certain they've read it before, that it's plagiarized, although none of them can put their finger on the source.

The situation's emblematic: William Gaddis's work forces every writer into this uncomfortable position; it makes Ottos of us all. When the first novel I wrote was eventually (after two of its successors) published, a *New York Times* reviewer praised it as a tribute to *The Recognitions*—which I hadn't read but, when I

subsequently did, discovered had the same core plot. Thomas Pynchon hadn't read *The Recognitions* when he wrote *V.*, yet aren't his Whole Sick Crew, yo-yoing back and forth between New World and Old in search of some elusive grail, chips off the block of Gaddis's degenerate yet driven New York demimonde? And what must the Pynchon of *Vineland* have thought when he came across Ellery's throwaway mention of a man who jumps through windows as a TV stunt? Or the Vladimir Nabokov of *Ada*, with its quick-change alternation of originals and duplications, real flowers posing as fake ones in a Francophone copy shop's clutter, when he stumbled on the Bosch-topped table Reverend Gwyon passes as a copy so as to sneak it out of Spain, which his son, Wyatt, copies and exchanges with a dealer before heading off to Paris's carnival of replay in which, everything already having been done, there remains "no bud of possibility which had not opened in the permanent bloom of artificial flowers"?

It's not just literature either. Isn't Andy Warhol's painterly output reprised in advance by Gaddis's vision of modulating repetition in lined-up canvases, "the same picture from different angles, the same painting varying from easel to easel as different versions of a misunderstood truth," of studios "more an assembly line than a manufactory" turning out "mass-produced artifacts" of the world we live in—or, indeed, his filmic output by the looping, overlapping monologues of Gaddis's drugged-up art-world partygoers? Nor does it stop there: it reaches well into the future. Picture, if you will, Flavor Flav thumbing his copy of *The Recognitions* backstage at a 1990s Public Enemy gig, dipping into the same 1950s party scenes, gasping and double-taking at the entrance of Mr. Feddle, a luminary who goes about with an alarm clock strung around his neck . . .

Then again, the preemptive doubling, the originary non-originality, works two ways: like Otto's name, it runs backward as well as forward. The name of the novel's fraud-orchestrating lynchpin, Basil Valentine, appears in "Social Error," a Damon Runyon story published two full decades earlier: it belongs to a character who, in a move that will seem familiar to Gaddis's readers, in order to pass himself off as a legendary New York gangster when he's nothing of the sort, agrees to shoot a "rival" gangster with blank cartridges, only to have the blanks switched for real ones by a scheming *actual* rival of the "rival." The art-forgery career of Wyatt, the novel's protagonist, whose first drawing, "a picture, he said, of a robin, which looked like the letter *E* tipped to one side," not to mention that of Jim the Penman and many other counterfeiters in *The Recognitions*, is anticipated by that of Shem the Penman, James Joyce's own embedded writer-avatar who copies other writers' signatures "so as one day to utter an epical forged cheque on the public for his own private profit" in *Finnegans Wake*—a 1939 work whose hero is represented by, that's right, the letter *E* tipped to one side. But Gaddis hadn't read *Finnegans Wake* when he wrote his book. Nor, despite his novel's affirmation of experience relived or regained, had he read Proust. Had he, when he sketched his panning urban sweeps, visual-verbal collages of newspaper headlines, faces of subway passengers, and snatches of dialogue, read Alfred Döblin's 1929 groundbreaker *Berlin Alexanderplatz*? Had he read Jules Laforgue? Or H.D.? Who knows.

It strikes me that, while academically interesting, these questions are, at base, *fausses pistes*, red herrings. You don't need to have read Sophocles, or even Freud, to have an Oedipus complex, after all. If Gaddis's work both sends out and is racked by shock waves moving fore and aft and on all sides around it, this is because it's engaging—rigorously, unreservedly—with structures, processes, and patterns that are, have been, and always will be central to Western art and thought; not least, those that turn around the perennial fetish of *authenticity* and its flip side, the fraught issue of the copy.

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For Plato, only *eidos*—abstract, ideal "form"—is real. Everything else, including the entire physical, embodied world around us, is a mere reflection of that ideality, recast in the mold of *hyle* (corrupt matter). As for literature and art, they're even worse, a copy of a copy. Christianity imbibes and divinizes that thought: only God is real or "true"; the highest, truest form of knowledge is of God—and since humans, descended into bodies, fallen flesh, are de facto carnal, sinful, and in every way corrupted, it would be thoroughly hubristic to presume we could attain, much less originate, that knowledge.

The Recognitions forcefully restates this philosophical and theological schema, most notably through the figure of Aunt May. To young Wyatt's earliest artistic efforts (that tipped-*E* robin) she retorts by warning him not to usurp God's place: "Our Lord is the only true creator, and only sinful people try to emulate Him." She attempts to scare him with the cautionary Mother Goose rhyme about a "man of double deed, who sows his field without a seed," which Gaddis skillfully proceeds to interweave with the story of Origen, "that most extraordinary Father of the Church, whose third-century enthusiasm led him to castrate himself so that he might repeat the *hoc est corpus meum, Dominus*, without the distracting interference of the rearing shadow of the flesh . . . sowing his field without a seed" (although when we revisit the rhyme, some seventy pages and twenty-odd years after its recital by Aunt May, the opening has been amended to "There was a

man of double deed / Sowed his garden full of seed"). Thus a complex set of concerns, around fathering, reproducing, doubling, and conjuring up ex nihilo—acting as origi/en—are brought into alignment, all around the dual stars of some kind of sleight-of-hand-induced overabundance (on the one hand) and (on the other) barrenness, castration.

This is pretty much the orbit in which Wyatt's, and the novel's, transits and returns will move. His early-adult bid to gestate his own art career is cut off by the corrupt critic Crémer, who makes his way by cultivating gardens not of his own planting (demanding a percentage of all future sales in exchange for good write-ups). Even as a child, though, Wyatt has found that, paradoxically, while original artworks of his making are "vulgar" and tainted by "blemish," his copied ones near "that perfection to which only counterfeit can attain." His Munich tutor Koppel provides a more formal framework for this intuition, decrying "That romantic disease, originality, all around we see originality of incompetent idiots, they could draw nothing, paint nothing, just so the mess they make is original. . . . When you paint you do not try to be original . . . you do not invent shapes, you know them, auswendig wissen Sie, by heart . . ." The statement is half Marxist critique of bourgeois subjectivity, laying the ground logic for brazenly appropriative later artists and writers such as Sherrie Levine and Kathy Acker (both of whom, being female, stand ab ovo in a different relation to seeds and fatherhood), half sacred affirmation of devotional submission: for religious-icon painters, the "event" of a work was not its newness but the opposite, its plugging into an ongoing and staggered series of pulsing reiterations. Through Wyatt's pilgrim progress from aspiring artist to art forger, Gaddis effects an inversion, or implosion, of the entire rationale separating paternity or authorship from derivation or redoubling. As Valentine notes: "Most original people are forced to devote all their time to plagiarizing."

As I suggested earlier, these concerns are both classical and foundational. You can see them playing out in Shakespeare, for example, whose oeuvre (with its many lines copied straight from Ovid, Plutarch, or the authors of the previous *Leir*s and *Henry*s he reworked) demonstrates a near-obsession with questions of paternity versus illegitimacy or "bastardliness." Deploying a strikingly similar register to Gaddis's, Shakespeare writes, in *Venus and Adonis*:

> Seeds spring from seeds, and beauty breedeth beauty;
> Thou wast begot; to get, it is thy duty.

Urging the mystery male addressee of his *Sonnets* to start making babies, he argues that Nature

> . . . carved thee for her seal, and meant thereby
> Thou shouldst print more, not let that copy die.

Later in the sonnet sequence, though, he has decided that his own craft as a poet can regenerate his loved one's beauty better than Nature herself:

> All in war with Time for love of you,
> As he takes from you, I engraft you new.

Engraft: the term neatly combines the world of horticulture with that of image-carving and printing or writing. Through the brilliance of his pen, Shakespeare guarantees that "in eternal lines to time thou growest." Wyatt, though, finds no such neat artistic synthesis or resolution through his work. Rather, it fills him with a dissonance that drives him first to drink and then to near-psychotic fugue states in which all artistic and subjective coherence slips away, "Like when a clay reproduction is made of an original statue, and then they take the copy and cut it behind the head with fine wire, and behind the arms and the legs, and those are all moved and it's cast again." It's at the moment of *signing*, of attaching a name to a piece Wyatt genuinely experienced, while (re)making, as his "own," that everything unravels: "I attach the signature," he tells Valentine, "and . . . lose it." Accordingly, Gaddis sees to it that, after two and a half chapters, neither he the author nor any of his characters will "sign" for Wyatt, write or speak his name. From here on (as though the text weren't hard enough to parse already—although if you're after a quick, easy read you probably won't have picked up *The Recognitions* in the first place), Wyatt's presence will merely be implied through mirroring and reverse POV, his very lodging indicated by "the bell with no name."

As for Wyatt, so for all the others. Names, acts, whole identities are switched, misappropriated, doubled, or simply lost. By the end, the secondary cast has spawned two extra sets of people with their titles, though in some cases lost the use of these titles for themselves (that's when they haven't already swapped them out for liquor brand names earlier). It's not just nomenclatural; it's a general condition. Everyone repeats

everyone else's quips, rethinks their thoughts. Even their problems are "plagiarisms" of each other's. The text itself, right at the level of the sentence, turns at times into a kind of pastiche in which all actions and words are secondhand: Janet watches the unnamed Wyatt's homecoming "with a look of familiar wonder," recycling lines of scripture, while the Town Carpenter regurgitates snatches of poetry, the entire scene playing out as replay, as a form of ritualized reenactment. Experience thus cut loose from any innate (rather than imitative) moorings, we see not only characters but also existence *tout court* flailing about for some kind of coagulant, anchor, or compass: something to hold them together, to hold on to or just recognize . . .

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This vertigo, this casting loose into inauthenticity, is opened or precipitated through the realm of art. But it plays out, too, through another prime arena, one that Gaddis would go on to explore further in his next novel, *J R*: money. Not only does *The Recognitions* contain multiple digressions on the history of counterfeit coinage, it uses all currency, both fake and "real" (all coins and banknotes, being symbols stamped on matter, multiply redoubled signs exchangeable for something else, or just for one another, are by their nature artificial), as another fault line along which the Platonic-Christian category of the ideal or divine is shaken and brought crashing down. As a child in church at collection time, Wyatt tries to "circumvent surrender of the coin in the wet palm of his hand" while "a voice singing, he believed, from Heaven" (but which turns out to belong to a boardinghouse keeper) describes what he understands as God's credit-and-debit scam, His issue and recall of everything, and wonders "what use that covetous heavenly host could have for a nickel." Canonization is assessed in terms of its cost (three million lire for the hire of St. Peter's alone!). Metaphysics, as a nameless girl lying on a bed in Paris quips, is at base simply economics, "heaven . . . paying for . . . hell."

On a more phenomenological scale, too, within the metric and dimension of being situated in the space-time of a city, Being reveals itself, through Gaddis's extraordinary prose, to be both generated and sustained by processes of coining, spending, and, of course, counterfeiting. Thus we see Mr. Pivner, in one of the book's most brilliant passages, hurrying through New York streets in which

> No fragment of time nor space anywhere was wasted, every instant and every cubic centimeter crowded crushing outward upon the next with the concentrated activity of a continent spending itself upon a rock island, made a world to itself where no present existed. Each minute and each cubic inch was hurled against that which would follow, measured in terms of it, dictating a future as inevitable as the past, coined upon eight million counterfeits who moved with the plumbing weight of lead coated with the frenzied hope of quicksilver, protecting at every pass the cherished falsity of their milled edges against the threat of hardness in their neighbors as they were rung together, fallen from the Hand they feared but could no longer name, upon the pitiless table stretching all about them, tumbling there in all the desperate variety of which counterfeit is capable, from the perfect alloy recast under weight to the thudding heaviness of lead, and the thinly coated brittle terror of glass.

One of Gaddis's more telling anecdotes from the well-researched history of economics narrates how, "like so many of the mystic contrivances devised by priesthoods which slip, slide, and perish in lay hands," the early establishment of sovereign credit turned into an American cottage industry as tradesmen, barbers, and barkeeps issued money, while inspectors traveling from bank to bank to verify their currency's securitizing were thwarted by banks shifting the same pile of bullion from one on to the next a step ahead of them. The tale is allegorical: in this novel in which sovereignty of all types—artistic, personal, ontological—is slipping, sliding, perishing at every moment, it's not so much that there is no gold standard (although there isn't) as that the very *notion* of one, let alone attempts to exercise or ratify it, is continually thwarted by its substrate of misprision, by its grounding in sleight of hand, in double-deeded seed capital that's at once excessive and unguaranteed: a stock bubble or Ponzi scheme. Of course, we get our crashes; even when the system's working, though, it's operating through an endless set of slippages, exchanges unfixed by any index other than that of exchange itself . . .

If this seems abstract, let's dive into a specific audit by looking more closely at a section in which Gaddis's dexterity—the deftness and inventiveness with which he shifts his signs and stocks and markers from depository to depository, shuttles them around his novel's trading floor—is on full, glorious display. Chapter 5 of part 2 begins with a quotation from President Lincoln's Treasurer, addressed to the director of the Mint, urging that "The trust of our people in God should be declared on our national coins"—an act he calls a "national recognition." (Ezra Pound's father, interestingly, was also the director of the Mint; Pound,

describing visiting his workplace as a child, likens the testing of silver to "an aesthetic perception, like the critical sense . . . the habit of testing verbal manifestations." His later anti-Semitism would be tied up, like that of Shakespeare's Antonio in *The Merchant of Venice*, with his revulsion for usury, the practice of making money breed more money out of nothing.) We then see Frank Sinisterra, the self-same counterfeiter who, posing as a doctor earlier, caused the death of Wyatt's mother. He's prepping, donning wig and makeup, for a meeting at which he'll hand over a supply of counterfeit twenty-dollar bills to an underground (and previously unencountered) contact in a hotel lobby; having already forged the money, he's now busily forging himself. As he does so, amidst back-and-forth with his long-suffering wife about Judaism versus Christianity, he bemoans the arrest of Jim the Penman, "the greatest artist that there ever was," and boasts of his own artisanal skill, claiming that no more than a half dozen men "can pick up engraving tools and do what I can do."

We then cut to Mr. Pivner, setting out to meet, for the first time in decades, his estranged son, Otto, in the same hotel lobby. Pivner, too, is on a path of self-creation, with the help of Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, with its credo of virtue, faith, and other values "oriented toward the market place," of constructed authenticity ("I am talking about a real smile," we read over Pivner's shoulder). Then we see Otto, waiting for Pivner as arranged, mistaking Sinisterra for his father, preparing to "receive from that hand the clasp of recognition, pledge fealty, inherit the signet and the kingdom its seal perpetuated." Sinisterra, mistaking Otto for his contact, hands him the fake twenties, which Otto interprets as a paternal gift. Thus fatherhood and sovereignty (the kingdom) embark on a dance of comical misrecognition over the lit-up disco floor of artifice, the whole thing paid for, underwritten by fake currency. (The next day, Otto and his actual father will stand side by side in the same hotel's urinal, their generative members out, each completely unaware of who the other is; later still, Pivner will "adopt" the office boy Eddie Zefnic, before being accused of being a counterfeiter himself.) Otto, suddenly flush, goes about town flashing his (unbeknown to him, fake) cash, pretending to have sold his (unattributably "plagiarized") play, while Sinisterra and his actual intended contact (whom he belatedly connects with) follow him around in an attempt to get their money back, only to see him picked up for soliciting yet another made-up or "counterfeit" figure, an undercover policewoman. Realizing how awry his plans have gone, Sinisterra ends up hurrying off to church to confess to the sin of pride and light a candle for the recently deceased master forger Johnny the Gent, who "had humility."

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This last sequence is exemplary of how *The Recognitions* works: through an endless out-of-joint-ness, people and stories wander from their posts, encroach and interlope on situations not their own, scale up from low-lying levels (that of anecdotal aside, say) to momentous (grand-symbolic or plot-central) ones, or tumble down the other way, to turn into a background detail in another plot: slip, slide, and perish indeed. In Gaddis's galaxy, celestial objects heave into *mis*alignment, not alignment, with each other—and then, even that is only temporary; any reading we take at one point of transit will be out of date ten pages later. Navigating this book, then, involves a kind of sidereal tracking of the paths of moving bodies, of signs being transported from one context to another, fading, bursting, re-amalgamating elsewhere.

I would invite you to see this stellar ballet and its machinations as a kind of mise-en-scène of a process and mechanism central to the book, to literature itself—that is, to view it as a large-scale enactment of the very essence and machinery of *metaphor* (a term that, literally, means transporting or transposing, carrying across: ΜΕΤΑΦΟΡΑΙ is written on the side of every truck in Greece). Itself a category, or more accurately another fault line, in the history of philosophy, metaphor's consideration prompts Nietzsche to assert that truth itself is no more than (and note, once more, the Gaddis-like language here) "a mobile army of metaphors, metonymics, anthropomorphisms . . . a sum of human relations . . . poetically and rhetorically intensified . . . illusions of which one has forgotten that they *are* illusions . . . coins which have their obverse effaced and now are no longer of account as coins." Jacques Derrida, in "White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy," weighs Nietzsche's passage against Aristotle's earlier (equally Gaddis-like) assessment of metaphor, specifically the example of it proffered by Plato's student in his *Poetics*: the sun casting forth light like a sower casting forth seeds—a construct that (as Derrida points out), relies on "a long and hardly visible chain" of associations. All metaphors, claims Derrida, are "heliotropic," since like sunflowers they turn toward what is supposedly "true," present, and visible, the superior, extra-linguistic, sun-like origin and source of visibility. Yet, conversely (he continues), it's from inside language itself, its tropes and transpositions, that the illusion of absolute, transcendent presence is projected in the first place. Metaphor, properly understood, is doubly heliotropic; it involves a double transport: both the movement of sunflowers as they turn after a sun that slips from the horizon *and* the turning of the (always metaphorical) "sun" itself within language. While sub- or post-Platonic metaphysics keeps on turning and returning in its

bid to point toward a true, absolute, or (as it were) "gold-standard" sun, a radical, poetic version of philosophy would instead attempt to collapse the sun down into a sunflower and disgorge it, letting its seeds gush out without limit. This image, in turn, leads Derrida to consider the remarkable philosopher (and keeper of the Bibliothèque Nationale's coin collection) Georges Bataille, who describes, in his short 1930 essay "Sacrificial Mutilation and the Severed Ear of Vincent van Gogh," the Dutch artist's "solar obsession," the "overwhelming relations he maintained with the sun." The Arles sower paintings, which depict sunsets so vivid that they're virtually unbearable, or the sunflower series, whose subjects seem to writhe and wrench themselves apart, lead Bataille to suggest that the essence of van Gogh's auto-mutilation, and the truth of sacrifice in general, lies in the desire "to resemble perfectly an ideal term, generally described in mythology as a solar god who rips and tears out his own organs."

These are complex, sexy thoughts—but what concerns us most about them here is the way they intersect so vividly with Gaddis's own concerns. *The Recognitions* is, of course (as we have seen), constructed around an elaborate set of metaphors (sowing, "counterfeit" of all types, etc.), of metonymic chains (those series of associations and substitutions); of sums, whole networks, of human relations, poetically intensified. It's also awash with solar obsession: with the Mithraism that erupts through the weak skin of Gwyon's Christianity ("to teach them to observe Sunday, and keep sacred the twenty-fifth of December as the birthday of the sun. Natalis invicti, the Unconquered Sun . . . to worship the sun. . . . Herakles star-adorned, king of fire, ruler of the universe, thou sun, who with thy far-flung rays art the guardian of mortal life, with thy gleaming car revolving the wide circuit of thy course . . ."); or the mysticism of old alchemists who "had seen in gold the image of the sun, spun in the earth by its countless revolutions, then, when the sun might yet be taken for the image of God." The sun, too, is interwoven with the history of Origen ("under the cauterizing brilliance of the summer sun, reared up now as the winter sun struck from the south . . . short memories reached back, struggling toward Origen"), and thus with (church) fathering and its de-seeded flip-side non-progeniture. When "Dick," Gwyon's replacement as minister, visits him in the psychiatric institution to which he's been confined, the doctor mistakes him for "the son," repeating to Nurse Inch "The son . . . the son"—to which she, noting the sunshine outside, replies, "It's a beautiful day, doctor . . ."

This solar obsession, these overwhelmingly maintained sun relations, go hand in hand—as for Bataille's van Gogh—with sacrifice and (striking, cauterizing) mutilation: it starts with the slaughtering of Heracles, the ape who shares the sun-god's name, a ritualized exchange or payoff made by Gwyon to ransom his sick child back from the clutches of death; then, in similarly Mithraic fashion, there's the killing of the sun-god bull who's just coupled with Janet in her reenacted role as Helios's daughter Pasiphäe. Soon after, Anselm will replay Origen's automutilation, cutting his own genitals off with Gwyon's razor in a subway bathroom. In performing this last act, Anselm *literalizes* or becomes the end point of a metaphor chain that not only has run through the whole book but which was itself *already* and inherently, at least in its Mother Goose version, *about* chains of metaphor:

> *When the seed began to grow,*
> *'Twas like a garden full of snow;*
> *When the snow began to melt,*
> *'Twas like a ship without a belt;*
> *When that ship began to sail,*
> *'Twas like a bird without a tail . . .*

Etc. The procession of *'Twas like*s goes on and on until "a penknife in my heart" and the literality of "death and death and death indeed" put a stop to the poetic transpositions. Gwyon's Mithraic substitutions and transubstantiations, too, are ended when he finds *himself* sacrificed by his institutional cellmate who decides to replay the crucifixion with, or on, him. Thus metaphor flips over, via the desire for perfect resemblance of an ideal term, into its opposite, literality, fed back in an implosion, a collapse of metaphysics into matter, bodies, acts. Pivner may eat meat "that had got its succulent redness from sodium sulphite rubbed into it when it had turned toxic gray the day before," but there's nothing fake about the "fine gray texture . . . practically turning red" of the bread Wyatt and the others in the Spanish monastery chew on at the end: it's Gwyon's conflagrated, packaged, and postmarked flesh and blood, unwittingly consumed in a Sadean Eucharist.

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For a novel that is so relentlessly profane, *The Recognitions* is (as we have also seen) exceedingly steeped in religion. Or, rather, in religions: Calvinism, Catholicism, their pre-Christian feeds; Judaism; Buddhism, Jainism, Hinduism. . . . In the melting pot of the mid-1950s, with the emergence of the patchwork or pick-

and-mix belief systems so prevalent today, these blur together and with other categories such as lifestyle and aesthetics: “Do you know this new word, *Caprew* . . . ? It’s made up of the first two letters of Catholic, Protestant, and . . .” one tourist “pilgrim” in Spain asks another, to which the second replies: “Christ no, I just came over to see the art here.”

It may be from early Christianity that Gaddis takes his title—from Saint Clement of Rome’s third-century “theological romance” of the same name—but the term, in typical Gaddis fashion, far transcends its source context to wander, encroach, and interlope on scores of other situations. Art, even when earnestly copied, involves (as the devout Stanley understands) “that sudden familiarity, a sort of . . . recognition”; Wyatt, in his own inchoate artistic manifesto, claims that “the recognitions go much deeper, much further back, and I . . . this . . . the X-ray tests, and ultra-violet and infra-red, the experts with their photomicrography and . . . macrophotography, do you think that’s all there is to it? Some of them aren’t fools, they don’t just look for a hat or a beard, or a style they can recognize, they look with memories that . . . go beyond themselves, that go back to . . . where mine goes.” Pivner, reading the newspaper, scans his memory “for recognition” of its stories; Gwyon, after his wife’s death, accepts “funerary offers of drink” as “recognitions . . .” As Steven Moore’s invaluable (and online—use them!) annotations point out, variants on the word appear no fewer than eighty-one times in the text. Overall, it forms the book’s core concept—or, to revert to theological diction, dogma. In the intellectual framework of the Jewish mystical tradition, “recognition” might approximate to Walter Benjamin’s notion of “constellation,” that revelatory (and revolutionary) moment at which all things coalesce into a legible assemblage; in that of Puritanism, to a vision of the prewritten (by God) “script” at work behind the world, a sensibility that runs from Marvell all the way to Burroughs and Pynchon (who renames it “paranoia”); in that of Catholicism, to a Joycean metempsychosis in which word becomes flesh and both can be assimilated through ingestion (as the artist Margarita Gluzberg puts it, “Catholics eat death for breakfast”). In a “pure” literary framework, it’s not far off what Proust is trying to chart: not memory itself but rather the whole network of patterns, and the process of patterning, for which, poetically tapped, memory serves as the portal.

In his own working notes, Gaddis, too, explicitly links his title term with the word “pattern”—a coupling that, as a prompt for how to think this novel through, is spot-on. In virtually every setting, and at every scale (individual, institutional, technological, commentarial), the fundamental tendency or drive is toward pattern recognition, toward an apperception of the many patterns, macro and micro, that surround and shape us. What is Bicknall’s *Counterfeit Detector*, the tome used by Sinisterra as a professional measuring stick or handbook, if not a pattern-recognition manual? What is Bernie the tourist’s light meter, that he adjusts to correlate with “the bleak even color of the day,” if not (like Wyatt’s experts’ gizmos) a pattern-recognition device? Or day itself, “laid out, shreds of its first reluctance to appear still blown across its face . . . exposed passive and foolish at the lifting of chaos,” challenging its human occupants “to blunder upon its familiar features, its ribs and hollows . . . like the blind man identifying with a memory-sensitized hand the body of a familiar in what they had both called life”? Consciousness, at the base cognitive level, is (according to neuroscience’s “fool theory about recognition” that Wyatt recaps to his father) nothing more than the forepart of the brain receiving an impression an instant before the other half. “When it reaches the second half the brain recognizes it!”

Mr. Feddle, fixing the book a critic acquaintance is reviewing (but not reading) “with a look of myopic recognition,” notes its “pattern of bold elegance,” the “stark configurations” of its cover’s letterings which “intimate the origin of design.” Bernie the tourist, too, has a book’s cover, or title, forced upon his consciousness: he’s made to write it out, letter by letter, on a train by a gun-toting Wyatt whom Bernie’s wife (but not he, busy fiddling with that light meter and trying, Rorschach-like, to decipher the contours of his necktie) will later recognize. It’s *Transcendental Speculations on Apparent Design in the Fate of the Individual*, Schopenhauer’s great tome on pattern and agency, in which Schopenhauer makes the claim “that the systematic connectedness which we believe to have apprehended in the events of our lives is no more than an unconscious effect of our regulative and schematizing fantasy.” Wyatt, here, could be Gaddis, holding us all to ransom, shoving his book, and all the other books it has ingested, transubstantiated, in our faces, confronting us with its impassioned central claim: that everyone is a reader, moving at confusing speed across a landscape it behooves us to get some kind of traction on; that pattern recognition is the task, the stake, and the goal of all existence—on top of which, it also presents (through our propensity to over-recognize) a lure, a danger, one of many will-o’-the-wisps along the pilgrim path.

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That these exhortations and admonitions written (constellated, scripted, offered sacrificially to us who have for the most part, like Bernie or the critic, stubbornly resisted reading them) so brilliantly more than fifty years ago should (in their turn) find such powerful traction on our present moment shouldn’t, given their

transhistorical nature, surprise us. All the same . . . wow. In an age of diagnostic and predictive algorithms, QR codes, and facial recognition software, pattern recognition has become both *nomos* and *agon* of contemporary existence. And counterfeit, fraudulence, has become (or remains) its currency. It would be too easy to point out that at the time of this essay's writing, the most powerful office in the world is occupied by a grotesquely made-up con man who makes Sinisterra look decidedly sincere. More nuanced, perhaps, is the story of the strategist behind his rise, the double-shirted speculator who made his millions by buying out a *World of Warcraft* gold-farming company (that is, a platform that hires low-paid workers to amass in-game currency and sell it onward for real money to wealthier gamers), then reselling that to Goldman Sachs for $60 million (as Issie Lapowsky, the *Wired* journalist who reported on this story, commented: "Surely there's a metaphor in there somewhere"). This, in turn, might point us backward, via Pound, and prompt us to recall that *his* beloved fascism, in its first, Italian version, derived its imagery and title from a Roman symbol—the *fasces* or bound wooden rods—that was also to be found on the reverse side of the US Mercury dime. But maybe that would just be connectedness projection, false speculation.

More urgent, perhaps—and more in the spirit of Gaddis—would be to think our way through and out of this moment, to navigate it. One knee-jerk strategy, when faced with overwhelming and oppressive fraudulence in every walk of life, might be to call for a "return to authenticity." Yet as Theodor Adorno cautioned, authenticity, as ideological construct, is *itself* a core part of the problem. In a seminal 1964 essay of the same name, Adorno warns against "the jargon of authenticity" that "extends from philosophy and theology . . . to pedagogy, evening schools, and youth organizations, even to the elevated diction of the representatives of business and administration. . . . Whoever is versed in this jargon does not have to say what he thinks, does not even have to think it properly. The jargon takes over this task and devaluates thought" (note, yet again, the economic metaphor). More sinisterly, Adorno suggests that authenticity, as Weltanschauung, has intimate ties to fascism, furnishing the language that in turn "provides it [fascism] with a refuge." This last insight is vital to an understanding of our present political quandary: every single far-right power seizure of the last few years, from that of Trumpists in America to Brexiters in Britain to the Law and Justicers in Poland, has (just like those of the 1930s) been initiated and driven through by a sustained invocation of authenticity—"real Americans," the "true voice" of the "authentic British/Polish people"—and by demands for a supposedly lost "sovereignty." A political, intellectual, and aesthetic—or, indeed, ethical—strategy of opposition to these tendencies, I'd suggest, should consist of a turn *away from* sovereignty and its associated credos (uniqueness, "purity" of national and cultural mettle, etc.), and an embrace of the very type of commingled interdependence that the sovereignty fetishists abhor. As Giorgio Agamben, one of our more astute contemporary philosophers, puts it: "Ethics begins only when . . . the authentic and the proper have no other content than the inauthentic and the improper."

Gaddis, of course, knows all this in advance. He is at pains to point out that "recognition" is *not* the same as authenticity; nor is it the same as any other type of resolution or transcendence; nor as the negation, on any scale or level, individual or collective, of a basic fallenness; nor rescue from a given state of errancy. At the climax of the novel, as the deluded tourist pilgrims fawn over miracles of "rigorously authentic origin" and the assassin Inononu discusses the "authenticity" of Sinisterra's mummified Egyptian, Wyatt's trajectory is brought—briefly and strategically—into conjunction with that of yet another novelist, the "distinguished" middlebrow author Ludy, whose success lies in "explaining, not man to himself, but men to each other." Ludy, who picks up none of Wyatt's literary or theological allusions, longs for just this type of transcendent resolution, for this rescue, spending his time in the monastery waiting for "a religious experience" that he might then package in digestible paragraphs for his many readers, answering his key market demand—as he puts it to Wyatt, using a register that combines Platonism, Christianity, and nascent New Age vagueness, "A need for spiritual . . . something more spiritual than typewriters . . ."

Ludy may be "just" a literary figure, and a rather one-dimensional one at that, but he stands in for the doctrines of authenticity and self-redemption as they play out in all areas of life. If Gaddis steers his protagonist right up against these doctrines, it's in order to forcefully and pointedly veer him away from them again. In his new inauthentic guise as the fugitive art restorer "Stephen," Wyatt finishes off Ludy's attempt to describe the way one might encounter beautiful things without "shouting" about them with the words (theologically overtoned but also profanely accepting of an endless, pained worldly experience from which there's no release): "You suffer them." A few pages later, Stephen/Wyatt literally brings Ludy crashing down as, ejected from the monastery's inner haven, he (Wyatt) delivers his own counterdoctrine, claiming that the ultimate pilgrim trajectory, rather than beating open the doors of the sovereign kingdom and being gathered up into some kind of personal, artistic, and metaphysical salvation, follows instead another path: that of "going back and living it through." The path, in other words, of being cast out once more into lived (*re*lived, doubled, slipping, sliding, perishing) existence—which, being precisely that sphere which is *not* redeemed into divinely sanctioned unity, belongs de facto to the realm of the irresolubly

inauthentic. The path of being cast, through art and consciousness (or, pace Proust, through consciousness of consciousness), back out into the world, compelled to navigate and recognize its multiples and replications all over again, even when we who navigate and recognize are *ourselves* made up of nothing other than these very multiples and replications. This impossible situation is the basis of all possibility. To requote Agamben, who here seems to be speaking as one with Wyatt:

> We can have hope only in what is without remedy. That things are thus and thus—this is still in the world. But that this is irreparable, that this *thus* is without remedy, that we can contemplate it as such—this is the only passage outside the world. (The innermost character of salvation is that we are saved only at the point when we no longer want to be. At this point, there is salvation—but not for us.)
>
> —Tom McCarthy

THE RECOGNITIONS

> Nihil cavum neque sine signo apud Deum.
> —Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses*

For Sarah
The awakened, lips parted, the hope, the new ships

PART I

I

THE FIRST TURN OF THE SCREW

> mephistopheles (*leiser*): Was gibt es denn?
> wagner (*leiser*): Es wird ein Mensch gemacht.
>
> —Goethe, *Faust* II

Even camilla had enjoyed masquerades, of the safe sort where the mask may be dropped at that critical moment it presumes itself as reality. But the procession up the foreign hill, bounded by cypress trees, impelled by the monotone chanting of the priest and retarded by hesitations at the fourteen stations of the Cross (not to speak of the funeral carriage in which she was riding, a white horse-drawn vehicle which resembled a baroque confectionery stand), might have ruffled the shy countenance of her soul, if it had been discernible.

The Spanish affair was the way Reverend Gwyon referred to it afterwards: not casually, but with an air of reserved preoccupation. He had had a fondness for traveling, earlier in his life; and it was this impulse to extend his boundaries which had finally given chance the field necessary to its operation (in this case, a boat bound out for Spain), and cost the life of the woman he had married six years before.

—Buried over there with a lot of dead Catholics, was Aunt May's imprecation. Aunt May was his father's sister, a barren steadfast woman, Calvinistically faithful to the man who had been Reverend Gwyon before him. She saw her duty in any opportunity at true Christian umbrage. For the two families had more to resent than the widower's seemingly whimsical acceptance of his wife's death. They refused to forgive his not bringing Camilla's body home, for deposit in the clean Protestant soil of New England. It was their Cross, and they bore it away toward a bleak exclusive Calvary with admirable Puritan indignance.

This is what had happened.

In the early fall, the couple had sailed for Spain.

—Heaven only knows what they want to do over there, among all those . . . those foreigners, was one comment.

—A whole country full of them, too.

—And Catholic, growled Aunt May, refusing even to repeat the name of the ship they sailed on, as though she could sense the immediate disaster it portended, and the strife that would litter the seas with broken victories everywhere, which it anticipated by twenty years.

Nevertheless, they boarded the *Purdue Victory* and sailed out of Boston harbor, provided for against all inclemencies but these they were leaving behind, and those disasters of such scope and fortuitous originality which Christian courts of law and insurance companies, humbly arguing ad hominem, define as acts of God.

On All Saints' Day, seven days out and half the journey accomplished, God boarded the *Purdue Victory* and acted: Camilla was stricken with acute appendicitis.

The ship's surgeon was a spotty unshaven little man whose clothes, arrayed with smudges, drippings, and cigarette burns, were held about him by an extensive network of knotted string. The buttons down the front of those duck trousers had originally been made, with all of false economy's ingenious drear deception, of coated cardboard. After many launderings they persisted as a row of gray stumps posted along the gaping portals of his fly. Though a boutonnière sometimes appeared through some vacancy in his shirt-front, its petals, too, proved to be of paper, and he looked like the kind of man who scrapes foam from the top of a glass of beer with the spine of a dirty pocket comb, and cleans his nails at table with the tines of his salad fork, which things, indeed, he did. He diagnosed Camilla's difficulty as indigestion, and locked himself in his cabin. That was the morning.

In the afternoon the Captain came to fetch him, and was greeted by a scream so drawn with terror that even his doughty blood stopped. Leaving the surgeon in what was apparently an epileptic seizure, the Captain decided to attend the chore of Camilla himself; but as he strode toward the smoking saloon with the ship's operating kit under his arm, he glanced in again at the surgeon's porthole. There he saw the surgeon cross himself, and raise a glass of spirits in a cool and steady hand.

That settled it.

The eve of All Souls' lowered upon that sea in desolate disregard for sunset, and the surgeon appeared prodded from behind down the rolling parti-lit deck. Newly shaven, in a clean mess-boy's apron, he poised himself above the still woman to describe a phantasmagoria of crosses over his own chest, mouth, and forehead; conjured, kissed, and dismissed a cross at his calloused fingertips, and set to work. Before the mass supplications for souls in Purgatory had done rising from the lands now equidistant before and behind, he had managed to put an end to Camilla's suffering and to her life.

The subsequent inquiry discovered that the wretch (who had spent the rest of the voyage curled in a coil of rope reading alternatively the Book of Job and the Siamese National Railway's *Guide to Bangkok*) was no surgeon at all. Mr. Sinisterra was a fugitive, traveling under what, at the time of his departure, had seemed the most logical of desperate expedients: a set of false papers he had printed himself. (He had done this work with the same artistic attention to detail that he gave to banknotes, even to using Rembrandt's formula for the wax ground on his copper plate.) He was as distressed about the whole thing as anyone. Chance had played against him, cheated him of the unobtrusive retirement he had planned from his chronic profession, into the historical asylum of Iberia.

—*The first turn of the screw pays all debts*, he had muttered (crossing himself) in the stern of the *Purdue Victory*, where the deck shuddered underfoot as the blades of the single screw churned Boston's water beneath him; and the harbor itself, loath to let them depart, retained the sound of the ship's whistle after it had blown, to yield it only in reluctant particles after them until they moved in silence.

Now he found himself rescued from oblivion by agents of that country not Christian enough to rest assured in the faith that he would pay fully for his sins in the next world (Dante's eye-witness account of the dropsical torments being suffered even now in Malebolge by that pioneer Adamo da Brescia, who falsified the florin, notwithstanding), bent on seeing that he pay in this one. In the United States of America Mr. Sinisterra had been a counterfeiter. During the investigation, he tried a brief defense of his medical practice on the grounds that he had once assisted a vivisectionist in Tampa, Florida; and when this failed, he settled down to sullen grumbling about the Jews, earthly vanity, and quoted bits from Ecclesiastes, Alfonso Liguori, and Pope Pius IX, in answer to any accusatory question. Since it was not true that he had, as a distant tabloid reported, been trapped by alert Federal agents who found him substituting his own likeness for the gross features of Andrew Jackson on the American twenty-dollar note, Mr. Sinisterra paid this gratuitous slander little attention. But, like any sensitive artist caught in the toils of unsympathetic

critics, he still smarted severely from the review given his work on page one of *The National Counterfeit Detector Monthly* ("Nose in Jackson portrait appears bulbous due to heavy line from bridge . . ."); and soon enough thereafter, his passion for anonymity feeding upon his innate modesty amid walls of Malebolgian acclivity, he resolved upon a standard of such future excellence for his work, that jealous critics should never dare attack him as its author again. His contrition for the death which had occurred under his hand was genuine, and his penances sincere; still, he made no connection between that accident in the hands of God, and the career which lay in his own. He was soon at work on a hand-engraved steel plate, in the prison shop where license number tags were turned out.

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For the absence of a single constellation, the night sky might have been empty to the anxious eye of a Greek navigator, seeking the Pleiades, whose fall disappearance signaled the close of the seafaring season. The Pleiades had set while the *Purdue Victory* was still at sea, but no one sought them now, that galaxy of suns so far away that our own would rise and set unseen at such a distance: a constellation whose setting has inaugurated celebrations for those lying in graves from Aztec America to Japan, encouraging the Druids to their most solemn mystery of the reconstruction of the world, bringing to Persia the month of Mordad, and the angel of death.

Below, like a constellation whose configured stars only hazard to describe the figure imposed upon them by the tyranny of ancient imagination, where Argo in the southern sky is seen only with an inner eye of memory not one's own, so the ship against the horizonless sea of night left the lines which articulated its perfection to that same eye, where the most decayed and misused hulk assumed clean lines of grace beyond the disposition of its lights. "Obscure in parts and starless, as from prow / To mast, but other portions blaze with light," the *Purdue Victory* lay in the waters off Algeciras, and like Argo, who now can tell prow from stern? Vela, the sails? Carina, the keel? where she lies moored to the south celestial pole, and the end of the journey for the Golden Fleece.

The widower debarked in a lighter that cool clear November night, with one more piece of luggage than he had had when he set out. Gwyon had refused to permit burial at sea. He faced strenuous difficulties entering the port of Spain, most of which hung about an item listed as "Importación ilegal de carnes dañadas," difficulties surmounted only by payment of a huge fee covering the fine, duties, excises, imposts, tributes, and archiepiscopal dispensation, since the cadaver was obviously heretical in origin. The cumbrous bundle was finally sealed in a box of mahogany, which he carted about the country seeking a place suitable to its interment.

Eventually, on the rise behind the village of San Zwingli overlooking the rock-strewn plain of New Castile, Camilla Gwyon was sheltered in a walled space occupied by other rent-paying tenants, with a ceremony which would have shocked her progenitors out of their Calvinist composure, and might have startled her own Protestant self, if there had been any breath left to protest. But nothing untoward happened. The box slid into its high cove in the bóveda unrestrained by such churnings of the faithful as may have been going on around it, harassed by the introduction of this heretic guest in a land where even lepers had been burned or buried separately, for fear they communicate their disease to the dead around them. By evening her presence there was indigenous, unchallenged, among decayed floral tributes and wreaths made of beads, or of metal, among broken glass façades and rickety icons, names more ornate than her own, photographs under glass, among numerous children, and empty compartments waiting, for the moment receptacles of broken vases or a broken broom. Next to the photograph of a little cross-eyed girl in long white stockings, Camilla was left with Castile laid out at her feet, the harsh surface of its plain as indifferent to memory of what has passed upon it as the sea.

The Reverend Gwyon was then forty-four years old. He was a man above the middle height with thin and graying hair, a full face and flushed complexion. His clothing, although of the prescribed moribund color, had a subtle bit of dash to it which had troubled his superiors from the start. His breath, as he grew older, was scented more and more freshly with caraway, those seeds often used in flavoring schnapps, and his eyes would glow one moment with intense interest in the matter at hand, and the next be staring far beyond temporal bounds. He had, by now, the look of a man who was waiting for something which had happened long before.

As a youth in a New England college he had studied the Romance languages, mathematics, and majored in classical poetry and anthropology, a series of courses his family thought safely dismal since language was a student's proper concern, and nothing could offer a less carnal picture of the world than solid geometry. Anthropology they believed to be simply the inspection of old bones and measurement of heathen heads; and as for the classics, few suspected the liberties of Menander ("perfumed and in flowing robe, with languid step and slow . . ."). Evenings Gwyon spent closeted with Thomas Aquinas, or constructing, with

Roger Bacon, formidable geometrical proofs of God. Months and then years passed, in Divinity School, and the Seminary. Then he traveled among primitive cultures in America. He was doing missionary work. But from the outset he had little success in convincing his charges of their responsibility for a sin committed at the beginning of creation, one which, as they understood it, they were ready and capable (indeed, they carried charms to assure it) of duplicating themselves. He did no better convincing them that a man had died on a tree to save them all: an act which one old Indian, if Gwyon had translated correctly, regarded as "rank presumption." He recorded few conversions, and those were usually among women, the feeble, and heathen sick and in transit between this world and another, who accepted the Paradise he offered like children enlisted on an outing to an unfamiliar amusement park. Though one battered old warrior said he would be converted only on the certainty that he would end up in the lively Hell which Gwyon described: it sounded more the place for a man; and on hearing the bloody qualifications of this zealous candidate (who offered to add his mentor's scalp to his collection as guaranty), the missionary assured him that he would. But the tall men around him would have none of his ephemeral, guilt-ridden prospects, and continued to beatify trees, tempests, and other natural prodigies. In solemn convocation, called in alarm, his superiors decided that Gwyon was too young. He was certainly too interested in what he saw about him. He was called back to the Seminary for a refresher course, and it was at that time that he developed a taste for schnapps, and started the course of mithridatism which was to serve him so well in his later years.

As a youth in college he had also got interested in the worldly indulgence of the theater (though it was not true, as some had it years later when he was locked up, defenseless, that he had made pocket money while in Divinity School playing the anonymous end of a horse in a bawdy Scollay Square playhouse). As he observed, no theater can prosper without popular subscription; which may well have been why the sincere theatricals of religions more histrionic than his own appealed to him. It was why he donated a resplendent chasuble, black with gold-embroidered skulls-and-bones rampant down the back, to the priest at San Zwingli in Spain (whom he would have costumed like an archbishop had the poor fellow dared let him). It was why he had given money for a new plaster representation of the canonized wraith (though, as the priest said, what they dearly needed was a legitimate locally spawned patron saint) who watched over the interests of the multitude: to them he gave Camilla's clothes, and an assortment of tambourines. And that was why, in Christian turn, they reciprocated with the festival which committed the body he had shared to rest on earth, and cajoled the only soul he had ever sought toward heaven.

In the next few months, various reports were received at home concerning the pastor's sabbatical: rococo tales, adorned with every element but truth. It was not true that, to exercise the humility struck through him by this act of God (in later years he was heard to refer to the "unswerving punctuality of chance"), he had dressed himself in rags, rented three pitiful children, and was to be encountered daily by footloose tourists in a state of mendicant collapse before the Ritz hotel in Madrid; it was not true that he had stood the entire population of Málaga to drinks for three days and then conducted them on an experimental hike across the sea toward Africa, intending that the One he sought should manage it dry-shod; it was not true that he had married a hoary crone with bangles in her ears, proclaimed himself rightful heir to the throne of Abd-er-Rahman, and led an insurrection of the Moors on Córdoba. It was not even true that he had entered a Carthusian monastery as a novice.

He had entered a Franciscan monastery as a guest, in a cathartic measure which almost purged him of his life.

The Real Monasterio de Nuestra Señora de la Otra Vez had been finished in the fourteenth century by an order since extinguished. Its sense of guilt was so great, and measures of atonement so stringent, that those who came through alive were a source of embarrassment to lax groups of religious who coddled themselves with occasional food and sleep. When the great monastery was finished, with turreted walls, parapets, crenelations, machicolations, bartizans, a harrowing variety of domes and spires in staggering Romanesque, Byzantine effulgence, and Gothic run riot in mullioned windows, window tracings, and an immense rose window whose foliations were so elaborate that it was never furnished with glass, the brothers were brought forth and tried for heresy. *Homoiousian*, or *Homoousian*, that was the question. It had been settled one thousand years before when, at Nicæa, the fate of the Christian church hung on a diphthong: Homoousian, meaning of *one* substance. The brothers in faraway Estremadura had missed the Nicæan Creed, busy out of doors as they were, or up to their eyes in cold water, and they had never heard of Arius. They chose Homoiousian, of *like* substance, as a happier word than its tubular alternative (no one gave them a chance at Heteroousian), and were forthwith put into quiet dungeons which proved such havens of self-indulgence, unfurnished with any means of vexing the natural processes, that they died of very shame, unable even to summon such pornographic phantasms as had kept Saint Anthony rattling in the desert (for to tell the truth none of these excellent fellows knew for certain what a woman looked like, and each could, without divinely inspired effort, banish that image enhanced by centuries of currency among them, in

which She watched All with inflamed eyes fixed in the substantial antennae on Her chest). Their citadel passed from one group to another, until accommodating Franciscans accepted it to store their humble accumulation of generations of charity. These moved in, encumbered by pearl-encrusted robes, crowns too heavy for the human brow with the weight of precious stones, and white linen for the table service.

They had used the place well. Here, Brother Ambrosio had been put under an iron pot (he was still there) for refusing to go out and beg for his brethren. There was the spot where Abbot Shekinah (a convert) had set up his remarkable still. There was the cell where Fr. Eulalio, a thriving lunatic of eighty-six who was castigating himself for unchristian pride at having all the vowels in his name, and greatly revered for his continuous weeping, went blind in an ecstasy of such howling proportions that his canonization was assured. He was surnamed Epiclautos, 'weeping so much,' and the quicklime he had been rubbing into his eyes was put back into the garden where it belonged. And there, in the granary, was the place where an abbot, a bishop, and a bumblebee . . . but there are miracles of such wondrous proportions that they must be kept, guarded from ears so wanting in grace that disbelief blooms into ridicule.

They got on well enough, even with the Holy See, the slight difficulties which arose in the seventeenth century being quite understandable, for who could foresee what homely practice would next be denounced as a vice by the triple-tiered Italian in the Vatican. The Brothers were severely censured for encouraging geophagous inclinations among the local nobility, whose ladies they had inspirited with a craving for the taste of the local earth, as seasoning, or a dish in itself: it was, after all, Spanish earth. But the commotion died. The ladies were seduced by salt (it was Spanish salt, from Cádiz), and peace settled for two more centuries, broken only by occasional dousings of the church altar with flying milk by peasants who chose this fashion of delivering their tithes, or monks knocked senseless by flying stones when they were noticed beyond the walls.

No one had ever got round to installing central heating, or any other kind. In summer, no one thought of it; in winter the good Brothers were immobilized, stagnating round heavily clothed tables with braziers underneath which toasted their sandaled feet, warmed them as far as the privities, and left them, a good part of the time, little better than paraplegics. The winter Reverend Gwyon appeared was a particularly harsh one in Estremadura. He was admitted as a curiosity, for few had ever seen a living Protestante, let alone one of their caudillos. But for Fr. Manomuerta, the organist, their guest might have been invited elsewhere: had not the confessor to the young king recently declared that to eat with a Protestante was to nominate one's self for excommunication? not vitando, perhaps, but at the least implying the consequence of working for a living. Curiosity prevailed. And at Christmas, Fr. Manomuerta reported to his fraternity that he had witnessed (through the large keyhole) their heretic guest administer the Eucharist to himself in his room, a ceremony crude and lonely compared to their own. —He is a good man, Fr. Manomuerta told the others, —there is some of Christ in him . . . But a few of those others wanted Gwyon castigated for defiling their rite, and even those who did not credit him with an actual Black Mass felt there was no telling how much damage might have been done simply by his tampering. Fr. Manomuerta understood some of the English language and assured them no such thing had happened, but for those whose suspicions were not allayed, reward seemed imminent some days later.

Gwyon had impressed his hosts with his capacity for their red wine, inclined to sit drinking it down long after they had finished eating, wiped their silver on their linen napkins and hidden it, and padded away. But he finally succumbed to a bronchial condition which threatened to become pneumonia and give him opportunity to pay the highest of Protestant tributes to Holy Church by dying on the good Brothers' hands. In a small room whose window lay in the countenance of the church façade overlooking the town's muddy central plaza, he developed a delirium which recalled the legends of the venerated Eulalio Epiclautos to some, to others (better read) the demoniacal persecution of Saint Jean Vianney, the Curé d'Ars, whose presbytery was in a continual state of siege, demons throwing platters and smashing water jugs, drumming on tables, laughing fiendishly and even, one night, setting fire to the curtains round the curé's bed. Gwyon himself was a big man. It was considered wise to leave him alone during these visitations.

So he lay alone one evening, perspiring in spite of the cold, almost asleep to be wakened suddenly by the hand of his wife, on his shoulder as she used to wake him. He struggled up from the alcoved bed, across the room to the window where a cold light silently echoed passage. There was the moon, reaching a still arm behind him, to the bed where he had lain. He stood there unsteady in the cold, mumbling syllables which almost resolved into her name, as though he could recall, and summon back, a time before death entered the world, before accident, before magic, and before magic despaired, to become religion.

Clouds blew low over the town, shreds of dirty gray, threatening, like evil assembled in a hurry, disdained by the moon they could not obliterate.

Next day the Brothers, in apprehensive charity, loaded Gwyon onto a mule, and after conducting him as far as the floor of the valley, Fr. Manomuerta Godsped him with benediction and the exhortation to return.

Following a horrendous journey, Gwyon was delivered to the best hotel in the country, where he was left to recover.

At night, his was the only opened window in Madrid. Around him less than a million people closed outside shutters, sashes, inside shutters and curtains, hid behind locked and bolted doors themselves in congruent shapes of unconsciousness from the laden night as it passed. Through that open window he was wakened by lightning, and not to the lightning itself but the sudden absence of it, when the flash had wakened him to an eternal instant of half-consciousness and left him fully awake, chilled, alone and astonished at the sudden darkness where all had been light a moment before, chilled so thoroughly that the consciousness of it seemed to extend to every faintly seen object in the room, chilled with dread as the rain pounding against the sill pounded into his consciousness as though to engulf and drown it. —Did I close the study window? . . . The door to the carriage barn? Anything . . . did I leave anything out in the rain? Polly? . . . a doll he had had forty years before, mistress of a house under the birch trees in the afternoon sun, and those trees now, supple in the gale of wind charged inexhaustibly with water and darkness, the rest mud: the sense of something lost.

On the hill in San Zwingli the rain beat against the figure crucified in stone over the gate, arms flung out like a dancer. It beat against the bóveda, vault upon vault, bead flowers and metal wreaths, broken stems and glass broken like the glass in a picture frame over a name and a pitiful span of years where the cross-eyed girl in white stockings waited beside Camilla, and the water streamed into the empty vaults. Outside another wall enclosed a plot of grass long-grown and ragged over mounds which had sunk from prominence, to be located only by wooden triangles and crosses, unattended and askew in that fierce grass, unprotected like the bodies beneath whom poverty denied a free-standing house in death as it had in life, and faith alone availed them this disheveled refuge of consecrated ground, wet now.

Gwyon bounded out of bed in sudden alarm, his feet on the cold tile woke him to himself in Madrid and he stood shivering with life, and the sense of being engulfed in Spain's time, that, like her, he would never leave. He dressed with his usual care but more quickly, drank down a glass of coñac, and went out. The rain was over, When the huge gates were opened he walked into the formal winter wastes of the Retiro Park, waiting for the late sunrise, menaced on every hand by the motionless figures of monarchs.

In that undawned light the solid granite benches were commensurably sized and wrought to appear as the unburied caskets of children. Behind them the trees stood leafless, waiting for life but as yet coldly exposed in their differences, waiting formally arranged, like the moment of silence when one enters a party of people abruptly turned, holding their glasses at attention, a party of people all the wrong size. There, balanced upon pedestals, thrusting their own weight against the weight of time never yielded to nor beaten off but absorbed in the chipped vacancies, the weathering, the negligent unbending of white stone, waited figures of the unlaid past.

Gwyon fingered the stick under his arm, extended it, struck at a leaf which he missed. He looked again. Like his family they waited; and he stood in every moment of his blood's expenditure a stranger among them, and guilty at the life in him, for like these figures of stone, each block furrowed away from the other so that the legs were an entity, the cuirassed torso another, the head another, his family had surrounded him in a cold disjointed disapproval of life. As the statues bore the currents of the seasons his family had lived with rock-like negligence for time's passage, lives conceived in guilt and perpetuated in refusal. They had expected the same of him.

Each generation was a rehearsal of the one before, so that that family gradually formed the repetitive pattern of a Greek fret, interrupted only once in two centuries by a nine-year-old boy who had taken a look at his prospects, tied a string round his neck with a brick to the other end, and jumped from a footbridge into two feet of water. Courage aside, he had that family's tenacity of purpose, and drowned, a break in the pattern quickly obliterated by the calcimine of silence.

—Lost: one golden hour, set with sixty diamond minutes . . . Quoted in an oft-quoted sermon of his father's. Anything pleasurable could be counted upon to be, if not categorically evil, then worse, a waste of time. Sentimental virtues had long been rooted out of their systems. They did not regard the poor as necessarily God's friends. Poor in spirit was quite another thing. Hard work was the expression of gratitude He wanted, and, as things are arranged, money might be expected to accrue as incidental testimonial. (So came the money in Gwyon's family: since he disapproved of table delicacies, an earlier Gwyon had set up an oatmeal factory and done quite well. Since his descendants disapproved of almost everything else except compound interest, the fortune had grown near immodest proportions, only now being whittled down to size.)

Gwyon had married Camilla the year after his father's death. Everything was in order at the wedding except for an abrupt end to the wedding march on a triumphal high note. Miss Ardythe, who had attacked the organ regularly since a defrauding of her maidenhood at the turn of the century, had dropped stone

dead at the keyboard with her sharp chin on a high D. Then there was also Aunt May's disapproval of Camilla's father, the Town Carpenter, who was said to have Indian blood, and had a riotous time at the wedding. Aunt May preferred to exclude him from her scheme, since he had been baptized in Christian reason and his salvation was his own affair, unlike a harried group of Laplanders who were even then being pursued by representatives of one of the Societies through which she extended her Good works. Those heathen were a safe distance away, not likely to be found rolling down Summer Street at unseemly hours, singing unchristian songs.

Camilla had borne Gwyon a son and gone, virginal, to earth: virginal in the sight of man, at any rate. The white funeral carriage of San Zwingli was ordained for infants and maidens. For the tainted and corrupt there was a ponderous black vehicle which Gwyon had turned his back on the moment he saw it. —She would never ride in that, he murmured in English, speaking not to San Zwingli's priest who stood beside him, but as though to someone inside himself. And before they closed that casket for the last time, Gwyon had stopped them, to reach in and remove Camilla's earrings, heavy Byzantine hoops of gold which had contrasted the fine bones of her face all these last years of her life. In the first week of his marriage, a friend, an archaeologist whom he had not seen since, had shown them to Camilla, and noting the delicate pricks in her ears (done with needle and cork years before), said laughing, —You may have them if you can wear them . . . , not knowing Camilla, not knowing she would run from the room clutching the gold hoops, and surprised (though Gwyon was not) when she burst in again with wild luster in her eyes, wearing the gold earrings, blood all over them.

Now, with a few delicate lies and promise of a carboy of holy water from a notorious northern font, he secured the white carriage to bear her up the hill, renovated like that remontant goddess who annually clambered forth from the pool with her virginity renewed. In that perennial innocence, —If there had only been time . . . He could hear her voice in this wistful complaint all of her life. —If only there were time . . . , she would have asked him for instructions. —What shall *I* do, in a Purgatory? . . . where they all speak Spanish? I've never been in any kind of Purgatory before, and no one . . . I'm not afraid, you know I'm not afraid but . . . if you'll only tell me what I should do . . .

Gwyon struck vaguely at the woman's profile on the stone shield of Don Felipe V, who stood above him casting back from the concave surface of a noseless face the motionless cold fallen from the white peaks of the Sierra de Guadarrama to the north, down upon the city. —El aire de Madrid es tan sutil, que mata a un hombre y no apaga a un candil, he had read somewhere, and that deadly cold seemed to come not from outside but to diffuse itself through his body from the marrow in his bones. False dawn past, the sun prepared the sky for its appearance, and there, a shred of perfection abandoned unsuspecting at the earth's rim, lay the curve of the old moon, before the blaze which would rise behind it to extinguish the cold quiet of its reign.

A feeling of liberation came over Reverend Gwyon. Whether it was release from something, or into something, he could not tell. He felt that a decision had been made somewhere beyond his own consciousness: that he must follow its bent now, and discover its import later. There would be time.

There would be time: just as the sun sped up over the margin of the earth in the miracle of its appearance and then, assured in its accomplishment, climbed slowly into day.

Reverend Gwyon packed his things and moved slowly about the peninsula. He saw people and relics, motion and collapse, the accumulation of time in walls, the toppled gateways, mosaics in monochrome exposure brought to colors of Roman life when a pail of water was dashed over them, the broken faces of cathedrals where time had not gone by but been amassed, and they stood not as witnesses to its destruction but held it preserved. Walking in cities, he was pursued by the cries of peddlers, men buying bottles, selling brooms, their cries the sounds of men in agony. He was pursued down streets by the desperate hope of happiness in the broken tunes of barrel organs, and he stopped to watch children's games on the pavements, seeking there, as he sought in the cast of roofs, the delineations of stairs, passages, bedrooms, and kitchens left on walls still erect where the attached building had fallen, or the shadow of a chair-back on the repetitious tiling of a floor, indications of persistent pattern, and significant form. He visited cathedrals, the disemboweled mosque at Córdoba, the mighty pile at Granada, and that frantic Gothic demonstration at Burgos where Christ shown firmly nailed was once said to be fashioned from a stuffed human skin, but since had been passed as buffalo hide, a scarcer commodity, reminiscent, in his humor, of the mermaid composed from a monkey and a codfish. He collected things, each of a holy intention in isolation, but pagan in the variety of his choice. He even got to a bullfight when the season opened.

In all this, he encountered few people who knew San Zwingli. Those who had heard of it recalled the only event which had distinguished that town in a century's current of events. Twelve years before, an eleven-year-old girl had been brutally assaulted on her way home from her first communion. She died a few days later. The man who had done it was found to be infected with a disease which he believed such intercourse

with a virgin could cure, and since everything about her appearance confirmed her probable virginity, he stalked the little cross-eyed bride to this simple curative end. He was in prison.

San Zwingli appeared suddenly, at a curve in the railway, a town built of rocks against rock, streets pouring down between houses like beds of unused rivers, with the houses littered like boulders carelessly against each other along a mountain stream. Swallows dove and swept with appalling certainty at the tower of the church, and the air was filled with their morning cries, with the sound of water running and the braying of burros, and the distant voices of people. Gwyon had climbed to the pines behind the town, pausing to breathe and smell the delicious freshness of manure, to realize how his senses had fallen into disuse under the abuses of cities. The day deepened weightlessly, a feast day, crowds wandering through the streets, groups singing and playing, in one a boy with half an arm supporting a broken anis bottle played scratching accompaniment on that corrugated glass surface.

He rarely smoked, but he sat with a cigar after dinner, charging its exhaled smoke with the quickening breath of coñac, as he spoke with Señor Hermoso Hermoso about Spain and the giant Antaeus, whose strength was invincible as long as he stayed on earth, and Hercules, discovering this, lifted him up and crushed him in the air. —Spain . . . , Gwyon said, —the self-continence, and still I have a sense of ownership here, but even now . . . to outsiders, it seems to return their love at the moment, but once outside they find themselves shut out forever, their emptiness facing a void, a ragged surface that refuses to admit . . . there, Spain is still on the earth and we, in our country, we are being crushed in the air . . .

—What we are most in need of here, said Señor Hermoso, who had been listening politely, —is of course a patron saint of our own. Perhaps you note the lack during your visit? Perhaps our kind priest drew it to your attention . . . ? Señor Hermoso taught foreign languages, or would have, if anyone had found such preposterous instruments necessary, and he ran an approximation to a drugstore. His face was round, its limp flabby quality belied by an exquisite mustache and penetrating eyes. The part in his hair cut clean separation from the back of his neck through his widow's peak. —But such a thing costs money, so much money you know, he went on, raising his voice above the strident chords of a barrel organ which had stopped before their café. —Such sums of money that perhaps only someone of your position could understand? Too much, perhaps, it is to say, for these poor and ignorant people who need the blessed care of a patron saint so much . . . He paused, sniffed his coffee with forlorn expectation, but Gwyon did not interrupt. —Then I feel certain, like these people who are so good, perhaps our Little Girl (here he referred to that unfortunate child done in twelve years since) —was sent us for this purpose. The Lord does not err, true? Verily, as your Bible says, true? Verily, she was a saint, a little saint among us. Asking nothing for herself, living on the simplest fare, beans and rice, she . . . Señor Hermoso stopped, as though he might have lost his place in a speech carefully prepared and memorized beforehand. —Though, perhaps that was because she was so poor . . . ? he went on, reasoning helplessly, trying to recover his lines.

Gwyon tossed his cigar out to the street, where it was caught before it touched the ground. He mumbled something about Antaeus and straightened up, but Señor Hermoso took hold of his sleeve. —I remember so well, Señor Hermoso persisted, —you know, she would not use an unclean word. "My tongue will be the first part of me to touch the Host . . ." que fervorosa luna de miel para esta pequeña esposa de Jesús! . . . when she is so cruelly struck down by all that is base in man . . .

Gwyon got out to the steps which led down to the plaza. The streets were thronged, sparsely and dimly lit. —But there are ways, true? he left Señor Hermoso saying. —Our Lord points to us the right one? Many thousands of pesetas, millions of lire, he whispered, clasping his plump hands, forsaken, as Gwyon went down the steps. —There are ways . . .

In the streets below, Gwyon was hailed by sundry extremes of his wife's wardrobe, worn with sportive and occasionally necessitous disregard for original design. Her favorite long flowered evening skirt passed on three distinctly different little girls. Then one woman appeared wearing three of her dresses, each a pattern of holes, what remained of one supplying the lack in the others. Her green cloche hat, her Fifth Avenue hat looking as though it had been slept in and eaten out of, was jammed at a warlike angle on the head of the local match-seller. After the feast celebrated that morning, most of the paraphernalia had been put away, since the holy oils, holy water, and fly-specked holy wafers were kept under lock and key for fear they be stolen and used in sorcery.

But other holy appliances were kept handy, for a rousing ceremony to speed the foreign visitor who rested up on the hill. Reliquaries were opened, censers swung in dangerous arcs, beads fingered and psalters thumbed, water scattered, bells clattered, tapers lit, candles burned and gutted, Latin jumbled and coughed in monody. In this perfectly ordered chaos, over the black waves rising and falling in genuflection, the tide of sound ebbing and flooding, Gwyon was told that it was, really, a pity (lástima) that there was no patron saint to defend their rights and advance their cause by direct intervention. The new tambourines, though slightly out of place, were used to brilliant effect: their clamor enhanced the spirit of impatience in which,

presumably, the wistful laboring shade of Camilla Gwyon waited to be sprung to the gate of Paradise.

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They never forgave him for not bringing the body home. And Gwyon thought it wiser, or at least less complicating, never to brief the families on the extravagant disposition that had been made of the soul. —It certainly would have weighed a lot less, said Aunt May (speaking of the body), —than all this rubbish he brought back. The rubbish included a number of un-Protestant relics soon to darken the parsonage, among them a tailless monkey (it was a Barbary ape from Gibraltar, being held in quarantine) which the distracted woman had not yet seen.

Wyatt was four years old when his father returned alone from Spain, a small disgruntled person with sand-colored hair, hazel eyes which burned into green on angry occasion, and hands constantly busy, clutching and opening on nothing, breaking something, or picking his nose. He was in celebrant spirits that spring day, and observed the solemn homecoming by emptying the pot on which he meditated for an hour or so each morning into a floor register. Aunt May was there a moment later. She gave him a hard slap on the bottom, realized her mistake, and pondered with some bitterness the end of this Christian family while she washed her hands. She had just come from the father, who had told her about the impatient piece of luggage waiting in quarantine. Leaving his room brusquely, to take this revelation away and try to fit it into the hectic tangram of recent events, she had hardly reached the newel at the stairhead when she heard a crash. She returned to find the Reverend swaying unsteadily among the breakage of a Bennington ware pitcher, a peculiarly ugly thing of which she'd been very fond. The Reverend, who'd been about to change, now trying to pull his trousers back up, said something about the roll of a ship, and losing his balance when the chiffonier failed to move over and support him. If her sniff was meant simply to express disdain, a sharp attentive look came to her face as she repeated it, and she was about to speak when, from below decks, rose the hilarious sound of metal being banged against metal. Down the wide golden-oak front staircase vaulted Aunt May, traveling at a great rate but retaining the glasses clamped to her nose, thus her dignity.

—It's certainly reached the furnace by this time, she said when the child's father appeared, drying her hands on an old dishcloth. —You can smell it all over the house, she added in unnecessary comment to heighten the effect, and turned on Wyatt with, —Why did you do such a nasty thing? He stood looking behind her, at the picture of his mother on the mantel, a photograph made before Camilla was married. Aunt May gripped his small-boned shoulder in her hand and shook him. She was his Christian mentor. It was she who had washed his mouth out with laundry soap after the rabbit episode. —Do you enjoy the sme-ll? she went on, drawing the word out so that it seemed laden with odor itself.

—You'd better go to your room, said his father, in a voice stern only with effort, for this sudden demand for discipline was confusing.

—To his room! said the woman, as though she would lop off a hand as a lesson. —Why that boy . . .

—Go to your room, Wyatt. Reverend Gwyon was stern now, but for her, not the child; and Aunt May swept out of the room to write a hurried note rescinding a tea invitation to the ladies of the Use-Me Society. The father and son faced one another across the stark declivity of their different heights, the man staring wordless at this incarnation of something he had imagined long before, in a different life; the child staring beyond at his virgin mother.

Gwyon recovered himself, but before he could speak the sound which was not yet a word in his throat Wyatt had turned away and walked slowly up the stairs to his room, to a chair beside a closed window where he sat looking out upon the unfulfilled landscape of the spring, picking his nose, and seeming not to breathe.

Beyond the roof of the carriage barn, clouds conspired over Mount Lamentation. He looked there with open unblinking eyes as though in that direction lay the hopeless future which already existed, of which he was already fully aware, to which he was conclusively committed. His shoulders were drawn in, as though confirmed in the habit of being cold.

For one dedicate in the Lord's service, as Aunt May assured him that he was, Wyatt seemed already to have piled up a tidy store of sin. He could move in few directions without adding to it. His most remarkable accomplishment had occurred right after Hallowe'en. He was in his mother's sewing room going through the button drawer, in the afternoon when he should have been taking his nap, when she came in. She was dressed in white, and although she appeared to be looking for something, she did not seem to see him. He ran toward her, crying out with pleasure, but before he could reach her she turned and went out, at the instant Aunt May came through the door. —She was here, where did she go? Mother was here . . . , he started to Aunt May, with barely another word when that flesh-and-bloodless woman picked him up and took him to his bed, to force him down there with little more than a turn of her wrist, and leave him to "beseech the Lord" to help him stop lying. It was days later when Aunt May called him to her, shaking, with

an opened letter in her hand, and had him repeat that lie in detail. Quivering like the letter he stared at in her hand, he spoke with frightened reluctance, as though this were a device, logical for Aunt May, to promote more punishment. But when he was done Aunt May had him kneel beside his bed and pray to the Lord to help him forget it, pray to the Lord to forgive him. She even knelt with him.

The Lord had not helped him: he remembered it very well. There was some confusion in his mind when his father returned, for somehow his father and the Lord were the same person and he almost asked his father to help him forget it. That would not do, because Aunt May had told him never to tell his father. Didn't his father know? And if the Lord was everywhere, hadn't *He* seen Camilla come in, dressed in a white sheet, looking for something?

Aunt May never mentioned that again. But she lost no time telling his father about the rabbit. —I scarcely know how to tell you, she commenced, and when Gwyon looked satisfactorily alarmed she went on, —Your son has learned, somewhere, to swear. It's scarcely surprising, with a grandfather who talks to him just the way he talks to his cronies in the saloon, and fills him full of all kinds of drivel . . . She went on to explain that she had taken a toy away from Wyatt every time this happened (being lenient), until he was left with only one, a cloth rabbit. (For the truth of that, the words which cost him those treasures were *darn* and *heck:* she seemed to know their euphemistic derivation well enough.) —And then, the last straw, I . . . I can scarcely repeat his words. Though Heaven knows how they are engraved on my memory. He knew I was in the room, he was sitting on the floor with his last toy, this rabbit, and he said . . . your son said, as clearly as I'm speaking now, he said, "You're the by-Goddest rabbit I ever damn saw!" At which, hearing herself speak this, Aunt May almost sobbed crying out, —What kind of a Christian mi . . . mish . . . minister do you think he will make?

Wyatt was, in fact, finding the Christian system suspect. Memory of his fourth birthday party still weighed heavily in his mind. It had been planned cautiously by Aunt May, to the exact number of hats and favors and portions of cake. One guest, no friend to Wyatt (from a family "less fortunate than we are"), showed up with a staunchly party-bent brother. (Not only no friend: a week before he had challenged Wyatt through the fence behind the carriage barn with —Nyaa nyaa, suckinyerma's ti-it-ty . . .) Wyatt was taken to a dark corner, where he later reckoned all Good works were conceived, and told that it was the Christian thing to surrender his portion. So he entered his fifth year hatless among crepe-paper festoons, silent amid snapping crackers, empty of Christian love for the uninvited who asked him why he wasn't having any cake.

On Sunday mornings he would sit tugging buttons or strands of horsehair from the pew's upholstery, trying to work out a way to circumvent surrender of the coin in the wet palm of his hand. But the untoward moment always arrived, heralded by a voice singing, he believed, from Heaven, —All things come of Thee O Lord and of Thine own give we back to Thee. He later learned that it was no heavenly voice at all, but Mrs. Dorman, a dumpy deep-chested boarding-house keeper, strategically placed somewhere up in the vicinity of the bell tower. The rest of the congregation was being victimized by this ruse, and he might have enlightened them but for the prospect of the yellow bar of laundry soap. And aside from the actual buying power of five cents, it was the notion that it had once belonged to the Lord he resented: what use that covetous heavenly host could have for a nickel . . . —Praise God from whom all blessings flow, burst the choir, and the money was carried away in a wicker basket never to be seen on earth again.

Now, even before the day was out, Wyatt was back staring through his window. After the near-silent midday meal, Aunt May sent him to his room for singing an indecent song.

—Singing? Gwyon demanded.

—He was humming it.

—But . . . humming? How . . .

—He knows the words well enough. It's a saloon song, he learned it from that . . . that dirty old man.

The Town Carpenter had left his daughter's upbringing to an aunt and a silent cousin named Mary. He was a floridly untidy fellow, lopsided from pushing a plane, so he said, and could usually be found in the Depot Tavern when his working day was done, around eleven in the morning. Some years before, his own mother's death had robbed him of his main occupation: retrieving her from the foot of the granite Civil War monument in the center of town where she went when the house oppressed her, and squatted there in any weather cross-legged under a blanket. The Town Carpenter's one accomplishment to date had been fathering Camilla. As for the course of recent events, this man having taken her on as a spiritual and economic responsibility and then left her inoperative in a land surrounded by foreigners, mountains, and the sea: he was somewhat muddled. What he could make out with little difficulty was the disapproval of his dead wife's sister and the silent cousin, both of whom wanted the body back. From convenient habit he disagreed with them. This gave him good excuse for staying away from home. It was in the Depot Tavern that he received condolences, accepted funerary offers of drink, and, when these recognitions were

exhausted, he sank into the habit of talking familiarly about persons and places unknown to his cronies, so that several of them suspected him of reading. Vague as it had been, his period of mourning did not last long for his temper was not suited to it, and he was never known to mention his daughter's name, in the Depot Tavern at any rate, again.

In the immediate family, blood proved thicker than three thousand miles of sea water; and prospect of scandal precluded any schismatic activities the Gwyon blood might not have taken care of. They faded in thin-lipped silence, though there were a few, wavering souls haunted by Darwinian shadows of doubt, who, when the mocking companion from Gibraltar was discovered, made it known to one another that they had no intention of forgiving him, in this world or the next.

In the late spring Reverend Gwyon returned to the pulpit of the First Congregational Church. The people inherently respected him, for their fathers had held his father in almost as high regard as they held their own. The name had the weight of generations behind it since, two centuries before, Reverend John H. Gwyon had been butchered by disaffectionate Indians whose myth he had tried to replace with his own. Most of that congregation pointed out pillars of Puritan society among their forebears, who had never permitted maudlin attachment to other human beings to interfere with duty. To suffer a witch to live was as offensive to the God of Calvin, Luther, and Wesley, as it was to That of the Pope of Rome; and as though bent on surpassing the record of the Holy Inquisition in the neighborhood of Toulouse, where four hundred were burned in half a century, these stern hands kept the air of the New World clean the same way, and might well have been locked up had they appeared among this present posterity, but were wisely exiled in death. They had done their work, passed on the heritage of guilt. The rest was not their business.

This congregation admired the Reverend's bearing up, as they called it, under his suffering (though there were an evilly human few who envied him his Providence) and they had never had the full details of the Spanish affair. Enough to know that their minister was of familiar lineage, had suffered sore trials, and was now returned from temporal disasters to lead them unfaltering, by word and example, in the ways of Christian fortitude.

His sermons took up a lively course. In his loneliness, Gwyon found himself studying again. With the loss of Camilla he returned to the times before he had known her, among the Zuñi and Mojave, the Plains Indians and the Kwakiutl. He strayed far from his continent, and spent late hours of the night participating in dark practices from Borneo to Assam. On the desk before him, piled and spread broadcast about his study, lay Euripides and Saint Teresa of Avila, Denys the Carthusian, Plutarch, Clement of Rome, and the Apocryphal New Testament, copies of *Osservatore Romano* and a tract from the Society for the Prevention of Premature Burial. *De Contemptu Mundi*, *Historia di tutte l'Heresie*, *Christ and the Powers of Darkness*, *De Locis Infestis*, *Libellus de Terrificationibus Nocturnisque Tumultibus*, *Malay Magic*, *Religions des Peuples Noncivilisés*, *Le Culte de Dionysos en Attique*, *Philosophumena*, *Lexikon der Mythologie*. On a volume of Sir James Frazer (open to the heading, Sacrifice of the King's Son) lay opened *The Glories of Mary*, and there underlined, —There is no mysticism without Mary. Behind the yew trees, whose thickly conspired branches and poison berries guarded the windows, night after night passed over him, over the acts of Pilate, Coptic narratives, the *Pistis Sophia*, Thomas's account of the child Jesus turning his playmates into goats; but the book most often taken from its place was *Obras Completas de S Juan de la Cruz*, a volume large enough to hold a bottle of schnapps in the cavity cut ruthlessly out of the *Dark Night of the Soul*.

In church his congregation attended his sermons out of stern habit, and occasionally with something uncomfortably like active interest they were swayed. They even permitted him to regale them in Latin, and later, with growing incidence as years passed, he dashed their petrous visages with waves from distinctly pagan tongues, voluptuous Italian, which flowed over their northern souls like sunlit water over rocks. They had not much use for that slovenly race. He exhorted them to breathe out when they prayed, . . . or was it breathe in? No one, alone with God afterward, was certain. And when unrest showed on those gray shoals, he put them at dismal ease once more by reminding them that they were, even at that moment, being regarded from On High as a stiff-necked and uncircumcised generation of vipers: they found such reassurances comforting.

He even managed to re-institute wine for the grape juice prescribed by temperate elders in the celebration of the Eucharist, rousing his flock one sunny morning with the words, —Drink no longer water, but use a little wine for thy stomach's sake and thine often infirmities. That upset Aunt May, and though she could not presume to argue with Saint Paul the Apostle, it was at moments like this that she suspected him of never having really got over being Saul the Jew of Tarsus, with a nose like Saint Edmund, and those dirty intemperate habits Jews are famous for. Unlike her charity and that of her Societies, which never ventured south of the sixtieth parallel except for forays into darkest Africa, Gwyon's troubled everyone by reaching no further than the sound of his own voice for objects worthy of mercy. Janet, a girl with a tic which drew her head to one side in bright affirmative inclinations of idiocy, exemplar of a lapse from

Puritan morality on the part of her mother (done in by a surgical belt salesman from New York), was found sharing a slap and tickle with the church janitor behind the organ one night after choir practice. Janet had been born a number of minutes after her mother's death, which some including Aunt May regarded as a bad sign from the start. The incident behind the organ proved it, and Aunt May said something about the stocks and the pillory, a shame they'd gone out of fashion. —A shame to deprive us all of that satisfaction, Gwyon agreed. She was wary. —What do you mean? —The great satisfaction of seeing someone else punished for a deed of which we know ourselves capable. —But I . . . —What is more gratifying than this externalizing of our own evils? Another suffering in atonement for the vileness of our own imaginings . . . —Stop it! cried Aunt May, —I'm sure I have never had such thoughts. —Then how can you judge her crime, if you have never been so tempted? he asked quietly. —You . . . you are speaking like a heretic, Aunt May brought out, —a heretic from your church and your . . . and from your family . . . ! and she left the room.

The text for the following Sunday's sermon was taken from the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 7:1), and Janet became kitchen girl in Reverend Gwyon's household.

There were a few, of an intuitive nature seldom bred in such a community, who suspected his charity to be a mask behind which he dissembled a sense of humor to mock them all. The Town Carpenter was one of these. He commenced to appear regularly on Sunday mornings in the dimmer sections of the church, dressed in policeman suspenders and shirts so respectfully modest that they even concealed the usually prominent top button of his underwear.

The parsonage was a clapboard house whose interiors were done in dark paper and wainscoting. Most of the downstairs windows were darkened by outside trees. As the master unpacked, its character changed, realizing itself for the first time in sympathy with the obscurity. Watts's painting of Sir Galahad, in the hall leading to the study, was replaced by a small cross bearing a mirror in each extremity. A robin, a thrush, and a bluejay (mounted by a distant cousin who had found taxidermy the Way Out and was last seen in the Natural History Museum in Capetown, South Africa, drinking himself to death in a room full of rigid hummingbirds he had stuffed himself) gave up their niche to the defaced stone figure of a Spanish saint, Olalla. A picture of an unassuming elk skulking among empty trees was replaced by a copy of a painting by the elder Breughel; and Saint Anthony's insanity manifest in the desert was hung over the unfaded square caused and covered by a painting of Trees (done by a maiden relative long since gone to earth, and rescued now by Aunt May).

A large low table appeared under the window in the dining room. It was the prize of this incipient collection, priceless, although a price had been settled which Gwyon paid without question to the old Italian grandee who offered it sadly and in secret. This table top was the original (though some fainaiguing had been necessary at Italian customs, confirming it a fake to get it out of the country), a painting by Hieronymus Bosch portraying the Seven Deadly Sins in medieval (meddy-evil, the Reverend pronounced it, an unholy light in his eyes) indulgence. Under the glass which covered it, Christ stood with one maimed hand upraised, beneath him in rubrics, *Cave, Cave, D*^{s} *videt* . . .

—Catholic! said Aunt May, sounding anathema in her voice. She added something about Catholic, or Spanish, vanity anent the mirrors in the arms of the cross. Reverend Gwyon thought it best not to explain their purpose.

As for the distinctly heathen monkey, it was forced to live in the carriage barn.

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It is the bliss of childhood that we are being warped most when we know it the least. In the medievally construed parsonage Wyatt graduated from the potty to more exalting porcelain eminence, and learned to pick his nose with his forefinger instead of his thumb. He spent more time indoors than out, and there was a chill in those dim corridors which no change of season dispelled, passages where he was often found wandering aimlessly, or simply standing still, gazing at the grooves in the wainscoting or up at the concave molding, to listen to the creaks that came from the sharp angles of woodwork, to talk to himself repeating words and phrases over and over, and then to move as though he were being watched. He could stand until interrupted by the opening of the study door behind him, and his father's garbled exclamation of surprise at finding him there staring up at the cross mounting the four small mirrors, though he never asked about it; and there was only one hall he avoided, or hurried when he had to pass through it to the dining room, even then with a quick look over his shoulder at Olalla watching, noseless, from her niche, the hand upraised, which he fully expected to strike him from behind as he passed.

—Al-Shira-al-jamânija . . . , he whispered.

—What? What is it you're saying? Aunt May demanded, rounding a corner.

—Al-Shira-al-jamânija . . . the bright star of Yemen . . .

—Where do you hear things like that? she scolded. —Yemen indeed! And she turned him toward the

stairs, and sent him up to read in Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*, one of the books provided to prepare him for the Lord's work. From the first time he was asked, —Do you love the Lord Jesus? he was uncomfortably embarrassed; and since hate is an easier concept to embody than love, the Pope trod in far more substantial reality through the frightened corridors of his mind than did the Lord. At such an age, the Blood of the Lamb provoked no pleasant prospect for bathing; and resurrection a dispensable preoccupation for one who had not yet lived. If it was (as she said) in the way of God that he walked with Aunt May, he might only have protested that her horny feet prepared her where his did not: only the exclusive atmosphere of this thorny expedition proved for a time unwholesomely attractive, that, and promise that his mother had already arrived in that intermediate Elysium where he would join her, whither, even then, Aunt May led by a dead reckoning of Orphic proportion. To say nothing of fear, and less of terror, for the jealous God wielded by Aunt May made the sinner's landscape of after-Death more terrible even than his happy life on earth. —The devil finds work for idle hands, she taught him, and —In Adam's fall / We sinned all, with the grim penitence of one who had never had opportunity.

The two of them, father and son, grew away from her in opposite directions. Wyatt grew forward, escaping for the most part in casual innocence any who would hold him back with the selfish nostalgia of love. And his father seemed to find the adventure of daily life more and more trying. Reverend Gwyon retreated from it, by centuries, whenever he could escape to his study, where he sank, inhumed until her voice struck with the sharpness of a gravedigger's pick. As men whose sons are born to them late in life do often, he regarded Wyatt from a wondering distance, saw in his behavior a phantasy of perfect logic demonstrating those parts of himself which had had to grow in secret. It is true they shared confidences, but even these usually centered about oddments from the forepart of Gwyon's mind, topics he might have left a minute before in his study, from Ossian, or Theophrastus, to the Dog Star, a sun whose rising ushered in the inundation of the Nile, Al-Shira-al-jamânija, the star of heat and pestilence, which Gwyon spoke of familiarly when he found himself forced to conversation by the abrupt and even more shy presence of this fragment of himself he kept encountering. He even spoke his son's name unfamiliarly. (But there was reason for that. Months before the boy's birth, he and Camilla had agreed, if it were a son, to name him Stephen; and not until months after their son was born, and Aunt May had peremptorily supplied the name Wyatt from somewhere in the Gwyon genealogy, did they remember. Or rather, Camilla remembered, and though it might have been a safe choice, for the name's sake of the first Christian martyr, even to Aunt May, neither of them mentioned it to her, for baptism had already taken place.)

When questions of discipline arose, Gwyon's face took the look of a man who has been asked a question to which everyone else in the room knows the answer. Or when his son sat whining in disobedience Gwyon stood over him clutching his hands as though restraining the impulse to kill the child, then took him up foreignly by a hand and a foot and swung him back and forth in labored arcs until Wyatt shouted with pleasure.

It was Aunt May who kept the stern measure of the present, unredeemed though it might be, alive to practical purposes, binding the two of them together like an old piece of baling wire.

—Go and ask your father, she said often enough, when questions came up in the reading she thrust upon him. —Ask your father what Homoousian means . . . But a good half-hour later she found him, standing still in the hall outside the study door, whispering, —Homoousian? . . . Homo-oisian? . . .

—What's the matter? Why haven't you . . . what is the matter?

And a few minutes later Wyatt was sent to bed for saying he could not move, as though the mirrors in the arms of the cross on the wall had gripped him from behind.

Gwyon came out looking confused, and she explained petulantly. —He comes up with all sorts of fabrications, she went on, seeing her chance, —things he invents and pretends they are *so*, things he picks up Heaven knows where. He's told me about seven heavens, made out of different kinds of metal, indeed! Last night he said the stars were people's souls, and sorcerers could tell the good from the bad. Sorcerers! He must pick up this drivel from that dirty old man, that . . . grandfather, indeed! Telling him all sorts of things, witches drawing the moon down from the heavens . . .

—Umm . . . yes, Gwyon muttered, his hand on his chin, looking down thoughtfully. —In Thessaly . . .

—What?

—Eh? Yes, the umm . . . Thessalian witches, of course, they . . .

—Do you mean to say you . . . you're telling him this . . . filling him full of this nonsense?

—Well, it's . . . Vergil himself says umm . . . somewhere in the *Bucolics* . . .

—And I suppose that you told him that pearls are the precipitate of sunlight, striking through the water . . .

—The eighth *Bucolic*, isn't it, Carmina vel caelo . . .

—And he has you to thank, she went on, raising her voice in the dim hall, —for that idiotic story about

the Milky Way being the place where light shows through because the solid dome of heaven is badly put together?

—Theophrastus, yes, umm . . .

—And that tale about the sky being a sea, the celestial sea, and a man coming down a rope to undo an anchor that's gotten caught on a tombstone? . . .

Gwyon had been attending her with the expression of a man who's come on a bone in a mouthful of fishmeat; now he looked up as though understanding the tenor of her conversation for the first time. He began in a defensive mutter, —Gervase of Tilbury . . .

—His own father! and a Christian minister, telling him . . . and I've blamed that foolish old man.

—Why . . .

—Yes, why shouldn't he be foolish? Falling down a well, and coming up to say he'd seen the stars in broad daylight. Indeed! Of course I thought I had him to thank for that story about evil spirits who keep the path to Paradise dirty, and the path to . . . to Hell clean to fool good people!

Gwyon, backing into his study, commenced, —Among the Wathi-wathi . . .

—Wathi- . . . wathi! she cried out. —Is that a thing for a Christian . . .

—Is it any worse, Gwyon broke out suddenly, his back to the door, his figure filling the doorway; then he lowered his head and spoke more evenly, —any worse than some of the things you give him to read, the man who jumps into the bramble bush and scratches out both his eyes . . .

—Children . . .

—The man of double deed, who sows his field without a seed . . .

But she'd turned away, her heels already in piercing conflict with the sharp creaks of the wood around her: so her trenchant mumbling almost soothed the chill it rode on, summoning not this but fragments of an earlier conversation she'd luckily interrupted, the Town Carpenter with the boy cornered on the porch, confiding —Your Father thinks the Dog Star is a sun, but I've seen it, of course. I've seen it in daylight. I've seen it in broad daylight, I've seen all the stars in broad daylight, that day I fell into the well. There's too much light during the day, the air's full of it, but get to the bottom of a well, why, I go there still, to look at them, one day I'll take you down with me and you can see them too, the stars in broad daylight . . .

She got up the stairs, passed a closet jammed with the empty square tin boxes made and stamped with the labels of better days, when the family oatmeal factory had flourished, there she sniffed, settling the glasses on her nose, but did not pause, to enter her room, steady herself in her chair with the first book to hand, and she called Janet, for supper to be brought her there. The book unfortunately proved to be Buffon's *Natural History*, but she sat bound to it, sprung open upon the magot, "generally known by the name of the Barbary Ape. Of all the apes which have no tail, this animal can best endure the temperature of our climate. We have kept one for many years. In the summer it remained in the open air with pleasure; and in the winter, might be kept in the room without any fire. It was filthy, and of a sullen disposition: it equally made use of a grimace to show its anger, or express its sense of hunger: its motions were violent, its manners awkward, and its physiognomy rather ugly than ridiculous. Whenever it was offended, it grinned and showed its teeth . . ."

That evening Reverend Gwyon ate alone, staring out vacantly over the large dining-room table toward the low table under the window, where his son had finished a little while before.

Unlike children who are encouraged to down their food by the familiar spoon-scraped prize of happy animals cartooned on the bottom of the dish, Wyatt hurried through every drab meal to meet a Deadly Sin. Or occasionally he forgot his food, troubled by the presence of the underclothed Figure in the table's center, which he would stare at with the loveless eyes of childhood until interrupted. After he had been told the meaning of the rubric, he could be heard muttering in those dark hallways, —Cave, cave, Dominus videt.

Even Aunt May, despite her closely embraced anti-Papal inheritance, did not dispute this litany, for she still, like all the women before her, planned another respectable minister in the family. Recent revelations had only prompted her to renew her efforts. Wyatt overheard her one day discussing his future with Janet. The question was whether he would grow up sturdy enough to weather the winters of Lapland, where he would be carrying the Gospel. After that, he never asked the Lord to make him strong and healthy again.

There were several sides she found herself obliged to shield for him, and possible influences to anticipate and combat, in addition to Rome, which he was taught was the greatest agent of evil, poison, and depravity on earth (Aunt May seemed to know the full history of the Papal court at Avignon, the only time she was ever known to use the word brothel). She rehearsed him in the exquisite careers from the *Book of Martyrs*, read aloud to him from Doctor Young's *The Last Day*, and had him read aloud *The Grave* of Blair. Together, they read aloud Bishop Beilby Porteus, *Death*, while she discouraged him from spending time with Janet, from visiting the tenant in the carriage barn, and from going for walks with his grandfather. The parsonage was not a door or two from the church, as is usual, but exposed on a rise almost two blocks away, at the

opposite end of town from the direction of the Depot Tavern, an approach guarded by a curve in the highway whose warning arrow pointed the wrong way. It was almost a mile from there to the parsonage, through the short decorous nave of the main street, a mile which the Town Carpenter accomplished quite often and, when he was able and permitted, took his grandson on walks to a recently abandoned bridge works, managing, on these brief excursions, to contribute heavily to the store of "nonsense" which Aunt May battled so valiantly. Between the two men, she could never be quite sure where Wyatt picked up his prattle about griffins' eggs, alchemy, and that shocking, disgusting story about the woman and the bull; but when his curiosity turned upon great voyages, and figures like Kublai Khan, Tamerlane, and Prester John, she knew she had the Town Carpenter to thank.

Now, in the middle hours of a late fall afternoon, she stood on the west porch, pursing her lips, her elbows drawn up in her palms, watching the sky darken above Mount Lamentation. A piercing tinkle from down the hill caused her to draw her elbows in, and close her lips even more tightly. She did not move when she saw Wyatt come round from the entrance to the carriage barn and start up the hill toward her.

It was neither known, nor did anyone (except perhaps the Town Carpenter) trouble to wonder why the Reverend had named the Barbary ape Heracles. Most, in fact, took the easy way of ignorance, and believed the name of the tenant in the carriage barn to be Hercules, easy enough to explain for he was a sturdy fellow over three feet high, light yellowish-brown with a darker line along his cheeks, and parts of his hands and feet naked of hair. He was active, good-tempered, and took up a whole end of the barn with his cavorting and singing. He slept in an old sleigh. When he thought it was mealtime, when he wanted company, or sometimes it seemed had simply the effervescence of some message to communicate, he rang the sleighbells furiously. A white rabbit given him for company proved his gentle nature mawkish. He sat with it cradled in his arms, singing. But his best friend was still the child who came down to give him cod-liver oil from the same bottle and spoon he used himself (a tie Aunt May did not know of), and spent hours devoting confidences to him. Heracles scratched his chin thoughtfully when asked questions, bowing his head in much the same manner, if anyone had noticed it, as Reverend Gwyon did. For at other hours Gwyon came too, always alone, always smelling better than anyone else, the faint freshness of caraway. He asked questions too.

But as he grew older, Heracles sang less often. He took to sitting sullenly in the sleigh looking far beyond the walls of the barn, as though dreaming of days under the Moroccan sun, in another generation, stealing from the gardens of the Arabs. He had never met Aunt May. He knew her thin shape, appearing to hang clothes on the line (where she inclined to hang male and female garments separately, or directed Janet to do so), or coming out alone with a trowel and scissors to tend the hawthorn tree on the edge of the upper lawn. He knew her singing voice too, and he hated it. She had never seen Heracles, and never mentioned him, but drew her lips tightly together and looked in another direction when his name came into conversation. So disquieting to her Christian scheme that she had never mentioned it, nor admitted it even to herself, was the sense that this monkey had replaced Camilla.

—Now where have you been? she demanded as Wyatt came up the steps, but her voice was almost gentle. —And what is the matter, have you been crying? He rubbed his eyes, and then drew his hand down over his face, but did not answer a word. —You look feverish, she said as he took her skirts in the sudden self-effacing embrace of childhood, and thus hobbled, she led him into the house. —Today is your mother's birthday, she said, once inside, and then, —You have dirt all over your hands.

—What is a hero? he asked abruptly, separating himself and looking up at her.

—A hero? she repeated. —A hero is someone who serves something higher than himself with undying devotion.

—But . . . how does he know what it is? he asked, standing there, grinding one grimy hand in the other before her.

—The real hero does not need to question, she said. —The Lord tells him his duty.

—How does He tell him?

—As He told John Huss, she answered readily, seating herself, reaching back with assurance to summon that "pale thin man in mean attire," and she started to detail the career of the great Bohemian reformer, from his teachings and triumphs under the good King Wenceslaus to his betrayal by the Emperor Sigismund.

—And what happened to him then?

—He was burned at the stake, she said with bitter satisfaction, as footsteps were heard in a hall from the direction of the study, —with the Kyrie eleison on his lips . . . Here, where are you going? What have you been up to . . . ? He had turned away, but Gwyon stood filling the doorway, and between them the child started to cry. Gwyon raised a hand nervously, uncertain whether to punish or defend, and Aunt May took up, —What have you done? I know that guilty look on your face, what is it?

—Go to your room, Gwyon brought out, trying to rescue him.

Aunt May started from her chair with, —To his room! . . . but Gwyon's upraised hand seemed to halt her, and she turned on the small retreating figure with, —To your room, go to your room then, and read . . . read what we've been reading, and I'll be up before supper to see if you know it.

—What have you been reading? Gwyon asked her, a strain in his voice.

—He's learning about the Synod of Dort.

—Dort? Gwyon mumbled, dropping his hand.

—Dort. The final perseverance of the saints. Good heavens, you . . .

—But . . . the child . . .

—Did you see the guilty look on his face? His sinful . . .

—Sinned! Where has he sinned . . . already . . .

—That you, as a Christian minister, can ask that? You . . . Suddenly she came closer to Gwyon, who stepped back into the hall away from the assault of her voice. —Not his sin then, but the prospect, she came on in a hoarse breathless voice, near a whisper, as though she were going to cry out or weep herself, —the prospect draws him on, the prospect of sin.

She stood there quivering, until the sound of Gwyon's footsteps had disappeared back down the hall. Then she sniffed, biting her lower lip, and stepped into the hall herself.

Later that evening Reverend Gwyon stood over the littered desk in his study, staring through the glass at the darkness beyond. —The final perseverance of the saints! he muttered. Then he turned to the door, as though he had heard a sound there. He waited, a hand out to the doorknob, for the faint knock to be repeated, but there was nothing. He had just turned away when he heard a creaking in the corridor, but whether it was someone moving slowly and carefully away, or only renewed betrayal of the constant conflict among those sharp angles of woodwork, he never knew.

The house was large and, perhaps it was the unchanging, ungratified yearning in the face of Camilla on the living-room mantel, eyed from the wall across by the dour John H., it held a sense of bereavement about it, though no one had come or gone for a long time.

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While even Aunt May's medieval posture could not credit her stomach as a cauldron where food was cooked by heat from the adjacent liver, she sought evidences of the Lord's displeasure in foreign catastrophes and other people's difficulties, and usually found good reason for it. Among provinces where He retained sway was that of creativity; and mortal creative work was definitely one of His damnedest things. She herself had never gone beyond a sampler, atoning there in word and deed for any presumption she might have made, at the age of ten, in assuming creative powers:

> Jesus permit thy gracious name to stand
> As the first effots of an infants hand
> And while her fingers o'er this canvass move
> Engage her tender heart to seek thy love
> With thy dear children let her share a part
> And write thy name thy self upon her heart

That absent *r* was not, like the flaw in Oriental carpets, an intentional measure of humility introduced to appease the Creator of perfection: she had been upset about it now for half a century, and would have torn out her mistake with her teeth as a child, had not a weary parental hand stopped her. (So she worked NO CROSS NO CROWN in needle-point, still hung unfaded in her room.)

But it was why Wyatt's first drawing, a picture, he said, of a robin, which looked like the letter *E* tipped to one side, brought for her approval, met with —Don't you love our Lord Jesus, after all? He said he did. —Then why do you try to take His place? Our Lord is the only true creator, and only sinful people try to emulate Him, she went on, her voice sinking to that patient tone it assumed when it promised most danger. —Do you remember Lucifer? who Lucifer is?

—Lucifer is the morning star, he began hopefully, —Father says . . .

—Father says! . . . her voice cut him through. —Lucifer was the archangel who refused to serve Our Lord. To sin is to falsify something in the Divine Order, and that is what Lucifer did. His name means Bringer of Light but he was not satisfied to bring the light of Our Lord to man, he tried to steal the power of Our Lord and to bring his own light to man. He tried to become original, she pronounced malignantly, shaping that word round the whole structure of damnation, repeating it, crumpling the drawing of the robin in her hand, —original, to steal Our Lord's authority, to command his own destiny, to bear his own light! That is why

Satan is the Fallen Angel, for he rebelled when he tried to emulate Our Lord Jesus. And he won his own domain, didn't he. Didn't he! And his own light is the light of the fires of Hell! Is that what you want? Is that what you want? Is that what you want?

There may have been, by now, many things that Wyatt wanted to do to Jesus: emulate was not one of them. Nonetheless it went on. He made drawings in secret, and kept them hidden, terrified with guilty amazement as forms took shape under his pencil. He wrapped some in a newspaper and buried them behind the carriage barn, more convinced, as those years passed, and his talent blossomed and flourished with the luxuriance of the green bay tree, that he was damned. Once, digging back there, he came upon the rotted remains of the bird he had killed that day he had burst into tears at Aunt May's conjectural challenge and punishment, the vivid details of the Synod of Dort: even that evening he had gone to his father's study to try to confess it, for it had, after all, been an accident (he had thrown a stone at the wren, and could not believe it when he hit it square, and picked it up dead). But when there was no answer to his first faint tapping on the study door, he retreated. Just as now, he almost went to his father to confess, in a last hope of being saved; but he had since learned from Aunt May that there was no more hope for the damned than there was fear for the Elect. And his father, withdrawing into his study with a deftness for absenting himself at crucial moments akin to that talent of the Lord, had become about as unattainable.

The earth behind the carriage barn was broken often enough that Wyatt, burying there still another package of drawings, would turn up the moldering guilt of years before. Even as he grew older, and might have burned them, he found himself unable to do so. He continued to bury them, around near the kitchen midden, as though they might one day be required of him.

Eventually Aunt May permitted him to copy, illustrations from some of the leather-bound marathons of suffering and disaster on her shelf; but even she had no notion of the extent of his work. It was hardly original, but derived from the horror of the Breughel copy in his father's study, and the pitilessness of the Bosch, promoting an articulate imagination which any Flemish primitive might have plumbed to advantage. Unlike the healthy child who devises ingenious tortures for small animals, Wyatt elaborated a domain where the agony of man took remarkable directions, and the underclothed Figure from the center of the Bosch table suffered a variety of undignified afflictions.

Transportation and communication advanced, bringing to Aunt May's door the woes of the world, a world which she saw a worse thing daily.

She put aside the Bible only for excursions among the *Lives, Sufferings, and Triumphant Deaths of the Primitive Protestant Martyrs from the Introduction of Christianity to the Latest Periods of Pagan, Popish, and Infidel Persecutions* ("embellished with engravings"), and such recent prophets as stood her in stead of newspapers. She read interpretations of the eleventh-century Malachi prophecy (on the Popes, of which only seven remained to come, and with the seventh the destruction of Rome) with the avidity of someone reading the morning's news, the same enthusiasm she brought to the *Penetralia* of Andrew Jackson Davis (who could see the interior of objects), the same hunger that she brought to William Miller, satisfied as he was a century before that the end of the world was at hand, as evidence continued to "flow in from every quarter. 'The earth is reeling to and fro like a drunkard.' At this dread moment look! The clouds have burst asunder; the heavens appear; the great white throne is in sight! Amazement fills the Universe with awe! He comes! He comes! Behold the Saviour comes!"

She waited, thumbing the Revelation of Saint John the Divine, which she read as a literal transcription of the march of science, a parade led off by Darwin which had trod on simian feet throughout her life. She spent more time with Janet; or rather, she had Janet spend more time with her. After her original disapproval of the kitchen girl had been firmly established, Aunt May worked her toward salvation with every discouragement she could supply. Janet was willing. She was, indeed, far on the way to that simple-mindedness which many despairingly intelligent people believe requisite for entering the kingdom of Heaven. This quality might prevent her from grasping some of the more complicated arcana which Aunt May tendered, still there was room for the residence of terror in the collapsing tenement of her mind. Darwin soon became as real to her as the Pope, the one resembling Heracles, the other triple-headed. From the carriage barn, the jingle of sleighbells reached them both. Aunt May, believing that she shut them out, hid them from herself in that part of her mind which turned upon her in dreams; Janet seemed to rush out to meet the hellish tinkling, and it was only on waking that her dreams began. But of all the distress that Janet endured, most persistent was her body's revenge on her attempt to disdain it. At first, hardly knowing how man and woman differed, she accepted the changes which grew upon her with no more regret than life itself produced. It was Aunt May who called her attention to the darkening of her chin, and asked questions of such profound delicacy that, when confirmed, the consternation which descended upon the questioner was only equaled in that household by her reception of the news of the Scopes trial in distant Tennessee. Of that she could hardly speak, but sat shaking her head over Buffon's *Natural History*, reading again and again

the article there on the animals called pygmies, and waiting, as though what she was waiting for was a secret from everyone but herself and her Creator.

Aunt May gradually withdrew from the affairs of the household, reading the Bible aloud to herself in her room, her voice only a sound barely broken by articulation. In this monotone it became so familiar a part of the house, that one paused when it was deflected, hearing it rise in pleading argument to the challenge of absolutes, —*I am* the Resurrection and the Life . . . , so plaintive that it seemed querulous, fearful not of doubting but of even admitting for an instant such existential possibility. Then the glimpse of humility was done, and the voice recovered the somnambulance of certitude.

She waited, her hair bobbed (not worn so for fashion from the outside world, where flappers were ushering it into smart society from the bawdy houses, where all fashions originate, but) in the clean shingles of a state hospital, always in the same trim arrangement, raising a clinically unsympathetic mirror to snip hairs from her nostrils. —This would be your grandfather's birthday, she told Wyatt, on May Day. —He would be eighty-six today, if he were alive, she added. She had been talking about John Huss a minute before, and looking the lean pale boy up and down, when he, for whom King Wenceslaus in that story bore striking resemblance to the Town Carpenter, broke out,

—But Grandfather, I . . . I saw him yesterday . . .

—Your father's father, she corrected him sharply, but her voice broke, almost bitter as she looked away, not for the death of her brother but to insinuate that he had abandoned her in this bondage of mortality. She talked to Wyatt familiarly of death, as though to take him with her would be the kindest expression of her love for him possible: still, she never spoke directly of death, never named it so, but continued to treat it with the euphemistic care reserved elsewhere for obscenity.

—And this? she appeared one morning in the study door poised rigid, dangling forth a pamphlet between forefinger and opposable thumb, —tell me how *this* got among *my* things? As though there might have been movement in the air, the pamphlet fluttered open, quaking its suspended title: *Breve Guida della Basilica di San Clemente*. In his chair, Gwyon startled, to reach for it, but stayed held at bay by her unpliant arm, and unyielding eyes which had fixed the distance between them. With a single shudder he freed his own eyes from hers and fixed them on the pamphlet, to realize that it was indeed not being offered in return but rather in evidence: not an instant of her stringent apparition suggested surrender. —Another souvenir from Spain! she accused, a page headed in bold face *La Basilica Sotterranea Dedicata alla memoria di S Clemente Papa e Martire* fled under her thumb. —Pictures of Spanish idols, . . . fragments of Byzantine fresco captioned *Nostra Signora col Gesù Bambino* almost caught her attention, —Catholic images . . . Another page fell over from the hand quivering at her arm's length, and bringing her foot a step past the sill she held it out that space closer to him: nothing moved. But the sill's sharp creak underfoot penetrated, a signal for her to hurl it at him, or down; for him to leap and snatch it. But nothing moved until she retired recovering her advance, and spoke with bitter calm, looking square at the thing, —A nice . . . place of worship! The illustration pinioned by her gaze was captioned *Il Tempio di Mitra*. —Look at it! a dirty little underground cave, no place to kneel or even sit down, unless you could call this broken stone bench a pew? She got her breath when he interposed, —But . . . —And the altar! look at it, look at the picture on it, a man . . . god? and it looks like a bull!

—Yes, a pagan temple, they've excavated and found the basilica of Saint Clement was built right over a temple where worshipers of . . .

—Pagan indeed! And I suppose you couldn't resist setting foot inside yourself? Did you? Again she paused, getting breath she appeared to prepare requital for his answer, admission or denial, and when he withdrew mumbling only —Set foot inside myself . . . ? she snapped immediately, —At least I have finally had the satisfaction of hearing you call the Roman Catholic Church *pagan!* She filled her grievous gaze a moment longer with the picture, and finishing with —Now that we all know what the inside of a Catholic church looks like, . . . she was gone, holding the abhorrent memento at arm's length, her eyes alert upon it, as though it might take life and strike.

Gwyon came slowly forward in his chair, hands clenched on nothing, listening to her sharp footsteps receding toward the kitchen. He waited until he heard them on the stairs, then hurried to the kitchen himself. Janet came in a few minutes later to find him sifting through the kitchen trashbin; but he went out without a word, and empty-handed. And when at lunch he once or twice faltered toward questioning her she looked up and beyond him and the room, as though listening to a confidence, or a summons, from far away.

For the most part, conversation seemed to pass over her, when she would stop it in its tracks to rescue something which struck her. Few things seemed to stir her pleasantly but news of unhappy occurrences in Italy: whether storms or strikes or railway accidents, she saw imminent in them the fall of Rome. She waited, contemplating wholesale damnation for the whole non-Christian world with an eye as level as that

of Saint Bonaventura: no more mother than he, the prospect of eternal roasting for millions of unbaptized children did not bring the flutter of an eyelash: “The sight of the pains of the damned heaps up the measure of the accidental joys of the righteous,” and with his words on her own lips, she firmly expected to see Saint Bonaventura heaping her own measure in the Life ahead. But even that torrid landscape chilled and shattered, pierced by the sleighbells, more pointed for their infrequency, to stop her breath if she were speaking, or raise her voice to the defense when she read.

—It’s all right indeed, all right for a man who goes to bullfights! she brought out next day at table, summoning this distant detail to interrupt the conversation between father and son. —Bringing a . . . a creature like that back from Africa, there should be a law against it.

—Creature? Gwyon repeated.

—That creature you brought back, that’s what you’re talking about isn’t it. Isn’t it?

—I was telling . . . talking about that painting, there, the table under the window.

—There ought to be a law against it, bringing back creatures like that.

—Oh, oh Heracles, yes, you mean, it’s forbidden, yes, taking them from Gibraltar, he commenced, confused, answering.

—Breaking the law, proud of yourself! Her glasses went blank with light as she returned her attention to her plate; and Wyatt, after the pause of her absenting herself, asked:

—How were you certain it was the original? Suppose . . .

—That took some . . . umm . . . conniving, getting it through customs. It’s prohibited, you know, taking works of art out of Italy . . .

—Italy! Aunt May cut in across the table. —You never told me you had been in Italy! Never. You never told me that!

—Strange I never mentioned it, Gwyon said.

—Mentioned! You never told me, she said getting up from the table.

—What earthly difference . . .

—Earthly! No earthly difference, as you say. No earthly difference, at all. For someone who tells stories about evil spirits who deceive good people by keeping the path to Paradise littered with filth, no earthly difference at all, she went on nearing the door. —At least you spared Camilla that! she finished, and was gone. Gwyon left the table a moment later, with a mutter of apology to his son, though he did not look up at him, and went out to the porch, where he stood looking straight up at the sun.

On pleasant days, such as this was, Aunt May still went out to tend her hawthorn tree. This afternoon, when she came in from it, she was impressively silent. Gwyon might have thought it was the Italian incident, but she said quietly, —I saw a moor hen this afternoon. (The moor cock was their family crest.) —And no male anywhere in sight. I have not seen a male moor hen for years.

Though slow, she still moved with energy. Her world had finally shrunk to her books and her hawthorn tree. When questions of foreign suddenness were asked she looked up startled and afraid, as though some worldly circumstance might intrude upon her preparations for departure. As the days passed, she sang in a weak voice which she believed maintained a tune, a hymn which, as she remembered, came to her from John Wesley, expressing her divine longing, ready sometimes, it seemed, like Saint Teresa, “to die of not being able to die.”

> —O beautiful aspect of death
> What sight on earth is so fair
> What pageant, what aspect of life
> Can with a dead body compare,

came her wail on the vivid spring air to the ears of living things.

She put an old smock over her housedress and tied a shielding bonnet to her head. Over the morning grass alive with creatures smaller than its own blades her old garden shoes trod. A robin took to the air before her as she approached the hawthorn tree, torn from the ground and lying flat, pink blossoms among the weeds. Her voice in its singing stopped in disbelief. Frantically she raised the tree and pushed it back into the open earth at a dead angle. Then she came back to the house, and before she reached it the tree had fallen again.

Heracles had got loose the night before. The Town Carpenter, who met him outside the Depot Tavern, brought him back, and tried to replant the tree. But it was no good. The tree was dead before the week was out, and so was Aunt May.

She was sixty-three. It was not, in her case, a ripe age, but quite the other way, a systematic reduction of unfertile years and thoughts, disapprobation, generally a life bounded by terms of negation, satisfied with its resistance to any temptation which might have borne fruit. Better to marry than to burn, but she had not

been forced to that pusillanimous choice: gnarled, she stepped from one virginity to another without hesitation. Here, three centuries after Dort, her face wore a firm look of Election, as though she knew where she was going, had visited there many times before. She seemed in a hurry to be gone from that body, as any vain soul well might have been, the still fingers faded under the framed flush of NO CROSS NO CROWN. Surrounded by closed books, with Buffon's *Natural History* on the floor, they found that body in her chair where she had left it when she fled, unequivocally abandoned, as though not even the last trumpet could summon her to take it up again. Her last words were, —I believe I put it in the top bureau drawer. They looked there afterward, but found only the white round shell box with a hole in its top, into which she had used to put dead hair when she combed it out.

Wyatt was twelve, and deeply impressed by the funeral sermon his father spoke over that anonymous box where Aunt May, in a lavender gown she had never before worn, lay with the lid closed, a stipulation as importunate as that of the Blessed Umiliana (another devotee of quicklime) having her socks put on, with her last breath, so that the crowd could not venerate her nude feet.

—"O man, consider thyself! Here thou standest in the earnest perpetual strife of good and evil," Reverend Gwyon thundered the lines of William Law down upon the gray faces (whose owners, years later when he was locked up, defenseless, recalled it as the last truly Christian sermon he had ever read). —"All nature is continually at work to bring forth the great redemption; the whole creation is travailing in pain and laborious working to be delivered from the vanity of time; and wilt thou be asleep? Everything thou hearest or seest says nothing, shows nothing to thee but what either eternal light or eternal darkness has brought forth; for as day and night divide the whole of our time, so heaven and hell divide all our thoughts, words, and actions. Stir which way thou wilt, do or design what thou wilt, thou must be an agent with the one or the other. Thou canst not stand still, because thou livest in the perpetual workings of temporal and eternal nature; if thou workest not with the good, the evil that is in nature carries thee along with it. Thou hast the height and depth of eternity in thee and therefore, be doing what thou wilt, either in the closet, the field, the shop or the church, thou art sowing that which grows and must be reaped in eternity."

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Three years later, that partisan Deity whose most recent attention to the family had been Aunt May's rescue from mortality, acted in Wyatt's direction (though, as the boy and his father independently suspected, perhaps it was a different God altogether). Wyatt was taken with a fever which burned him down to seventy-nine pounds. In this refined state he was exhibited to medical students in the amphitheater of a highly endowed hospital. They found it a very interesting case, and said so. In fact they said very little else. Physicians, technicians, and internes X-rayed the boy from every possible angle, injected his arms with a new disease they believed they could cure, took blood by the bottleful from one arm to investigate, and poured the blood of six other people into the other. They collected about his bed and pounded him, tapped his chest, thrust with furious hands for his liver, pumped his stomach with a lead-weighted tube, kneaded his groin, palped his spleen, and recorded the defiant beats of his heart with electric machinery.

He was embarrassed by the flocks of fingers exploring for cancer, or something as satisfactory, and mortified when photographed in despoiled nudity by a handsome nurse. The hands of these young women were the first ever to reach him with the succor of indifferent love; and two he would never forget, though he never saw her to whom they belonged. He lay in an operating room staring at the lamp above him, reading the circle of words in its center, *Carl Zeiss, Jena, Carl Zeiss Jena Carl Zeiss* . . . while a surgeon's insistently clumsy fingers dug in an incision under his arm for a node which slipped from their grasp. The hands of the nurse at his head wiped his face with a damp cloth, and when he fainted were there with aromatic spirits to revive him: so the woman's hands kept him, and the man's eventually caught the node, took it out, sewed up that hole and descended to make another in the leg where they paused on the surface to slice off a piece of mottled skin, then entered to probe and remove a fragment of muscle. A zealous young interne, Doctor Fell, ran a needle into his backbone and tapped that precious fluid. Week after week, he continued to provide an outlet for this conspiracy of unconscionable talents and insatiable curiosity.

Reverend Gwyon took all this in a dim view. As his son lay dying of a disease about which the doctors obviously knew nothing, injecting him with another plague simply because they had it on familiar terms could only be the achievement of a highly calculated level of insanity. Wyatt's arms swelled at each point of injection. The doctors nodded, in conclave, indicating that science had foreseen, even planned, this distraction. From among them came Doctor Fell with a scalpel in his hand and a gleam in his eye seldom permitted at large in civilized society, a gleam which the Reverend recalled having seen in the eye of a Plains Indian medicine man, whose patient regarded it respectfully as part of the professional equipment assembled to kill him. With the bravura of a young buck in an initiation ceremony, he slashed the arms open at each point of infection. Dr. Fell did a good job. They drained for two months.

Winter thawed into sodden spring, cruel April and depraved May reared and fell behind, and the doctors realized that this subject was nearing exhaustion, might, in fact, betray them by escaping to the dissection table. A few among them bravely submitted, in the interests of science, new experiments and removals; but during Wyatt's prolonged residence many comparatively healthy people had been admitted to the hospital, and were waiting in understandable impatience to make their own vital contributions to the march of science. With serious regret, the doctors drew their sport to a close, by agreeing on a name for it: *erythema grave*. After this crowning accomplishment they completed the ritual by shaking hands, exchanging words of professional magic, mutual congratulation and reciprocal respect, and sent the boy home to die.

In the parsonage, Wyatt lay perspiring freely in his sheets. At one moment his muscles and the joints of his body were so filled with pain that he would deliberate for minutes before moving a limb, or turning over. At other times he was feverishly awake, and the books stacked round him could not hold his exhausted attention. Their titles ran from Doughty's *Travels in Arabia Deserta* to *A Coptic Treatise Contained in the Codex Brucianus*, the *Rosarium Philosophorum*, two books of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Wyer's *De Præstigiis Dæmonum*, Llorente's *Inquisition d'Espagne*, the pages of these and all the rest littered in the margins with notations in Reverend Gwyon's hand. Gwyon had brought them up, one by one, meaning them to serve for conversation, which he found difficult; but once arrived in the sickroom he would stand passing the book nervously from one hand to the other until asked about it. He would look down, as though surprised to find it in his hands, a moment later be talking about it with a fervor which gradually became agitation, until he left off altogether and handed it over, as shy at the idea of trying to press on his son things which so interested him, as he was excited at the possibility of sharing them with him. Then he might simply stand, trying to keep one hand still in the other behind him, while he stared at the floor, in the acute embarrassment of this intimacy which the sickness had created between them. On the other hand, Wyatt read as much as he could, to prepare for these conversations which gave his father such pleasure, to break the silences whose strain showed so readily in that flushed face, and the short exhalations tainted with the sweet freshness of caraway. Sometimes Gwyon simply turned and rushed out of the room, with as much restraint as he could manage until he reached the door, as he did one day when he espied a stained familiar pamphlet among his son's papers on the floor. —Where did this come from! he demanded snatching it up open on a picture of a wreathed papal monogram tied at the foot with an anchor. —I found it, in the rubbish, on the rubbish heap, Wyatt faltered, —the kitchen midden years ago, behind the carriage barn. He stared at the covetous look on his father's face. —I didn't know . . . —And you've kept it, yes, all this time, kept it for me? Gwyon brought out without looking up from it, turning the spotted pages. —Did you read it? —Just, the Italian was difficult, I didn't know all the words, but the pictures . . . that? that monogram, with the anchor? —Yes, Gwyon murmured catching it under his thumb, —Clement's monogram, he was martyred, yes here, gettato a mare con un'ancora . . . they tied an anchor to his neck and threw him into the Black Sea.

—Yes into the sea with an anchor? like the man you told me about? The anchor caught on a tombstone, and the man coming down the rope in the celestial sea to free it, and he drowned? Listen, . . . But Gwyon, fearing the insistent monotone that crept into the boy's voice for the delirium it might forebode, hurried out of the room studying the picture of the subterranean sanctuary discovered beneath the basilica of Saint Clement of Rome, a sudden light in his eyes as though his senses were afloat with vapors from two thousand years before.

Gwyon's entrances were often as precipitous as this escape; and there were times Wyatt pretended to be asleep when he heard his father's approach upon the stairs.

When he could not read, he painted, with an extraordinary deftness which consumed his whole consciousness, and often left him so tense that he passed into delirium. —Listen, I . . . what was it? Listen . . .

It was the deliria that Gwyon feared, which left him doubly helpless, trying to conceal his anxiety behind his back in one hand twisting the other, and he hastened to call Janet who was, a good part of the time now, the only moving thing in the house. She remained, gibbering testimony to Aunt May's inquisition.

So far as anyone knew, she never left the house. Her voice had gained the timbre of that of a grown man when she raised it in the full volume of speech. But this was infrequent. She usually spoke in a hoarse whisper, lubricated by a salivary flow which she had difficulty controlling (and caused, though she did not know it, by a medicine compounded of mercury which she'd found in Aunt May's cabinet, renewed and taken reverently in uniform overdose since Aunt May's death). Her shoulders were broad, thighs narrowed, and with squarely muscular hands she plied an emery cloth to remove the fine filaments which darkened her chin.

In any other native household, her regular absences from her work, or those occasions which found her insensibly rigid before an empty window, or prostrate on the kitchen floor, might have been taken for

organic disorders; and, like the Venerable Orsola Benincasa, whose sixteenth-century childhood was visited by innumerable misinterpreted ecstasies, she might have been bruised black-and-blue, pricked with needles, and burned with exposed flames to rouse her. But Reverend Gwyon remarked to himself that her derelictions from duty had occurred most notably during Easter week of that year: that about eight o'clock on Thursday evening, in the midst of serving his dinner, she was numbly entranced before the kitchen stove; and the following afternoon at three he almost upset her in the dark passage outside his study door, where she stood limbs immobilely extended before the cruz-con-espejos.

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When modern devices fail, it is our nature to reach back among the cures of our fathers. If those fail, there were fathers before them. We can reach back for centuries. Gwyon appreciated the extended hands of his people less and less as the months passed. The doctors refused him information of any direct nature, guarding the frail secrets of their failing magic as carefully as Zuñi priests planting prayer sticks. And then there was that hallowed tribal agreement among them never to admit one another's mistakes, which they called Ethics.

On the other, the spiritual, hand, the congregation breathed out stale prayers for the boy's recovery. But in the end they always gave their God full leave to do as He wished, to remove the lad if such were His sacred whim, loading the fever-stricken boy with the guilt it had taken them generations to accumulate. They called this Humility.

The sermons thundered at them from the pulpit of their peaceful church increased in violence, and embraced expiatory petitions to the Lord their God less and less frequently. Still the gray faces continued to appear, drawn by duty and (though none but the Town Carpenter might have admitted it) a sort of perilous curiosity. The tension mounted, until the sermon on the evils of vivisection, on the morning of June twenty-fourth, after which the Reverend retired for the rest of the summer.

That Sunday morning, Saint John's, or, as the Reverend reminded them in a deceptively peaceful voice, Midsummer Day, the simple altar was decorated with flowered sprigs of oak trees. The warm light of the sun stretched in long empty patterns from the diamond-shaped panes across the congregation. Someone's liver-and-white hound appeared and tussled briefly with the bellrope, came part way down the aisle, and then sensing something turned and fled.

The sermon, meanwhile, had progressed from vivisection to the Mojave Indians, —among whom it is humbly understood, and I quote from foremost authority, "to be the nature of doctors to kill people in this way just as it is in the nature of hawks to kill little birds for a living." Among the Mojaves, it is believed that everyone dead under the doctor's hand falls under his power in the next life. Superstition? It is what we, gathered here today in the sight of God, call superstition. We call such people as those benighted savages, and send missionaries among them, to enlighten them with the word of Truth we are gathered together to worship here today. For centuries, missionaries have brought back stories to make us blanch with horror, stories of human sacrifice practiced in the interests of religion on the bloodstained altars of the Aztecs. Yet we support in our very midst a highly respected class of men who are Aztecs in their own right. Like ourselves, they may throw up their hands at the thought of murdering a maiden on a stone altar. But it is only that this was done to serve a god different from their own, that shocks them. We may find them wringing their hands in reproach against those who roasted Saint Lawrence on a gridiron: Is it the roasting they regret? Is it the suffering of Saint Catherine on the wheel? The choking cries of Tyndale being strangled? The muffled words of forgiveness on the lips of John Huss at the stake . . . those of Our Lord on the Cross . . . O Sancta simplicitas! No! They regret simply that none of these experiments was carried out under the scientific conditions of a medical pathological laboratory. (He had already gone ten minutes beyond the time usually allotted to the sermon, but the gray faces were bound in wonder.) —Tell me, how did Asclepius end? he demanded, reaching his turning point. —Asclepius, the Greek god of medicine. Why, Zeus slew him with a thunderbolt! But we mortals, what are we allowed? Not even as little as John of Bohemia, who threw his surgeon into the river when he failed to cure the king's blindness. No terms, like the Hungarian king five centuries ago, who could promise full reward to the surgeon who cured his arrow wound, with death if he failed. No, we turn them loose, with money in their pockets, and expressions of deep respect for their failures. The same trust, and confidence, perhaps, that Saint Cyril had for the physician who cut out his liver and ate it, . . . that Pope Innocent VIII had in the physician who prescribed the blood of three small children for His Holiness' nerves, . . . of Cardinal Richelieu, on his deathbed, given horse dung in white wine . . . Have you noticed, he went on, lowering his voice, leaning toward them over the high pulpit, —the charm that doctors wear? A cross? No. In the very name of Heaven, no! It is a device called the caduceus. Look closely . . . two serpents coupling round a wand, the scepter of a pagan god, the scepter of Hermes. Hermes, the patron of eloquence and cunning, of trickery and theft, the very wand he

carried when he conducted souls to Hell. (The organist, an alert young man, fingered the pages of the next hymn and made sure there was air in the bellows.) And when Reverend Gwyon hit the pulpit with the flat of his hand and raised his voice from the crisp confidence he had just given to commence a new inventory of the achievements of the medical profession, beginning with —Who was it that suggested the use of the guillotine in the French Revolution, but a doctor who died under its own blade! . . . there was a cheer from the far end of the nave, a moment of unholy silence, and the organ lusted into *Rock of Ages* as the Town Carpenter left hurriedly from one end of the church (in the direction of the Depot Tavern), and Reverend Gwyon, shaking but steadily, left from the other.

A stirring sermon, everyone agreed; as they agreed that their minister was tired, and might do well to rest for the summer. He was undergoing a severe trial, and they gave him credit for that, as practicing Christians magnanimously sharing their sins approve the suffering of another.

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Janet's jaw dropped with concentration, —Listen. When the seed began to blow, 'Twas like a garden full of snow, I . . . didn't . . . mean . . . Father? A safe-conduct from the Emperor Sigismund, but you see how they betrayed him? Keeping the road to Paradise littered with filth, to deceive good people. Limited atonement, total depravity, . . . wait. Unconditional election, limited atonement, total depravity, ah . . . ahhm . . . irresistibility of grace, I didn't mean . . . Father? I . . . what was it? Listen . . .

—The power of God to guide me, Janet whispered, —the might of God . . .

—If you want proof, if you want proof, listen Father. That . . . and that wren, I didn't mean . . . Father? Father? . . .

—The wisdom of God to teach me, the eye of God to watch over me, Janet went on, leaving the bedside to run down the stairs and pound on the study door, a thing she had never done, but this time she brought Reverend Gwyon bounding back up after her, to listen to his son's broken disjointed confession of killing the wren that day, a confession which broke off and left the boy sitting bolt upright in the bed, his teeth chattering, blazing green eyes fixed on his father. Gwyon started to put a hand out, but withdrew it, saying, —A wren though, a wren? My boy, that . . . why, a wren, you know, the missionaries themselves, the early Christian missionaries used to have it hunted down, hunted down and killed, they . . . the wren was looked on as a king, and that . . . they couldn't have that, . . . around Christmas . . . they couldn't have that, he finished, withdrawing slowly, his voice trailing off as his son sank back on the bed, and Gwyon turned abruptly and hurried back downstairs to his study, where he bolted the door and reached to a bookshelf for the works of Saint John of the Cross.

—The ear of God to hear me, the word of God to speak for me . . . Janet paused, at the bedside, to listen to the church bell ringing the hour. But like those on the pillow before her, her lips kept moving.

Hidden from people and the declining sun by the heavy green of the yew trees, Gwyon kept to his study. He was reaching back.

The longest day of the year was passed, and long past the annual Midsummer Day magic of bonfires to impel the sun on its suddenly flagging course, a measure despaired of, when religion took the reins, faith the ritual, and the day was turned over to Saint John Baptist who, in return for these same bonfires, rid cattle of sickness and banished the witches who caused it, raised splendid harvests, and even brought rain in Russia to the families of women who bathed on his day there (though faith had not quite won the day there: if drought continued, rain could certainly be brought by tossing into the nearest lake the corpse of a villager who had drunk himself to death). But in New England rain fell according to the caprice of a Divine who was to be propitiated only by making good use of it, and feast days, such as this Sunday, were best spent in the reverent complacency of sitting still. The outdoors was still light after suppertime, though Gwyon had refused supper from behind his study door, and Wyatt ate scarcely a bite before he lay back, whispering at the ceiling, leaving Janet contorted in prayer beside him. All day she had moved through the halls, on the stairs, to the kitchen in near silence, the only sounds to betray her to man the slavering lisps of her higher devotion which she exercised now: —The hand of God to protect me, the way of God to lie before me, the shield of God to shelter me, the host of God to defend me, Christ with me Christ before me Christ behind me Christ within me . . .

Birds ran on the empty lawns of the parsonage pecking at fallen irregular shapes of unripe crab apples. Swallows cut silent erratic courses above the carriage barn. The only clear sound was the sound of the sleighbells.

—Christ beneath me Christ above me Christ at my right Christ at my left Christ in breadth Christ in length Christ in height . . . Wyatt lay full length on his back, listening without hearing, staring without seeing at the familiar lines on the ceiling, a network of cracks which had formed an Arabian camel in childhood, since become Bactrian and grown a long tail. The windows were opened, and the whole house

so silent that the warmth of day seemed even to have penetrated the dim corridors and set at rest the creaking contention among those dark angles of woodwork. Thus the sound from the carriage barn came inside interrupted only by its own impatient pauses. It was these clinking splinters of sound which suddenly seemed to penetrate Janet, raise her from her bedside attitude and lift her away to her own room, where no one but she had entered bodily since she first entered it herself. Her door closed, closeting the stifled sound which escaped her as she sank to the floor.

It was almost an hour from dark. Gwyon stared at the branches arm's length through the study window. From beyond those lacings of yew came the sound of the sleighbells, seeming more insistent with the approaching darkness. His arm rested as though lifeless on the Egyptian *Book of the Dead;* and he tapped the hard closed cover of the *Malleus Maleficarum* with his fingertip. Hardly moving in his chair, he took the flask from its cavity in the *Dark Night of the Soul*, and drank down half a tumblerful of schnapps. He placed the empty glass on the level surface of a volume of the *Index*, and said aloud, after a few minutes had passed so, —Make full proof of thy ministry. But the book open before him was not the Bible, nor the words Saint Paul's.

"Close to the outskirts of every big village a number of stones may be noticed stuck into the ground, apparently without order or method. These are known by the name of *asong,* and on them is offered the sacrifice which the Asongtata demands. The sacrifice of a goat takes place, and a month later that of a *langur* (*Entellus* monkey) or a bamboo-rat is considered necessary. The animal chosen has a rope fastened round its neck and is led by two men, one on each side of it, to every house in the village. It is taken inside each house in turn, the assembled villagers, meanwhile, beating the walls from the outside, to frighten and drive out any evil spirits which may have taken up their residence within. The round of the village having been made in this manner, the monkey or rat is led to the outskirts of the village, killed by a blow of a *dao*, which disembowels it, and then crucified on bamboos set up in the ground. Round the crucified animal long, sharp bamboo stakes are placed, which form *chevaux de frise* round about it. These commemorate the days when such defences surrounded the villages on all sides to keep off human enemies, and they are now a symbol to ward off sickness and dangers to life from the wild animals of the forest. The *langur* required for the purpose is hunted down some days before, but should it be found impossible to catch one, a brown monkey may take its place; a hulock may not be used."

He walked up the stairs slowly. Wyatt slept, the sheet covering him rose to points on the bony protrusions of his body. Only faintly aware of the trouble in his mind over the apparent extreme shortness of the boy's legs, Gwyon suddenly brought this terrible impression straight up into his consciousness and, doing so, realized that the points of the sheet were not Wyatt's feet but his knees, so thin they stood up like feet. He moved quickly. He turned down the stairs, and walked from one room to another in the darkened parsonage, past the small butler's pantry where Aunt May had stood weeping silently and alone that day her hawthorn tree had been found torn from the ground. He passed Olalla, her nose broken off a century before by a suppliant whose prayers had gone unheeded, her arm raised in her niche as though to stay him. For an instant fragments of his passing were reflected in the powerful clear mirrors of that cruz-con-espejos said to have been used by Sor Patrocinio, the Bleeding Nun, whose pullulating stigmata upset Spanish politics and the throne to such extent that she inclined to wear mittens. Gwyon glanced in at the low table in the dining room, mesa de los pecados mortales, —Cave, cave, Dominus videt. Abscondam faciem meam ab eis et considerabo novissima eorum, not reading those words but repeating under his breath, as though to give himself strength, words of that fourteenth-century translator of the Bible who died in bed, only to be dug up and burned, already rewarded for his labor of Divine Love with the revelation, —In this world God must serve the devil.

In the living room, he turned away from Camilla's picture, where he had stopped, and took John H. down from the wall across. That portrait he put in a broom closet, muttering that the ancestor had probably got just what he deserved. All this time it seemed that Gwyon was putting off a decision which had already been made. He even stopped to cover a large mirror with a tablecloth. Finally he walked out to the back veranda of the house, and down onto the lawn.

Perhaps it was prospect of the white moon's rising which had upset Heracles. The sleighbells sounded furiously, and then stopped, leaving an urgent silence. Gwyon was perspiring freely as he paced toward the arbor and back, in spite of the cool night air mounting around him. Then he stopped for a full minute to look toward the shadowed hulk of Mount Lamentation.

When he went in at the carriage-barn doors, Heracles stood still, quivering his long arms slightly, and then came up to his full height, waving a piece of bread. Gwyon took the leash from the wall, fastened it to the animal's neck and together they walked up the lawn toward the house.

Afterwards Wyatt could not distinguish reality in these days, and the nights of the weeks just past. Deliria embraced in his memory, and refused to discriminate themselves from one another, from what had happened, and what might have happened. Memories of pain were lost between waking and sleep, and but for the merciless stabbing in his feet that night, no longer identified themselves with definite parts of his body. Prolonged hours of wakefulness, when all he sought was sleep, might turn out to have been sleep

when he waked: but most insupportable was the sensational affair which went something like this: consciousness, it seemed, was a succession of separate particles, being carried along on the surface of the deep and steady unconscious flow of life, of time itself, and in fainting, the particles of consciousness simply stopped, and the rest flowed on, until they were restored: but this was the stoppage, the entire disappearance of that deeper flow which left the particles of consciousness suspended, piling up, ready any instant to shatter with nothing to support them. Still, at such times everything was in order, of shape and color to mass and distance, of minutes accomplishing hours by accumulation just as the clock itself stayed on the table where it was if only because it had been accumulating there for so long: that was the reassurance of weight. But had a voice, even his own, quoted, —"With regard to Saint Joseph of Copertino Rapture was accompanied by Levitation"? The grating cry of Janet rang in his ears still: had he chased her down the brick wall of someone's garden, where she turned on him transformed into a black man, and escaped? Had his father come in with Heracles, shaken him in his bed and pounded the walls saying words he could not understand, and turned to drive the animal out before him and down the stairs? And then a faint cry from the carriage barn below: had he leapt from his bed toward the pale casement of the window, forgetting that he had been so long off his feet that they were useless, their function totally forgotten, so that he fell screaming at the pain in them? For he woke on the floor with his father beside him, holding him up by the shoulders, his father whom he did not recognize, wild-eyed in that dim light. Then he broke open sobbing at the memory of the pain which had just torn up through his body. —In my feet, he cried, —it was like nails being driven up through my feet, as he was laid back on the bed blood-spotted at the shoulders, by this shaking man who could hardly walk from the room.

A few days later, Wyatt began to recover. He regained the weight of his body by meticulous ounces. That fever had passed; but for the rest of his life it never left his eyes.

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The Town Carpenter came to call, and stood looking round the room at the wallpaper. The convalescent's bed had been moved to the sewing room, since its windows faced east and south and those of his own smaller room to north and west, away from the sun. Her sewing cabinet, with its long drawer still full of a thousand buttons, stood to one side of a window, and over it a shelf with a few books she had never opened since leaving school. There was nothing else of Camilla in the room, though here it was she had come at the moment of death, seeking something. —What was it? he whispered sometimes, looking up and around as though he expected her again, though her presence had always been one silent and expectant, often even while she was in the room it had seemed empty.

Camilla had chosen the wallpaper. It was pink, with beaded bands of light blue running to the ceiling and rows of roses between them. Her father had papered the room, and behaved very professionally about it though his pleasure showed through at the privilege of doing it for them: showed through so well that he had got the paper on upside down. And only now, as he lay on his back and followed its lines up the wall, did Wyatt realize that the roses were roses, not the pink dogs' faces with green hats he had taken them for as a child, and never questioned since. When she stepped into the room that first time, Camilla could not see what had gone wrong. Then she did; but there stood her father with a smile of pride beside her, and she threw her arms over his crooked shoulders and thanked him, and never told him. It was the way things had of working out for her from the start.

—It looks fine, it still looks fine, the Town Carpenter said now, backing into a chair stacked with paintings and sketches and knocking the whole thing over, which immediately put him at his ease by giving him something to do. He admired each piece separately as he picked them up. —The detail! The detail! he said over and over, of these souvenirs of Wyatt's illness by now become permanent fixtures in his life. Of these fragments of intricate work most were copies. Only those which were copies were finished. The original works left off at that moment where the pattern is conceived but not executed, the forms known to the author but their place daunted, still unfound in the dignity of the design.

—Look! said the Town Carpenter, waving a book from the floor. —Balloons! . . . Then he added, —Damn them, the French. Someone's written it in the French language. He stood turning the pages, muttering, —They do that to confuse people, of course. The French covet a truth when they come upon it, you know . . . He stayed an hour or so, talking himself most of the time, a proclivity he'd developed since he started to become hard of hearing and people tired of the effort of talking to him. Now, he gave a rough précis of the *Odyssey* (Gwyon had sent him off one day with Chapman's translation), and as though the voyage had suddenly grown too short, had just introduced Odysseus to Prester John at Ogygia, when Janet came in with Wyatt's supper. The Town Carpenter behaved with all the courtly grumbling of a shy hero, retiring before her, waving from the door to the boy on the bed and calling out, as though across a chasm, —And they've made me the sexton at the church, you know. The Reverend your father made me the sexton, over

their dead bodies if you follow me . . . And he escaped with both volumes of Tissandier's *Histoire des ballons*.

Thus the bells ringing in the morning hours were usually right on time; but after eleven in the morning they commenced to fall off a bit, for it was a good fifteen-minute walk from the Depot Tavern to the church.

Waking in this room of roses upside-down was a new experience, the dawn red from the roses of Eden (as one of those books at his bedside had it from the Talmud), after the days' ends in his own room red from the fires of Hell. Here, after the throbbing flow of the night was broken by the first particles of light in the sky, he often pulled a blanket from the bed and crept to the window, to sit there unmoving for the full time it took until the sun itself rose, the unmeasured hours of darkness slowly shattered, rendered into a succession of particles passing separately, even as the landscape separated into tangible identities each appraising itself in a static withdrawal until everything stood out separate from the silent appraisals around it.

He passed the months of convalescence painting, and with increasing frequency broke his gaze at the window to get to work. He was most clear-headed, least feverish, in these early hours when, as unsympathetically as the daylight, his own hand could delineate the reasonable crowded conceits of separation.

Only once, going to the window before it was light, he was stopped in his tracks by the horned hulk of the old moon hung alone in the sky, and this seemed to upset him a good deal, for he shivered and tried to leave it but could not, tried to see the time on the clock but could not, listened, and heard nothing, finally there was nothing for it but to sit bound in this intimacy which refused him, waiting, until the light came at last and obliterated it.

Then, mornings just before sunrise he could hear his father's steps on the east porch below. And though he heard the voice speaking sometimes, he never made out a word.

Wyatt missed the sound of sleighbells. On his first attempt at a long walk outside, he went down to the carriage barn and found it locked and silent.

—Yes, his . . . his time came, Gwyon said, clearing his throat and pulling at one hand with the other behind him.

—But you . . . no one told me.

—Well, we . . . you were sick, while you were sick I didn't want to upset you.

—But, then what did you do?

—Yes, I . . . I buried him, down there, down behind the barn there.

—How did it happen, did he just . . . It's funny, some of the things I . . . sometimes I think I remember things that are . . . that couldn't . . . like . . . He looked up earnestly, pausing now as though he expected to be prompted, to see his father watching him with eyes which, had he known it, blazed with the same wild intensity as his own in fever. —It's . . . sometimes it's bewildering . . . , he faltered, looking down as Gwyon looked away, turned his back and showed his twisting hands behind him. But only for a moment. Gwyon swung round, looking very different, reassured, and tried to smile with,

—You're well? You're well now, almost well? Yes, it's bewildering, bewildering . . . He changed the subject clumsily. —Like the bulls. Yes, people say they're kept in a dark cell before they're let into the arena, into the bright sun, to confuse them, but that . . . that . . . you should see their confidence, their grandeur when they come in, a great moment, that, when they come in, they . . . their heads up, tossing their heads when they come in . . . He paused to look up and see if he'd relaxed Wyatt's attention, then went on enthusiastically, —It's after that, after they stick those . . . the banderillas in the shoulders, you can hear them rattling in the bull's shoulders, a regular dance of fury, it's after that their legs start to cave outward, after that they just stand, bewildered, looking around . . . before the sword, the . . . they say you don't kill with the sword but with the cape, the art of the cape . . . He relaxed himself as he spoke, moving about the room until he got near the door, talking as though in a hurry to be gone, but he paused there to finish with, —The sword, when the sword is in and the bull won't drop, why, they use the cape then, to spin him around in a tight circle so the sword will cut him to pieces inside and drop him. His legs stiffen right out when they stab him in the brain. Do you want anything? But you're up, you're up now. Do you want anything? I'll send Janet up, Gwyon finished and got out to the stairs.

When Janet arrived, Wyatt had her help him out and down the stairs, but he left her in the house when he went down the lawn with his cane. A large stone had been pushed into place against the hole in the hillside, among thorn bushes now bearing early blackberries. The place had been the kitchen midden for as long as he could remember. In his weakness he could not move the stone from its place, for it was very great; and when he started back for the house he tripped against a row of small stakes, driven into the ground there without evident purpose. He climbed unsteadily to his feet from the blemished earth and stones and walked as quickly as he could manage back up the open lawn. There was something defiled

about that place which frightened him.

From her window above, Janet watched him stagger back into the open, and was down to help him climb to the porch and in, without a word between them. He went upstairs and got to work without a pause.

Every week or so he would begin something original. It would last for a few days, but before any lines of completion had been drawn he abandoned it. Still the copies continued to perfection, that perfection to which only counterfeit can attain, reproducing every aspect of inadequacy, every blemish on Perfection in the original. He found a panel of very old wood, nearly paper-thin in places but almost of exact size, and on this he started the Seven Deadly Sins: Superbia, Ira, Luxuria, Avaritia, Invidia . . . one by one they reached completion unbroken by any blemish of originality. Secrecy was not difficult in that house, and he made his copy in secret.

His father seemed less than ever interested in what passed around him, once assured Wyatt's illness was done. Except for the Sunday sermon, public activities in the town concerned him less than ever. Like Pliny, retiring to his Laurentine villa when Saturnalia approached, the Reverend Gwyon avoided the bleak festivities of his congregation whenever they occurred, by retiring to his study. But his disinterest was no longer a dark mantle of preoccupation. A sort of hazardous assurance had taken its place. He approached his Sunday sermons with complaisant audacity, introducing, for instance, druidical reverence for the oak tree as divinely favored because so often singled out to be struck by lightning. Through all of this, even to the sermon on the Aurora Borealis, the Dark Day of May in 1790 whose night moon turned to blood, and the great falling of stars in November 1833, as signs of the Second Advent, Aunt May might well have noted the persistent nonappearance of what she, from that same pulpit, had been shown as the body of Christ. Certainly the present members of the Use-Me Society found many of his references "unnecessary." It did not seem quite necessary, for instance, to note that Moses had been accused of witchcraft in the Koran; that the hundred thousand converts to Christianity in the first two or three centuries in Rome were "slaves and disreputable people," that in a town on the Nile there were ten thousand "shaggy monks" and twice that number of "god-dedicated virgins"; that Charlemagne mass-baptized Saxons by driving them through a river being blessed upstream by his bishops, while Saint Olaf made his subjects choose between baptism and death. No soberly tolerated feast day came round, but that Reverend Gwyon managed to herald its grim observation by allusion to some pagan ceremony which sounded uncomfortably like having a good time. Still the gray faces kept peace, precarious though it might be. They had never been treated this way from the pulpit. True, many stirred with indignant discomfort after listening to the familiar story of virgin birth on December twenty-fifth, mutilation and resurrection, to find they had been attending, not Christ, but Bacchus, Osiris, Krishna, Buddha, Adonis, Marduk, Balder, Attis, Amphion, or Quetzalcoatl. They recalled the sad day the sun was darkened; but they did not remember the occasion as being the death of Julius Caesar. And many hurried home to closet themselves with their Bibles after the sermon on the Trinity, which proved to be Brahma, Vishnu, and Siva; as they did after the recital of the Immaculate Conception, where the seed entered in spiritual form, bringing forth, in virginal modesty, Romulus and Remus.

If the mild assuasive tones of the Reverend offended anywhere, it was the proprietary sense of his congregation; and with true Puritan fortitude they resisted any suggestion that their bloody sacraments might have known other voices and other rooms. They could hardly know that the Reverend's powers of resistance were being taxed more heavily than their own, where he withstood the temptation to tell them details of the Last Supper at the Eleusinian Mysteries, the snake in the Garden of Eden, what early translators of the Bible chose to let the word 'thigh' stand for (where ancient Hebrews placed their hands when under oath), the symbolism of the Triune triangle and, in generative counterpart so distressing to early fathers of the Church, the origin of the Cross.

Janet did not go to church. There was no disaffection, but she seemed to have attained some unity of her own. And she was no longer found benumbed on the kitchen floor; but might interrupt any household drudgery to hurry to her room where rapturous gasps could have been heard from behind the closed door, if anyone had listened. For the most part she went about her work happily, detached, padding through the dim passages in soft slippers, and ordering the kitchen with dark-gloved hands. Occasionally she kept to her bed.

Gwyon's interest in his son's painting was perfunctory when it did occur, slightly distracted and puzzled as he became now for anything intruding upon him from worlds that were not his own. He only broke through this withdrawal once, when he sustained a shock at seeing an unfinished approximation to the picture of Camilla on the living-room mantel. It was done in black on a smooth gesso ground, on strong linen, a stark likeness which left its lines of completion to the eye of the beholder. It was this quality which appeared to upset Gwyon: once he'd seen it he was constantly curious, and would stand looking away from it, and back, completing it in his own mind and then looking again as though, in the momentary absence of his stare and the force of his own plastic imagination, it might have completed itself. Still each time he

returned to it, it was slightly different than he remembered, intractably thwarting the completion he had managed himself. —Why won't you finish it? he burst out finally.

—There's something about a . . . an unfinished piece of work, a . . . a thing like this where . . . do you see? Where perfection is still possible? Because it's there, it's there all the time, all the time you work trying to uncover it. Wyatt caught a hand before him and gripped it as his father's were gripped behind the back turned to him. —Because it's there . . . , he repeated.

Gwyon turned back to the unfinished panel muttering, —Yes, yes . . . Praxiteles . . . and his voice tailed off as he returned and stood following the line of the nose, bringing it back round the broken circle of a Byzantine hoop of gold, while behind him his hands opened and closed on nothing.

The table of the Seven Deadly Sins was unfinished. It remained unfinished for some years, when Wyatt went away to study. It was still hidden and untouched when he came home from Divinity School, where he had completed a year's work.

Something was wrong then. His father knew it, but Reverend Gwyon by this time lived immersed in himself. He shied from talking with Wyatt about his studies. From his flushed face and his agitated manner, it seemed that one word could summon in him histories and arguments of such complexity that they might now take hours, where they had in truth taken centuries, to unravel: but he seemed at pains to dismiss them as quickly as he could, commenting directly, then obliquely, and then changing the subject entirely. —Mithras? Of course, he answered to some question of Wyatt's. —It didn't fail because it was bad. Mithraism almost triumphed over Christianity. It failed because it was so near good. He mumbled something, and then added, —That's the trouble today. No mystery. Everything secularized. No mystery, no weight to anything at all . . . , and he got up and left the room, as he did often in the middle of conversation. Especially these questionings grown from Wyatt's studies. —Pelagianism? he repeated over a plate of disintegrated white lima beans (for Wyatt seldom saw him but at meals). —If it hadn't been Pelagius it would have been someone else. But by now we . . . too many of us may embrace original sin ourselves to explain our own guilt, and behave . . . treat everyone else as though they were full-fledged . . . umm . . . Pelagians doing just as they please . . . He did not elaborate, but sat drumming his fingers on the mahogany dining-room table top.

—Free will . . . Wyatt commenced, but his father was not listening. In all these discussions there seemed to be decisions he had made privately, and in the effort of suppressing them could at last say nothing at all. But as the weeks passed, Wyatt pressed him more and more for encouragement in his own study for the church. Sometimes Gwyon rose to this as though it were his duty to do so. He might manage, for instance, to discourse on the intricacies of transubstantiation without dissent, or even departure from orthodoxy; but as his references mounted, and his enthusiasm grew, reaching the doctrine, which he called Aristotelian, of God retaining the 'accidents' of the bread and wine (in order not to shock His worshipers, he added), and embarked upon a discussion of the 'accidents' of reality, and the redemption of matter, he left the table abruptly to get a reference, a paper or a book from his study, and did not come back. It was all as though he had no wish to push Wyatt into the ministry, like a man whose forebears have served all their lives on wooden ships, and he the last of them to do so, who will not force his son to serve on one knowing that the last of them will go down with him. Full proof of his ministry had begun. It was beyond his hand to stop it now.

Something was wrong. The summer fell away to fall, and Wyatt packed to leave. In the increasing amount of time he had spent painting, a plan formed of its own accord, so spontaneous of generation that he went on unaware of it, and it might seem only by chance that he did not stray from the confines of its design. He had called less and less frequently upon his father for encouragement toward the ministry, and Gwyon appeared to appreciate that, to become more relaxed, leading their conversations off in the direction of the past, the monastery in Estremadura, and Fr. Manomuerta to whom he still wrote, and sent packages of food; or the town of San Zwingli, the barrel organs in the streets, and the still uncanonized patron saint; the only bullfight he had ever seen: —And you don't kill with the sword, but with the cape, the art of the cape . . . , he said following his son up the stairs, to the sewing room where Wyatt was packing.

The room was littered with sketches, studies, diagrams and unfinished canvases. A large panel stood face to the wall, and Wyatt, who'd entered first, suddenly backed up against it and stood there staring at the floor as though overcome by an idea, something he had known all along, but only now dared bring to consciousness.

—What is it, what did you bring me up to show me? Gwyon asked, looking over the litter. —Some painting, is it, you've done? Finished? At that he took a step toward the large panel, and Wyatt threw out his arms as though to protect it. —Eh? Gwyon stopped. —What is it? What's the matter? Didn't you have something to show me?

—Yes, yes, but I . . . I did, but . . . here. Wyatt's eyes had been darting about the floor, then he stooped

abruptly and snatched up a paper. —Yes, here, he said holding it out, —you see, this . . . this is what I've been . . . doing. He held the paper out, his face in a blank expression which fused into desperate appeal as he looked up at his father.

—This? All these lines? Gwyon said, taking it.

—Yes, it's studies in perspective.

—I see, all these lines, coming together here at one point.

—Yes, Wyatt mumbled, backing away toward the panel again. —The vanishing point. That's called the vanishing point. He was staring wide-eyed at his father, but he withdrew his eyes quickly when Gwyon looked up, and waited there, shaking throughout his frame, until his father left the room. Even then he did not move, but waited until the heavy footfalls sounded to the bottom of the stairs. Then he swung round to the panel, pulled it out from the wall, and looked at this finished copy of the Bosch painting with a new expression on his face.

At supper that evening, each of them tended his plate with more than the usual shy pretense to interest, nervously alert to one another, but silent until Gwyon called Janet in to open a bottle of wine. He seemed prepared to sit over that dark oloroso sherry all evening, starting sentences and leaving them unfinished, looking up at his son with the evasiveness of a conspirator, one, that is, involved in a conspiracy to which no one has confessed. For an instant their unblinking eyes locked with one another, then Gwyon turned away, and started to recount the brave deceit of the old Italian grandee, the Conte di Brescia, looking, as he spoke, at the table top of the Seven Deadly Sins under the far window, without a shadow on his features to suggest that he knew he was looking at an imposture, or hint at the memory of the meticulous and molding pictures he had found buried wrapped in newspapers behind the carriage barn, that evening of Midsummer Day years before.

When the bells struck noon next day, at about quarter past the hour, Janet followed Wyatt's departure as far as the front door, where her blessings engulfed him in a farewell bath of blood, the Precious Blood which seemed forever now upon her lips, —O Blood ineffable, burning burning blood which I have shed and bathed in with my Beloved . . . and that door closed.

The luggage had gone to the station, where Wyatt and his father arrived and stood in the dust without speaking. The sky was a deep gray-blue, banded with the colors of rust seen under water. Gwyon looked nervously about to speak several times, towering over his son, fingers twitching in the pocket of his black waistcoat. Finally he blurted out, —Do you have that painting? Wyatt looked overcome, guilt reddened his face until his father interrupted his choking attempt to speak. —The . . . her picture, the picture of your mother that you . . . that you won't finish.

—That, yes, yes I have it, in that crate, that flat crate there, Wyatt brought out breathless, trying to indicate the crate with casual innocence. —It's there, with . . . you know, a lot of other pictures.

—You must finish it, you must try to finish it, Gwyon told him, —finish it, or she will be with you, he paused, looking at his son's face where so few traces betrayed his own, come under self-dominance so long before. —Or she will be with you always, Gwyon said suddenly withdrawing his fingers from the waistcoat pocket, drawing out those two large studded Byzantine hoops of gold. —Here, he held them out. —These were hers, these . . . were hers.

Wyatt accepted them, hidden, large as they were, in his hand. He started to speak, but his father, looking away from him toward the east, made a sound, and they were both caught, as a swimmer on the surface is caught by that cold current whose suddenness snares him in cramps and sends him in dumb surprise to the bottom.

The sun showed their motionless shadows on the rough wood platform. Then the sun was obscured by a cloud, and the shadows disappeared. When the sun came out again the shadows were gone.

Days passed, then weeks, and Gwyon, restlessly leaving his study to pace those dim passages, the mirrors in the cruz-con-espejos clenching at him as he emerged, to pause beyond and confront Olalla silently, or listen for the creaking from the sharp angles of woodwork around him, muttering, —And he took my razor! He took my razor! . . . And then, when he'd received the letter, —The final perseverance of . . . yes, perspective, the vanishing point . . . , before he'd even opened it. He gazed at the unfamiliar postage stamps, made out the postmark, München, and finally took it out with him, to read on a walk in the clear air of that season. He walked out, toward the abandoned bridge works, seen by no one, this man born on the yellow day in Boston when the volcano Krakatao had erupted on the other side of the earth and night came everywhere with a red sunset, only now in age approaching maturity, waiting, like Manto, while time circled him, to make full proof of his ministry.

The New England evening had taken on the chill of finished day, the chill of reality which follows sunset. All Saints' approached, and All Souls', when in France there would be picnics in the cemeteries, and in Spain they would be out to place chrysanthemums on the graves, against beaded wreaths and the ornate

names of the dead, where Camilla's name stood out in cold vigilance, waiting.

—Guilt? he murmured, walking with the letter unfolded in his hand. —Because of guilt, my son cannot study for the ministry. Guilt . . . good God! are You hiding somewhere under this welter of fear, this chaos of blood and mutilation, these terrors of weak minds . . . A feeling of guilt, dear Heaven what other kind of Christian ministers do you send us? or have there ever been? The fool! . . . and I thought I could spare him. Perhaps, if he knew the truth . . . An abrupt shudder broke through his whole frame, and he stood as though he had been pierced, the shock of the past in that woman's voice perhaps, —Pagan indeed! . . . and his faltering withdrawal, —Set foot inside myself . . . ? He sniffed, as though to clear his head of vaporous memories risen from some chill sanctuary deep in the basilica of the past; and squared his shoulders as he had coming forth from that subterranean Mithraeum under the church of Saint Clement of Rome. And suddenly he sought the empty sky for the sun.

But the sudden cooling of the air, and this letter, had startled the old man into the present, from which he turned and trudged back in a lucidity of memory against which he was defenseless. The memories became facts, including him unsparingly in their traffic but shut him unmercifully out from intrusion, left him walking slowly and impotent among their hard thrusts. The shrill cry of Heracles, echoed down from the house on two voices; and the dark-stained faces of the mirrors mounted in the cross. His discovery upon her corpse's head that Aunt May had worn a transformation, hidden from him those last years of her life with the care of Blessed Clara. That plain casket gone deep in earth, while the other stood a man's height above the earth, anticipating dehiscence, ready to shell in falling: Camilla, and her death of which he never spoke, the white carriage mounting the rock-studded road, its course marked by the stations of the Cross and droppings of animals still too fresh to be picked up for fuel, toward the cypress trees. That desolate Eucharist on Christmas Day at Nuestra Señora de la Otra Vez: the accidents of reality, Christ made of buffalo hide, or was it human skin? in the cathedral at Burgos. The bewilderment of the bulls, the port, and Columbus surrounded by lions. Then the trees of Tuscany in spired erection, the apologetic decay of the Conte di Brescia, the marble porch at Lucca so beautiful that no one ever stopped to look at it; and the image; and the words of William Rufus, to Bishop Gundulf of Rochester, —*By the Holy Face of Lucca, God shall never have me good for all the evil that He hath wrought upon me!*

Tearing his eyes from the empty place in the sky where the sun had set, he stopped stumbling back by years and ran, vaulted through centuries. The letter he had torn in pieces lay on the moving air for an instant, was caught, spread up over the ground and blew away from him like a handful of white birds startled into the sky.

II

> Très curieux, vos maîtres anciens. Seulement les plus beaux, ce sont les faux.
>
> —Paul Eudel, *Trucs et truqueurs*

On the terrace of the Dôme sat a person who looked like the young George Washington without his wig (at about the time he dared the Ohio country). She read, with silently moving lips, from a book before her. She was drinking a bilious-colored liquid from a globular goblet; and every twenty or so pages would call to the waiter, in perfect French, —Un Ricard . . . , and add one to the pile of one-franc saucers before her. —Voilà ma propre Sainte Chapelle, she would have said of that rising tower (the sentence prepared in her mind) if anyone had encouraged conversation by sitting down at her table. No one did. She read on. Anyone could have seen it was *transition* she was reading, if any had looked. None did. Finally an unshaven youth bowed slightly, as with pain, murmured something in American, and paused with a dirty hand on the back of a chair at her table. —J'vous en prie, she said, lucid, lowering *transition*, waiting for him to sit down before she went on. —Mursi, he muttered, and dragged the chair to another table.

Paris lay by like a promise accomplished: age had not withered her, nor custom staled her infinite vulgarity.

Nearby, a man exhibited two fingers, one dressed as a man, one as a woman, performing on a table top. Three drunken young Englishmen were singing *The Teddy Bears' Picnic*. Three dirty children from Morocco were selling peanuts from the top of the basket and hashish from the bottom. Someone said that there was going to be a balloon ascension that very afternoon, in the Bois. Someone else said that Karl Marx's bones were buried at Highgate. Someone said, —I'm actually going to be analyzed. *Psycho*analyzed. A boy with a beard, in a state of black corduroy (*corde du roi*) unkemptness which had taken as long as the beard to evolve, said, —I've got to show these pictures, I've got to sell some of them, but how can I have people

coming up there with him there? He's dying. I can't put him out on the street, dying like that . . . even in Paris. A girl said that she had just taken a villa right outside Paris, a place called Saint Forget. —Of course it's a hideous place, and Ah had to pay a feaful sum to get the tiasome French family that was there out of it, but it's such a sweet little old address to get mail at. Another girl said, —My conçerage has been returning all my mail marked ankonoo just because I oney gave her ten francs poorbwar. People who would soon be seen in New York reading French books were seen here reading Italian. Someone said, in slurred (blasé) French, —Un café au lait.

Over this grandstand disposal of promise the waiters stared with a distance of glazed indulgence which all collected under it admired, as they admired the rudeness, which they called self-respect; the contempt, which they called innate dignity; the avarice, which they called self-reliance; the tasteless ill-made clothes on the men, lauded as indifference, and the far-spaced posturings of haute couture across the Seine, called inimitable or shik according to one's stay. Marvelous to wide eyes, pricked ears, and minds of that erectile quality betraying naive qualms of transatlantic origin (alert here under hair imitative long-grown, uncombed, on the male, curtly shorn on the girls) was this spectacle of culture fully realized. They regarded as the height of excellence that nothing remained to be done, no tree to be planted nor building torn down (they had not visited Le Bourget; found the wreckage up behind the Hôtel de Ville picturesque), no tree too low nor building too high (those telescoping lampposts on the Pont du Carrousel), no bud of possibility which had not opened in the permanent bloom of artificial flowers, no room for that growth which is the abiding flower of humility.

"A mon très aimé frère Lazarus, ce que vous me mandez de Petrus l'apostre de notre doux Jesus . . . ," wrote Mary Magdalen. "Notre fils Césarion va bien . . . ," wrote Cleopatra to Julius Caesar. There was a letter from Alexander the Great to Aristotle ("Mon ami . . ."); from Lazarus to Saint Peter (concerning Druids); from Pontius Pilate to Tiberius; Judas's confession (to Mary Magdalen); a passport signed by Vercingetorix; notes from Alcibiades, Pericles, and a letter to Pascal (on gravitation) from Newton, who was nineteen when Pascal died. But M. Chasles, eminent mathematician of the late nineteenth century, paid 140,000 francs for this collection of autographs, for he believed them genuine: they were, after all, written in French. So the Virgin appeared to Maximin and Mélanie at La Salette, identified Herself by speaking to them in French which they did not understand, broke into their local patois for long enough to put across Her confidences, and then returned to Her native language for farewell: any wonder that transatlantic visitors approached it with qualms? murmured in tones spawned in forests, on the plains in unrestricted liberty, from the immensity of mountains, the cramped measure of their respect, approached in reverence the bier where every shade of the corpse was protected from living profanation by the pallbearers of the Académie Française.

Before their displacement from nature, baffled by the grandeur of their own culture which they could not define, and so believed did not exist, these transatlantic visitors had learned to admire in this neatly parceled definition of civilization the tyrannous pretension of many founded upon the rebellious efforts of a few, the ostentation of thousands presumed upon the strength of a dozen who had from time to time risen against this vain complacence with the past to which they were soon to contribute, giving, with their harried deaths, grounds for vanity of language, which they had perfected; supercilious posturing of intellect, which they had suffered to understand and deliver, in defiance; insolent arbitration of taste, grown from the efforts of those condemned as having none; contempt for others flourishing from seedlings which they had planted in the rain of contempt for themselves; dogmata of excellence founded upon insulting challenges wrought in impossible hope, and then grasped, for granted, from their hands fallen clenching it as dogma.

From the intractable perfection of the crepusculous Île de la Cité (seen from the Pont des Arts) to the static depravity of the Grands Boulevards, it was unimpeachable: in superficiating this perfection, it absorbed the beholder and shut out the creator: no more could it have imitation than a mermaid (though echoes were heard of the Siren of Djibouti).

—Voici votre Perrier m'sieur: —Mais j'ai dit café au lait, pas d'eau Perrier . . . A small man in a sharkskin suit said, —Son putas, y nada mas. Putas, putas, putas . . . Someone said, —Picasso . . . Someone else said, —Kafka . . . A girl said, —You deliberately try to misunderstand me. Of course I like art. Ask anybody. Nearby, a young man with a beard received compliments on his recent show. It was a group of landscapes in magenta and madder lake. Très amusant, gai, très très original (he was French). It was quite a rage. He said he had walked four kilometers out of Saint Germain en Laye, found he'd forgotten all of his colors but magenta and madder lake, so he went ahead and painted anyhow. He said, —Quelquefois je passe la nuit entière à finir un tableau . . . Someone said that there was a town in Switzerland called Gland. Someone told the joke about Carruthers and his horse.

On the right bank, a lady said, —You'll like Venice. It's so like Fort Lauderdale. At the same table, a man

said, —I'm going to look her up. She's lived here for years, right outside Paris, a place called Banlieu. At another table someone said, —By God, you know, they're almost as rude to us as they are to each other.

On Montmartre, someone looked up at the Sacré Coeur and said, —What the hell do you think they call *that?* The woman with him said, —Why bother to go all the way to the top, I haven't got my camera. A girl said, —Voulez vous voir le ciné cochon? Deux femmes . . .

Above, the thing itself towered exotic and uninvited, affording the consolation of the grotesque: that dead white Byzantine-Romanesque surprise which was heaped in bulbiferous pyramids atop the Hill of the Martyrs in the late nineteenth century, soon after the city had finished installing a comprehensive new sewage system. It was a monument (the church) not, as many had it, to the French victory over Prussia, but to the Jesuit victory over France. The birth of Ignatius of Loyola was early understood to have erred only in its location: Spain was origin, but none has ever excelled France in vocational guidance for the ideas of others, and it was obvious (in France) that his Society of Jesus could be best advanced through the medium of the French mind. In the mid-seventeenth century, the Society was having difficulty with the Jansenists, and the contributions of Pascal upset them almost as much as did the Miracle of the Holy Thorn, a relic which cured little Marguerite Périer of fistula lachrymalis: it was a Jansenist miracle. The Society recouped: found its own Marguerite and, with the kindly instruction and encouragement of Père La Colombière, her confessor, she revealed to the world a parade of the marvelous which shocked even those who were compelled to believe, an account which made a cure of fistula lachrymalis, never a pretty thought, pale into organic commonplace. The searing narrative of Marguerite Marie Alacoque passed from hand to hand for some two centuries until at last, in 1864, Pope Pius IX was assailed with a petition asking highest recognition for the Sacred Heart (the afflicted organ). In fact the petition itself participated in the miraculous, bearing as it did twelve million signatures forth from a country whose district records showed three-fourths of its brides and grooms unable to write their names. A bare decade after the beatification, papal decree consecrated the Universal Catholic Church to the Sacred Heart, and the Society has since defended its successful exploit against all comers with the same dexterous swashbuckling that was shown in its achievement: against the Virgin of La Salette, against promoters of the Devotion of the Perpetual Rosary, even against the prodigal (85 liters per minute) Virgin of Lourdes, whose bottled testimonials were soon flowing broadcast when proved not liable to the excise levies and export taxes of the Republic. Amid a crowd equaling the population of Afghanistan, the Sacré Coeur launched its church on the crown of that hill Saint Denis had once approached carrying his head under his arm. The new "public utility," so it was called, was dedicated by Cardinal Archbishop Guibert, disdaining insular mutterings which insinuated that the Society had plagiarized the Sacred Heart from England's leading philosophe, William Godwin, who thought of it first. And eventually, the Devotions within the favored land made truce: after all, as Monseigneur Ségur said, the Virgin shows very good taste in choosing France as the theater for her apparitions.

Near the Bourse, a lady said, —Des touristes, oui, mais des sales anglais, . . . là, regardez ce type là . . . She indicated a figure across the street, not a dirty Englishman, as she noted, but Wyatt, who lived nearby. With no idea of Paris when he arrived, he had been fortunate enough to find quarters in this neighborhood which maintained anonymity in the world of arts. Few people lived here. Activity centered around the stock exchange. On Sunday it was empty.

He knew few people, and them he saw infrequently. In three years, he had not written his father; and after a year in Paris he had finished seven pictures, working with a girl named Christiane, a blonde model with small figure and features. As she exposed the side of her face, or a fall of cloth from her shoulder, he found there suggestion of the lines he needed, forms which he knew but could not discover in the work without this allusion to completed reality before him. He had by now little money, and so in addition to his own work he did some restoring of old paintings for an antique dealer who paid him regularly and badly. He did not spend time at café tables talking about form, or line, color, composition, trends, materials: he worked on this painting, or did not think about it. He knew no more of surréalisme than he did of the plethora of daubs turned out on Montmartre for tourists, those arbiters of illustration to whom painting was a personalized representation of scenes and creatures they held dear; might not know art but they knew what they liked, hand-painted pictures (originals) for which they paid in the only currency they understood, to painters whose visions had shrunk to the same proportions. He might walk up there occasionally and see them, the alleys infested with them painting the same picture from different angles, the same painting varying from easel to easel as different versions of a misunderstood truth, but the progeny of each single easel identical reproduction, following a precept of Henner who called this the only way of being original. Passing, he showed all the interest for them he might have for men whitewashing walls.

Still, a dull day in the fall, a day which had lost track of the sun and the importunate rendition of minutes and hours the sun dictates, and that configuration on Montmartre stood out in preternatural whiteness, the

ceremonial specter of a peak, an abrupt Alp in the wrong direction. Walking home alone, the cold bearing in a dread weight of anxiety, the sense of something lost, passing people closely he passed them with wonder as though he'd seen no one in years, looking into every face as though hoping to recognize something there. Could the cold differentiate? aside from the change in clothing where the trees and the people reciprocate, the people suddenly came out muffled, and what trees there were stood forth in the mottled dishabille of discolored leaves. But even the streets, and the lights showing along the streets looked different, recalling nakedness in angular displeasure, summoning the fabled argument between the sun and the wind, distending the brief Rue Vivienne into the crowded desolation of Maximilianstrasse, the secure anonymity of childhood recalled by the fall of the year, and a Munich which had known spring and summer only in the irretrievable childhood of the Middle Ages, that hence, forward, there was no direction but down, no color but one darker, no sky but one more empty, no ground but that harder, no air but the cold. —Bitte? . . . Propriety faded, the level decorum of French roofs might break into the fibrous fakery of Italian and French rococo, an occasional tumor of nineteenth-century Renaissance sparked by the Byzantine eye behind the Allerheiligen-Hofkirche's Romanesque façade. As lonely, or more lonely (so they say one is in a crowd), the buildings in Munich's modern town stood away from each other in their differences, made up to extremes like guests at a Venetian masquerade, self-conscious perpetrations of assertive adolescence, well-traveled, almost wealthy, déracinés, they had gathered as transcripts of their seducers who were not known in this land, and stood now stricken in erect silence up and down the aisles of the avenues, surprised that those they had known in conglomerate childhood had also traveled, had also been seduced, and that, in this shocked instant, by lovers more beautiful than their own. Like paralyzed barbs of lightning, hooked crosses in the streets had portended holocaust; while alone indigenous, hermaphrodite host and doubly barren, the Frauenkirche disembosomed impartial welcome from twin and towering domes at which the others railed but could not supplant. Empty pavilions colonnaded on a hill across the river witnessed the afternoon pleasure of a child who had been called away, and left this glittering plaything for the wind to tear.

Now, he painted at night. In the afternoon he worked at restoring old pictures, or in sketching, a half-attended occupation which broke off with twilight, and Christiane went on her way uncurious, uninterested in the litter of papers bearing suggestion of the order of her bones and those arrangements of her features which she left behind, unmenaced by magic, unafraid, she walked toward the Gare Saint-Lazare, unhurried, seldom reached it (for it was no destination) before she was interrupted, and down again, spread again, indifferent to the resurrection which filled her and died; and the Gare Saint-Lazare, a railway station and so a beginning and an end, came forth on the evening vision, erect in testimony, and then (for what became of the man who was raised?) stood witness to a future which, like the past, was liable to no destination, and collected dirt in its fenestrated sores.

He painted at night, and often broke off in a fever at dawn, when the sun came like the light of recovery to the patient just past the crisis of fatal illness, and time the patient became lax, and stretched fingers of minutes and cold limbs of hours into the convalescent resurrection of the day.

The streets, when he came out, were filled with people recently washed and dressed, people for whom time was not continuum of disease but relentless repetition of consciousness and unconsciousness, unrelated as day and night, or black and white, evil and good, in independent alternation, like the life and death of insects.

This can happen: staying awake, the absolutes become confused, time the patient seen at full living length, in exhaustion. One afternoon he went to sleep, woke alone at twilight, believed he had slept the night through, lost it, here was dawn. He went out for coffee. The streets were full, but unevenly. There was a pall on every face, a gathering of remnants in suspicion of the end, a melancholia of things completed. Wyatt, haggard as he was, looked with such wild uncomprehending eyes on a day beginning so, that he attracted the attention of a policeman who stopped him.

—Où allez-vous donc? —Chez moi. —Vos papiers s'il vous plaît. —Mon passeport? Je ne l'ai sur moi, c'est chez moi. —Où habitez vous? —Vingt-quatre rue de la Bourse. —Qu'est-ce que vous faites? —Je suis peintre. —Où donc? —Chez moi. —Où habitez vous? —Mais . . . —Avez vous des moyens? —Oui . . . Wyatt reached into his pocket, took out what francs he had, showed the money. —Alors, said the policeman, —il faut toujours en avoir sur soi, de l'argent, vous savez . . .

After a glass of coffee he climbed the stairs to his room. Someone was waiting in the dim light of the hall. As Wyatt approached the figure turned, put out a hand and murmured a greeting. —My name is Crémer, he said. —I met you last week, in the Muette Gallery. May I come in for a moment? He spoke precise English. Wyatt opened the door to his room, ordered and large, blank walls, a spacious north window. —You will be showing some of your pictures next week, I believe?

—Seven pictures, Wyatt said, making no effort to expose them.

—I am interested in your work.

—Oh, you've . . . seen it?

—No, no, hardly. But I see here (motioning toward the straight easel, where a canvas stood barely figured) —that it is interesting. I am writing the art column in *La Macule*. Crémer's cigarette, which he had not taken from his lips since he appeared, had gone out at about the length of a thumbnail. He looked rested, assured, hardly a likely visitor at dawn. —I shall probably review your pictures next week, he added after a pause which had left Wyatt smoothing the hair on the back of his head, his face confused.

—Oh, then, . . . of course, you want to look at them now?

—Don't trouble yourself, Crémer said, walking off toward the window. —You are studying in Paris?

—No. I did in Munich.

—In Germany. That is too bad. Your style is German, then? German impressionism?

—No, no, not . . . quite different. Not so . . .

—Modern? German impressionism, modern?

—No, I mean, the style of the early Flemish . . .

—Van Eyck . . .

—But less . . .

—Less stern? Yes. Roger de la Pasture, perhaps?

—What?

—Van der Weyden, if you prefer. Crémer shrugged. He was standing with his back to the window. —In Germany . . .

—I did one picture in the manner of Memling, very much the manner of Memling. The teacher, the man I studied with, Herr Koppel, Herr Koppel compared it to David, Gheerardt David's painting *The Flaying of the Unjust Judge*.

—Memlinc, alors . . .

—But I lost it there, but . . . do you want to look at the work I've done here?

—Don't trouble. But I should like to write a good review for you.

—I hope you do. It could help me a great deal.

—Yes. Exactly.

They stood in silence for almost a minute. —Will you sit down? Wyatt asked finally.

Crémer showed no sign of hearing him but a slight shrug. He half turned to the window and looked out. —You live in a very . . . clandestine neighborhood, for a painter? he murmured agreeably. In the darkening room the cigarette gone out looked like a sore on his lip.

—The anonymous atmosphere . . . Wyatt commenced.

—But of course, Crémer interrupted. There was a book on the floor at his feet, and he moved it with the broad toe of one shoe. —We recall Degas, eh? he went on in the same detached tone of pleasantry, —his remark, that the artist must approach his work in the same frame of mind in which the criminal commits his deed. Eh? Yes . . . He approached Wyatt slightly hunched, his hands down in his pockets. —The reviews can make a great difference. He smiled. —All the difference.

—Difference?

—To selling your pictures.

—Well then, Wyatt said looking away from the blemished smile, down to the floor, bringing his arms together behind him twisted until he'd got hold of both elbows, and his face, thin and exhausted, seemed to drain of life. —Yes, that . . . that's up to the pictures.

—It's not, of course, Crémer said evenly.

—What do you mean? Wyatt looked up, startled, dropping his arms.

—I am in a position to help you greatly.

—Yes, yes but . . .

—Art criticism pays very badly, you know.

—But . . . well? Well? His face creased.

—If you should guarantee me, say, one-tenth of the sale price of whatever we sell . . .

—We? You? You?

—I could guarantee you excellent reviews. Nothing changed in Crémer's face. Wyatt's eyes burned as he looked, turning green. —Are you surprised? Crémer asked, and his face changed now, expressing studied surprise, scorning to accept; while before him Wyatt looked about to fall from exhaustion.

—You? For my work . . . you want me to pay you, for . . . for . . .

—Yes, think about it, said Crémer, turning to the door.

—No, I don't need to. It's insane, this . . . proposition. I don't want it. What do you want of me? he went on, his voice rising as Crémer opened the door.

There was hardly light, not enough to cast a shadow, left in the room. As they had talked, each became more indistinct, until Crémer opened the door, and the light of the minuterie threw his flat shadow across the sill. —I regret that I disturbed you, he said. —I think you need rest, perhaps? But think about it. Eh?

Wyatt followed him to the door, crying out, —Why did you come here? Now? Why do you come at dawn with these things?

Crémer had already started down the stairs. —At dawn? he called back, pausing. —Why my dear fellow, it's evening. It's dinner time. Then the sounds of his feet on the stairs, and the light of the minuterie failed abruptly, leaving Wyatt in his doorway clutching at its frame, while the steps disappeared below unfaltering in the darkness.

Il faut toujours en avoir sur soi, de l'argent, vous savez . . .

Like lions, out of the gates, into the circus arena, cars roared into the open behind the Opéra from the mouth of the Rue Mogador. Around it this faked Imperial Rome lay in pastiche on the banks of its Tiber: though Tiber's career, from the Apennine ravines of Tuscany, skirting the Sabine mountains to course through Rome and reach with two arms into the sea, finds unambitious counterpart in the Seine, diked and dammed across the decorous French countryside, proper as wallpaper. Nevertheless, they had done their best with what they had. The Napoleons tried very hard. The first one combed his hair, and that of his wife and brothers, like Julius Caesar and his family combed theirs. J.L. David (having painted pictures of Brutus, Andromache, and the Horatii) painted his picture looking, as best he could manage, like Julius Caesar; and Josephine doing her very best (the *Coronation*) to look above suspicion herself. Everyone rallied round, erecting arches, domes, pediments, and copied what the Romans had copied from the Greeks. Empire furniture, candlesticks, coiffures . . . somewhere beyond them hung the vision of Constantine's Rome, its eleven forums, ten basilicas, eighteen aqueducts, thirty-seven city gates, two arenas, two circuses, thirty-seven triumphal arches, five obelisks, four hundred and twenty-three temples with their statues of the gods in ivory and gold. But all that was gone. There was no competition now. Not since Pope Urban VIII had declared the Coliseum a public quarry.

As the spirit of collecting art began in Rome, eventually it began in Paris, reached the proportions of the astounding collection of that wily Sicilian blood the Cardinal Mazarin, murmuring to his art as he left in decline and exile, —Que j'ai tant aimé, French enough to add, —et qui m'ont tant couté. If the Roman connoisseur could distinguish among five kinds of patina on bronze by the smell, French sensitivities soon became as cultivated. If, to please the Roman connoisseur, sapphires were faked from obsidian, sardonyx from cheap colored jasper, French talents were as versatile: "Un client désire des Corots? L'article manque sur le marché? Fabriquons-en . . ." (And one day, of Corot's twenty-five hundred paintings, seventy-eight hundred were to be found in America.) Even then they knew the value of art. Or of knowing the value of art. As Coulanges said to Madame de Sévigné, —Pictures are bullion.

Paris, fortunate city! by now a swollen third of the way into the twentieth century, still to be importuned by those who continued to take her at her own evaluation. Perhaps a kindred homage which rang across the sea was well earned (from a land whose length was still ringing with the greeting —Hello sucker!): perhaps fifty million Frenchmen couldn't be wrong. Four million of them, at any rate, were nursing venereal diseases; and among the ladies syphilis brought about some forty thousand miscarriages that year. "Paris": a sobriquet to conjure with (her real name Lutetia), it bore magic in the realm of Art, as synonymous with the word itself as that of Mnesarete, "Phryne," had once been with Love. Long since, of course, in the spirit of that noblesse oblige which she personified, Paris had withdrawn from any legitimate connection with works of art, and directly increased her entourage of those living for Art's sake. One of these, finding himself on trial just two or three years ago, had made the reasonable point that a typical study of a Barbizon peasant signed with his own name brought but a few hundred francs, but signed *Millet*, ten thousand dollars; and the excellent defense that this subterfuge had not been practiced on Frenchmen, but on English and Americans "to whom you can sell anything" . . . here, in France, where everything was for sale.

Under the eyes of Napoleon I (atop a column in the Place Vendôme, "en César") the Third Republic bickered on. Having established their own squalid bohemias, there was no objection to handing the original over to their hungry neighbor across the Maginot Line, who was busy scrapping the Versailles treaty, fragment by fragment, until the day when a German envoy would be shot in Paris, and, weeks later, a peace pact signed to prepare for a re-enactment of the bloodshed which had provoked this expression of faith from one killed in it, "Il y a tant de saints, ils forment un tel rempart autour de Paris, que les zeppelins ne passeront jamais." And Paris waited, as ever ready as Phryne beset by slanders and threats, to rend her robe and bare her breasts to the mercy of her judges.

In an alley, a dog hunting in a garbage can displayed infinite grace in the unconscious hang of his right foreleg. Little else happened that Saturday night in August. Saint Bartholomew's Day was warm. It was the dead heat of Paris summer, when Paris cats go to sleep on Paris windowsills, and ledges high up, and fall

off, and plunge through the glass roof of the lavabo. The center of the city was empty. A sight-seeing bus set off from the Place de l'Opéra. A truck and a Citroën smashed before the Galeries Lafayette. At the Pont d'Auteuil, a man's body was dragged out of the Seine with a bicycle tied to it. Among the fixtures, tiled and marbled shapes remindful of a large outdoor bathroom, in the cemetery at Montrouge a widower argued with his dead wife's lover over who had the right to place flowers on her grave. In front of the Bourse, a deaf-mute soccer team carried on conversation in obstreperous silence. On the Quai du Pont Neuf, a Frenchman sat picking his nose. Then he put his arm around his girl and kissed her. Then he picked his nose. It was Sunday in Paris, and very quiet.

On the terrace of Larue, under the soiled stature of the Madeleine's peripteral imposture, Wyatt considered a German newspaper. Taxis limped past, bellicose as wounded animals, collapsing further on at Maxim's, late lunch. Unrepresentatively handsome people passed on foot. Some of them stopped and sat at tables. —In Istanbul in the summer, a lady said, —it was Istanbul, wasn't it? We used to take long rides in the cistern, in the summer . . .

Wyatt read slowly and with difficulty in *Die Fleischflaute*, an art publication. His show was over. No pictures had been sold. He had thrown away *La Macule* quickly, after reading there Crémer's comments: —Archaïque, dur comme la pierre, dérivé sans cœur, sans sympathie, sans vie, enfin, un esprit de la mort sans l'espoir de la Résurrection. But at this moment the details of that failure were forgotten, and the thing itself intensified, as he made out in *Die Fleischflaute* that there had just been discovered in Germany an original painting by Hans Memling. Crude overpainting had transformed the whole scene into an interior, with the same purpose that Holofernes' head had once been transformed into a tray of fruit on Judith's tray (making it less offensive as a 'picture'): this one proved to be a figure being flayed alive on a rack, since overpainted with a bed, and those engaged in skinning him were made to minister to the now bedridden figure. A fragment of landscape seen through an open window, said *Die Fleischflaute*, had excited the attention of an expert, and once it was taken to the Old Pinakothek in Munich and cleaned, the figure stretched in taut agony was identified as Valerian, third-century persecutor of Christians, made captive by the Persian Sapor whose red cloak was thrown down in the foreground before the racked body thin in unelastic strength, anguish and indifference in the broken tyrant's face, its small eyes empty with blindness. Possibly, the experts allowed, it might be the work of Gheerardt David, but more likely that of Memling, from which David had probably drawn his *Flaying of the Unjust Judge*. There followed a eulogy on German painters, and Memling in particular, who had brought the weak beginnings of Flemish art to the peak of their perfection, and crystallized the minor talents of the Van Eycks, Bouts, Van der Weyden, in the masterpieces of his own German genius.

Saint Bartholomew's Day in Notre Dame, reflecting commemoration of the medal which Gregory XIII had struck honoring Catherine de' Medici's massacre of fifty thousand heretics: the music surged and ebbed in the cathedral, and in the Parisian tradition of preconcerted effects the light suddenly poured down in fullness, then faded, together they swelled and died. At the end of the service, as the organ filled that place with its sound, the body of the congregation turned its many-faced surface to look back and up at the organ loft, and from the organ loft they formed a great cross so. Then the cross disintegrated, its fragments scattered over their city, safe again in the stye of contentment.

Paris simmered stickily under the shadowed erection of the Eiffel Tower. Like the bed of an emperor's mistress, the basin she lay in hadn't a blade or stitch out of place; and like the Empress Theodora, "fair of face and charming as well, but short and inclined to pallor, not indeed completely without color but slightly sallow . . . ," Paris articulated her charm within the lower registers of the spectrum. So Theodora, her father a feeder of bears, went on the stage with no accomplishment but a gift for mockery, no genius but for whoring and intrigue. An empress, she triumphed: no senator, no priest, no soldier protested, and the vulgar clamored to be called her slaves; bed to bath, breakfast to rest, she preened her royalty. —May I never put off this purple or outlive the day when men cease to call me queen . . . She died of cancer.

Toward evening the shadow of the Eiffel Tower inclined to the Latin Quarter across her body. She prepared, made herself up from a thousand pots and tubes, was young, desperately young she knew herself and the mirror forgotten, the voice brittle, she lolled uncontested in the mawkish memories of men married elsewhere to sodden reality, stupefied with the maturity they had traded against this mistress bargained in youth. Revisiting, they could summon youth to her now, mark it in the neon blush uncowed by the unquerulous façades maintained by middle age, and the excruciating ironwork and chrome, the cancerous interiors.

At a bar in Rue Caumartin a girl said to an American, —Vous m'emmenez? Moi, je suis cochonne, la plus cochonne de Paris . . . Vous voulez le toucher? ici? Donnez moi un billet . . . oui un billet, pour le toucher . . . ici . . . discrètement . . .

A girl lying in a bed said, —We only know about one per cent of what's happening to us. We don't *know*

how little heaven is paying for how much hell.

Someone said, —But you've been over here so *long*, to an American in a hotel room who was showing his continental savoir faire by urinating in the sink. He said, —I wanted to marry her, but you know, she's tied to her envirement. Someone said, —I never knew him very well, he's of the Negro persuasion. On the left bank, someone had just left his wife and taken up the guitar. It was at home in bed. —I dress it in her bathrobe every night, he said. Someone else suggested using a duck, putting its head in a drawer and jamming the drawer shut at the critical moment. A young gentleman was treating his friends to shoeshines for the seventh time that hour. He was drunk. The dirty Arab children sold peanuts from the top of the basket and hashish from the bottom. They spoke a masterful unintimidated French in guttural gasps, coming from a land where it was regarded neither as the most beautiful language, as in America, nor the only one, as in France. At that table someone said, —This stuff doesn't affect me at all. But don't you notice that the sky is getting closer? —Of course I love art, that's why I'm in Paris, a girl said. The boy with her said, —Je mon foo, that's French for . . . —Putas, putas, putas, muttered the man in the sharkskin suit. Someone said, —My hands are full, would you mind getting some matches out of my pocket? . . . here, my trouser pocket. Someone said, —Do you like it here? Someone else said, —In the morning she didn't want to, so I put it under her arm while she was grinding the coffee. A man in an opaque brown monocle said, —Gzhzhzhzhzt . . . hu . . . and fell off his chair. Someone told the joke about Carruthers and his horse.

On the quai, the man kissed his girl and returned to his more delicate preoccupation. Along the Rue de Montmartre stubby hands lifted glasses of red wine. These were the people, slipping, sliding, perishing: they had triumphed once in revolution, and celebrated the Mass in public parody; installing the Goddess of Reason with great celebration, she proved, when unveiled, to be a dancing girl with whom many had extensive acquaintance. The People, of whom one of their officers, Captain de Mun, said —"Galilean, thou hast conquered!" Ah, for them no mercy; they are not the people, they are hell itself! . . . But they knew what they wanted: Liberté, égalité, fraternité . . . evaded the decorous façades decreed by their elders, or betters, and gathered in public interiors of carnivorous art nouveau.

In Père Lachaise an American woman bought a plot so that she might be buried near . . . who was it? Byron? Baudelaire? In the Place Vendôme another transatlantic visitor overturned a stolen taxicab at Napoleon's feet, was jailed, fined, and made much of by his friends. In Notre Dame du Flottement a millionairess from Maine married her colored chauffeur and was made much of by his friends. On the terrace of the Dôme, beset behind the clattering bastion of her own Sainte Chapelle, the young George Washington read with silently moving lips, broke wind pensively and looked around to see if she had attracted notice. On the Boulevard de la Madeleine a girl walking alone, swinging her purse, paused to glance in at the feet showing below the shield of the pissoir, and waited to accost their owner. Someone, looking above, cried out, —What's that? What is it? —The balloons. The balloons have gone up. In the washroom of the Café de la Régence, someone scrawled *Vive le roi* over the sink.

To one side, a man read the *Tribune*. To the other, *Al Misri*. —Votre journal, m'sieur, the waiter called, waving *Die Fleischflaute*, —votre journal . . .

And the shadow he cast behind him as he turned away fell back seven centuries, to embrace the dissolute youth of Raymond Lully, and infatuation with the beautiful Ambrosia de Castello, which she discouraged; and if she seemed to succumb at last, offering to bare her breasts in return for a poem he had written to their glory, it was to show him, as he approached in that rapture of which only flesh is capable, a bosom eaten away by cancer: he turned away to his conversion, to his death years later stoned in North Africa, and to his celebration as a scholar, a poet, a missionary, a mystic, and one of the foremost figures in the history of alchemy.

III

> First of all, then, he is evil, in the judgment of God, who will not inquire what is advantageous to himself. For how can anyone love another, if he does not love himself? . . . In order, therefore, that there might be a distinction between those who choose good and those who choose evil, God has concealed that which is profitable to men.
>
> —Peter, in the Clementine *Recognitions*

—Wyatt . . . let's get married before we know too much about each other.

That was unlike Esther.

She liked to get things out in the open, find why they *happened*. Still, like other women in love, salvation

was her original purpose, redemption her eventual privilege; and, like most women, she could not wait to see him thoroughly damned first, before she stepped in, believing, perhaps as they do, that if he were saved now he would never need to be redeemed. There was a historical genuineness about Esther, which somehow persisted in spite of her conscious use of it. In her large bones there was implicit the temporal history of a past, and a future very much like it. There was size to her. She had the power of making her own mistakes appear as the work of some supramundane agency, possibly one of those often vulgarly confused with fate, which had here elected her capable of bringing forth some example which the world awaited. Principal among these (and no less a mistake, somewhere, which she must live out as though it were her own) was being a woman. She worked very hard to understand all this; and having come to be severely intellectual, probing the past with masculine ruthlessness, she became an accomplice of those very circumstances which Reason later accused of being unnecessary, and in the name of free will, by which she meant conscious desire, managed to prolong a past built upon them, refurbished, renewed, and repeated. With great diligence, and that talent of single purpose with which her sex pursue something unattainable in the same fashion they pursue something which is, her search for Reason was always interrupted by reasons. Things happened for reasons; and so, in her proposal it may have been simply her feminine logic insuring a succession of happenings which reasonably might never have happened at all. Or being a woman, and the woman she was, her proposal may have been an infinite moment of that femininity which is one of humanity's few approximations to beauty, asking no justification and needing none to act in a moment of certainty with nothing to fear, one day to be recalled in a fearful moment threatened by certainty.

Left hand; right hand: they moved over her with equal assurance. Undistinguished here they raised her flesh, and Esther rose to reconcile them, to provide common ground where each might know what the other was doing.

A year later, they had been married for almost a year; which was unlike Wyatt. He had become increasingly reluctant wherever decisions were concerned; and the more he knew, the less inclined to commit himself. Not that this was an exceptional state: whole systems of philosophy have been erected upon it. On the other hand, the more he refused to commit himself, the more submerged, and the more insistent from those depths, became the necessity to do so: a plight which has formed the cornerstone for whole schools of psychology. So it may be that his decision to marry simply made one decision the less that he must eventually face; or it is equally possible that his decision to marry was indecision crystallized, insofar as he was not deciding against it.

Knowing that extraordinary capacity for jealous hatred which men so often have for a woman's past, Esther was in a way grateful that he never asked her about hers. Still, she did not disown it, though much as she wanted to go everywhere she had never been, she as fervently never wanted to revisit any scene in that past, a frantic concatenation whose victim she remained, projecting her future upon it in all the defiant resentment of free will, in a world where she had been victimized by every turn of the die since her father had first cast it. Where Esther's mind had gone since, her thighs had followed with errant and back-breaking sincerity, in civilized correspondence to that primordial cannibal rite performed by sober comrades who eat their victims in order to impart to themselves the powers with which those victims had, as enemies, threatened to overcome them. (It is not simply hunger: those driven by hunger alone have been heard to remark afterward, —I should have preferred pork.)

Not hunger? One of the more fastidious comments risen in her past had sported the phrase *vagina dentata*. Still it was not hunger, but an insatiability which took this hunger as its course, seeking, in its clear demand, to absorb the properties which had been withheld from her; and finding, in its temporary satisfaction, and the subsequent pain of withdrawal, insatiability. Year after year the emancipated animus of free will labored its spinneret, spun out this viscous fluid of causality which had rapidly hardened into strands fatal as those of the tarantula's silk-lined burrow here in the sandy soil of native hope. She did not question it; no more than the trap door which the tarantula leaves open at the top, or the victims who tumble in, affirming her woman's part in deep despair over their common lot, expressed in a resentment of men for the success of their casual fortunes where her devourings continued, but not for love.

At no time was Esther unprepared for those attempts which the lives around her made to rise to tragedy; though by the time they managed it, they had escaped it, and through their ascendance she had come rather to see herself as the conglomerate tragic figure, since it was she who was always left. It confirmed something. Esther had spent little time with women. She seemed to find in their problems only weak and distorted plagiarisms of the monstrous image of her own. Thus it seemed very odd to many who knew her that she should choose a woman analyst. It became a very deep attachment, so long before any completion of her analysis that it was evident to both of them who had the upper hand. When Esther met Wyatt, she asked if she should marry, and was forbidden. She demanded, and was pled with. She married, and her analyst was a suicide. It was a way things had of working out for Esther. It confirmed something.

Call him louder! Call him louder! Trumpets sounded, and the roll of drums.

—And why you like Handel, Esther said quietly after their argument, or to continue it. She had a cold, which broke her voice low with apparent emotion.

—Handel?

Is not His voice like a hammer . . . ?

—Mozart . . . She coughed.

Like a hammer that breaketh the stone

She swallowed. There was a magazine open in her hands, as there was a book in his; but she was watching him, to see if the intent strain in his face were for his reading, or tense suspension waiting, borne upon the chords of music, for the next sound of constriction and release in her throat. He did not move. Her throat drew tighter, its strictures embraced, and she swallowed with difficulty. At that, as though it were a signal of release from restraint, a hand rose to hide the intent corner of his profile. —And *Tosca!* . . . she murmured, as her throat bound up again, and she swallowed quickly. He did not move. The book was a large one, but she could not make out its title. It might have been anything; just as his tension must be for her presence, since he appeared to read everything with the same casual concentration. When she interrupted, there was no way of knowing whether he was looking up from Diogenes Laërtius or *No Orchids for Miss Blandish*. She might be breaking a thread in Berkeley's *New Theory of Vision*, joining a rain of falling objects from the supercelestial geography of Charles Fort, or only echoing a voice in some cheap paper novel like *Les Damnés de la Terre*. Mendelssohn's *Elijah* continued from the radio. She swallowed. Immediately, he cleared his throat, a vicarious measure which left her unrelieved. If she asked, he might look up with, —Fort says, "By the damned, I mean the excluded" . . . but she would have to ask, —Excluded from what? —"By prostitution, I seem to mean usefulness . . ."

She studied him now as though he might not be reading at all, but peeping at her through fingers of the hand shielding his eye. She cleared her throat. There was no way, as *Elijah* came to a close, to reopen their discussion: unless the next composition should be something by Beethoven or Mozart. If the radio voice should announce, Mozart's Symphony Number 37, Köchel Listing 444 . . . He turned a page. Since their discussions seldom lasted long, she often carried them on in her own mind, reconsidering now (and certain she saw the glint of his eye between his fingers) her thralldom to the perfection of Mozart, work of genius without an instant of hesitation or struggle, genius to which argument opposed the heroic struggle constantly rending the music of Beethoven, struggle never resolved and triumphed until the end. —Genius in itself is essentially uninteresting. —But the work of genius . . . —It's difficult to share in perfection. —You, to share? she'd commenced; but that was all. He was reading. She swallowed, and caught the glitter of an eye. *Elijah* was finished. Still in her mind, "By prostitution, I seem to mean usefulness," Esther said:

—What are you reading?

—Eh? His surprise was a look (she would think of it one day, remembering, or trying to remember) indigenous to his face, either that immediate anticipatory surprise, reflecting sudden foretaste of something past (as when she asked him when he'd been in Spain: —I? I've never been in Spain); or it was this look he had now, the surprise of one intruded upon. And year after year as their marriage went on, the first came less and the other more often, until one day, remembering him, or trying to remember, it would be this one which would come to her, this face of confusion, of one intruded upon, an anxious look. He said, —Nothing.

—Nothing? You can't read nothing.

—It's a book on mummies.

—Mummies?

—Egyptian mummies.

—Why are you reading a book on Egyptian mummies?

He cleared his throat, but said nothing.

—But what I gave you of mine, the story I'm writing, you haven't read that yet.

—Yes, I did read it.

—And . . . well? What did you think?

—It was . . . you seemed quite partial to the word atavistic.

—Well that, is that all?

—Well Esther, the um, and double adjectives, cruel, red anger; hard, thin lips; dark, secret pain . . .

—But . . .

—But women's writing seems to get sort of . . . Sharp, eager faces; acid, unpleasant odor . . . listen. He turned toward the radio, where a poet whose work they both enjoyed was about to read. She looked at him a moment longer, and the book which had gone closed in his hand the instant she'd spoken to him. It had happened as directly as when once she had said, —You have wonderful eyes, and he turned them from her.

What was it? As though to protect whatever lay beyond them until he could solve it himself, betraying the fear that in one lax moment his eyes might serve her as entrances. Even taking up a book she had read (Esther admired Henry James, but she trusted D. H. Lawrence), he did so anxiously, as though he might find the pages blank, the words eaten away by that hunger.

—Do you want to follow it? she asked, coming toward him with the *Collected Poems* opened in her hand. He shook his head, but did not look up, listening; and she sat down nearer him.

The poet read, in modulated tones given a hollow resonance by the radio. Esther's thumb was drawn down the page, following one line to the next, bent over the book, and her lips moved, forming around the poet's words as he spoke them, clear separate syllables which her lips, meeting and parting, moistened by her tongue, allowing exhalations in vowels, wet clicks from the roof of the mouth on *d*, brought into viscous consonance with her absorbedness, unrestrained by those lips clamped tight beside her until he cleared his throat and suddenly got to his feet. Before she could speak he had reached a door.

—But what? . . .

—I have some work, he said quickly, and left her there sitting, hunched over the pages, staring after him, while the poet read on in clear separate syllables. She blew her nose, and returned to the page before her, but her lips did not move, for she did not hear another word of the reading. Neither did her eyes, for she was gazing at the backs of her hands.

The room Wyatt had entered was as large as the bedroom, but had only one window which would have opened on an airshaft if anyone had bothered opening it. During the first year or so, the room served various vague purposes. Though between them they hadn't a great number of books, not great enough, that is, to warrant a library (for a library, to Esther, was a roomful of books), it served as that for awhile. However, this was not practical, for reasons of which each privately accused the other in refusing to admit his own. Esther liked books out where everyone could see them, a sort of graphic index to the intricate labyrinth of her mind arrayed to impress the most casual guest, a system of immediate introduction which she had found to obtain in a number of grimy intellectual households in Greenwich Village. Her husband, on the other hand, did not seem to care where his books were, so long as they were where he put them. That is to say, separate. No doubt Boyle's *Skeptical Chemist*, Jalland's *The Church and the Papacy*, Cennino Cennini's *Libro dell' Arte*, or *La Chimie au Moyen Age* would have dressed up Esther's shelves; no doubt the *Grimorium Verum* and the *Turba Philosophorum* would have been dusted down their spines regularly. No doubt these were among the reasons he kept them on his own, or strewn among the litter which had gradually filled the undetermined room until it belonged to him. Things were tacked on the walls there haphazard, an arm in dissection from a woodcut in the *Fabrica* of Vesalius, and another sixteenth-century illustration from the *Surgery* of Paré, a first-aid chart called "the wound man"; a photograph of an Italian cemetery flooded by the Po; a calendar good for every day from 1753 to 2059; a print of a drawing of the head of Christ by Melozzo da Forlì; a ground plan of the Roman city of Leptis Magna; a mirror; and rolls of paper and canvases on stretchers leaning in the corners.

When he started to work at restoring paintings, in addition to his regular job, the littered room changed only slightly. There had always been piles of drawing paper, and canvases on frames, prepared and clean or the composition begun in black unfinished lines, most prominent, or most familiar among these the initiated portrait of Camilla. The gessoed surface had cracked here and there, and got unevenly soiled, but the composition was very clear in lines unaltered since he'd put them there some fifteen years before. Occasionally this was hung on one of the walls, as though being studied with an eye to completion. Other times it remained stacked with the other empty and besmirched canvases against a wall. There was a wide flat drafting table, and a heavy easel stood erect in the middle of the room under the bare electric bulb. But the most noticeable change was not to be seen: it lay heavily on the air, the smell of varnish, oils, and turpentine, quickened by the pervasive delicacy of lavender, oil of lavender which he used sometimes as a medium.

Esther had admired the drawing begun on that large soiled cracked surface, the fine-boned face (so unlike her own) whose fleshless quality of hollows was elevated by heavy earrings, archaic hoops of gold she had seen in a leather box where her husband kept odds and ends; admired the drawing not for what it was but, as she said, for what it could be. He stood looking at it, and they were silent, for he knew she was looking at him. The only work he had ever finished, those paintings shown in Paris years before, had ended up in a warehouse in New Jersey. Esther had never seen them. They seldom discussed painting, for like so many things upon which they might agree, they never managed to agree at the same moment; and as the conversations of the early months of their marriage went on, their ideas and opinions seemed to meet only in passing, each bound in an opposite direction, neither stopping to do more than honor the polite pause of recognition.

The poet's clear tones had given way to the ingratiating pillage of the announcer, and she rose, the charm

broken, with no word of the poet in her head but, for no apparent reason, “By prostitution I seem to mean usefulness.” She picked up *The Royal Mummies* and blew her nose as she crossed the room toward the half-open door, where she put her head in, and the book, saying, —Do you want this in there?

—What? Oh that, thank you.

—What are you doing?

—Nothing, just . . . this work. He motioned toward the plans pinned on the drafting table.

—Don’t they give you enough time down there, to do your work? But he lowered his eyes from hers, shrugged and turned back to the table. —If it were something real, but this, going to this silly job every day, year after year.

—It’s not a silly job, Esther, he answered soberly, without turning.

—Copying lines, copying plans, one bridge after another. Oh, all right, it isn’t silly but you could do better, you could do more. Honestly Wyatt, the way you go day after day with your job and your reading and your . . . fooling around, and you could do more. It’s not . . . you’re not waiting to discover something, are you. Waiting to be discovered, aren’t you? Oh I hate to go on like this, sounding like this . . . She paused, watching his narrow black-suited figure bend as a vertical line came down the paper. —It’s this . . . seeing you like you are sometimes now, she went on slowly, —I see you with your head down and, I don’t know, but it upsets me, it makes me unhappy to see you that way.

—Why? he asked in a voice near a whisper, his face close down to the paper.

—Because you look so lonely and that’s what I can’t bear, she brought out at his back. Then her eyes lowered to the floor when he did not turn, and she brought the damp knot of the handkerchief to her nose. —Don’t you want anything . . . any of the things, that other people want?

—Other people? he demanded, turning.

—Oh . . . , her throat caught. —Never mind. There. I’ll leave you with company.

—That? the mirror?

—I love that, you having a mirror in here.

—But that . . . to correct bad drawing . . .

—Good night, I’m going to bed when I’ve done the dishes.

—I’ll do them, if you’re tired, he offered. —Your cold . . .

—Don’t be silly. I’ll do them. She left him there, knotting a piece of string in his hand. A few minutes later, when she’d turned out the lights in the living room, the light from the half-open door drew her eyes and she saw him standing, running the fingers of his right hand over his rough chin, up one cheek and then the other, as though to wake after the night needing a shave made sense, but finding his face rough with growth after a day’s well-lighted consciousness a strange thing. Then he said aloud, —How safe from accident I am!

She had once heard him mentioned, with little more than curiosity, by people whom neither of them knew now. Then, when she came to asking more pointedly about him, there were anecdotes enough (someone she met at a party had heard he’d jumped off the Eiffel Tower, and with drunken persistence marveled at his survival). In and out dodged the vagrant specter, careering through conversations witness to that disinterested kindness which other people extend to one who does not threaten them with competition on any level they know. Costumed in the regalia of their weary imaginations, he appeared and vanished in a series of images which, compacted, might have formed a remarkable fellow indeed; but in that Diaspora of words which is the providential nature of conversation, the fugitive persisted, like those Jewish Christians who endured among the heathen, here in the figure of a man who, it appeared at last, had done many things to envy and nothing to admire.

—Wyatt, what is it? What’s the matter?

—A dream? . . .

—Only a dream?

—But . . .

—It’s all right, darling, whatever it was it’s all right now.

—It was . . .

—What was it?

—At home, in bed, that parsonage was a big empty house and I know every step in it, I woke up and I could hear footsteps. I woke up there hearing very heavy footsteps in an even tread and I knew where they were going, I heard them down the stairs and through the front hallway and into the living room, across the living room and through the back hall past the dining room toward the kitchen . . .

—But, was that all?

—But listen, what was terrible was that I know every step in that house, I know how many steps it takes to come down the stairs or to cross the living room, I can’t tell you the number but I know, but these steps I

heard in the darkness, they were regular and even, not in a hurry but what was terrible, they kept reaching places too soon. I know the sound, I know how the sounds change when you step from the front hall into the living room, or passing the dining room or off the last stair and . . . but these steps kept arriving too soon, not hesitating anywhere and not in a hurry, but if you take regular even steps, and there weren't enough of them.

—It is strange. And your voice, you sound like a child.

—It doesn't sound terrible does it, now.

—We'll talk about it in the morning, she whispered, and her hand moved down his body to find him and gently raise him into life. —There must be a reason . . .

—Reason! but, good God, haven't we had enough . . . reason.

Her hand twisted and her fingers, closed together, moved only enough to make themselves felt, to make their motion not an act but a sense, to arouse not simply the blood which rushed to meet them but, in a touch, something beyond it. —Why do you fight it all so hard, Wyatt?

—Women, he commenced, and then, —men rising to isolated challenges, he spends his life preparing to meet one, one single challenge, when he triumphs it's, they call it heroic, but you, I know how hard you try for me, women just go on, they just go on and I . . .

—They have to, Esther said beside him, as he came over half upon her in the darkness. —If we could get away from here, you've been everywhere, you've studied in Germany and in Paris and I . . . Wyatt, if we could travel . . . She felt his leg relax on hers. —And you don't want to, you don't want to travel.

—To voyage . . .

—With me?

—Charles Fort says maybe we're fished for, by supercelestial beings . . .

—Yes, without me. Alone.

—My grandfather, he fell down a well once, did I tell you? He talks of voyages, he's oriented by the stars. Orientation sidérale, the man who experimented with ants in the desert in Morocco . . . Then he seemed to tighten and hold her off suddenly, and she asked:

—What is it?

—In that dream, I just remembered my . . . my hair was on fire.

She felt him run his hand over his hair, and down his rough cheek in the darkness. —We'll talk about it in the morning, she said, —not now.

—Not flames, he said holding her again.

—You, you'd go to Morocco . . .

—But just burning, he whispered, almost wondrously, as she rose to engage the incredulous tension of his right hand, still murmuring:

—And be more . . . Moroccan . . . than the Moors.

Next morning Esther woke alone, to realize that she had been alone most of the night. She swallowed, and found her cold better. She smelled coffee and went to the kitchen, where half a pot of it was boiling furiously on the stove. She started to call out, felt a wave of nausea, and sat down and decided to eat something. She got out bread and butter and looked for an egg, but could not find one. Then she poured some of the boiling coffee into a cold cup, and the cup cracked; nonetheless she poured until it was full and took it into the living room.

Light showed from the studio, and she heard sounds behind the half-closed door. Then:

—Damn you, damn you . . . damn you!

—What? she brought out, at the door. —What a smell.

—Nothing. He stood facing her under the bare brilliance of the bulb, as though stricken, in the midst of some criminal commission, as lightning freezes motion.

—What is it?

—Nothing, I'm . . . talking to myself.

—Are you working? still working?

—Yes, yes, working, he answered. His empty hands opened and closed at his sides, as though seeking something to occupy them. Then he caught up a knife in one, and with the other pointed to the straight easel, —On that.

—That? She looked at the familiar thing on the easel. It was a late eighteenth-century American painting in need of a good deal of work, the portrait of a woman with large bones in her face but an unprominent nose, a picture which looked very much like Esther. She found it so, at any rate; and even when he'd said, —As a painting, it isn't very good as a painting, is it? . . . she standing behind him could see no further than the portrait, held by the likeness as happened so often but seldom so clearly, finding resemblances to herself everywhere as though she set out from the start seeking identity with misfortune, recognition in disaster.

He had backed away from her, holding the knife, as though he were guarding something, or hiding it, and when she looked behind him on the wall she saw the black lines on the cracked soiled surface of the unfinished portrait. —That, she said, —that's what you were working on?

—That. He made a stab pointing behind her with the knife, and she moved to sink wearily against the door frame.

—A way to start the day, she said, looking at him. —I wish you'd stop waving that knife. Start the day? I feel like you've been in here all night, like you're always in here, and whoever it is that sleeps with me and talks to me in the dark is somebody else.

—I woke up, he said putting the knife down, —I wanted to work.

—But this . . . if you wanted to work on that, you can tell me, you don't have to pretend, . . . this secrecy . . .

—Aunt May, when she made things, even her baking, she kept the blinds closed in the butler's pantry when she frosted a cake, nobody ever saw anything of hers until it was done.

—Aunt May! I don't care about Aunt May, but you . . . I wish you would finish that thing, she went on, looking at the lines over his shoulder, —and get rid of her.

—Rid of her? he repeated. From somewhere he'd picked up an egg.

—Finish it. Then there might be room for me.

—You? to paint you?

—Yes, if you . . .

—But you're here, he brought out, cracking the egg over a cup, and he caught the yolk in his palm. —You're so much here. Esther . . . I'm sorry, he said with a step toward her, the egg yolk rolling from one palm to the other, threatening to escape. —I'm sorry, he said seeing the expression he'd brought to her face. —I'm tired.

—Even this, she said lowering her eyes, and bringing them round to the damaged likeness on the easel, —if you'd finish this.

—There's no hurry, he said quickly, —they've gone abroad, the people who own it, they may not be back for some time.

—If they were gone ten years you'd take ten years. You could do work like this in half the time you take, a tenth of the time, even if you won't paint yourself you could settle down to restoring work and make something of it. It's no wonder you don't sleep, that you're nervous and have bad dreams when you're not doing what you want to do.

He stood bent over a cup, where he held the egg yolk suspended between the squared fingertips of one hand, and a pin in the other, about to puncture it, and he looked up at her. —But I am, Esther.

—If you could finish something original, she said. —You look like an old man. Why are you laughing?

—Just then, he said straightening up, and the egg yolk still hanging from his fingers, —I felt like him, just for that instant as though I were old Herr Koppel, I've told you, the man I studied with in Munich. As though this were that studio he had over the slaughterhouse, where we worked, he'd stand with an egg yolk like this and talk, "That romantic disease, originality, all around we see originality of incompetent idiots, they could draw nothing, paint nothing, just so the mess they make is original . . . Even two hundred years ago who wanted to be original, to be original was to admit that you could not do a thing the right way, so you could only do it your own way. When you paint you do not try to be original, only you think about your work, how to make it better, so you copy masters, only masters, for with each copy of a copy the form degenerates . . . you do not invent shapes, you know them, auswendig wissen Sie, by heart . . ." The egg yolk fell, most of it went into the cup. —Damn it, he said, looking at it, —but it doesn't matter, these stale eggs . . . "Country eggs you must have, with stale city eggs you cannot make good tempera . . ."

—I might have had it for breakfast.

—But, was it the last one? I didn't . . . I'm sorry, Esther, I . . . here . . . He poured the white from one stained cup into what yolk there was in the other. —Here, it just isn't . . . it's clean, there just isn't as much yolk . . .

—Aren't you going to your office? You'd better shave if you are, she said and left him offering the cup in the direction of the damaged likeness on the easel.

Her coffee was cold. She poured it into the sink, and went down to get the mail. She read one letter on the stairs, and called out before she'd closed the door behind her, —Wyatt, something awful's happened. Where are you? Then she almost screamed, seeing him standing in the door of the studio with blood all over one side of his face and his neck. —What happened?

—What is it? he asked. —What awful thing . . .

—What's happened to you? she cried running up to him.

—What? He stood there with a straight razor opened in his hand.

—What are you doing?

—Shaving . . .

—Did you do that . . . shaving? What are you doing in there, shaving.

—Oh, he said running his fingertips over his chin, and looking at the blood on them. —It's a mess, I'm sorry, Esther. The mirror, I was using this mirror in here, you have the one in the bathroom covered . . .

—Covered! she burst out impatiently, twisting the letter in her hand.

—It has a cloth over it, I thought for some reason you might . . .

—It's a handkerchief drying, why didn't you just pull it off. And that, she went on, getting breath, —that terrible thing, it's dangerous to shave with, look at it, just because your father . . . You're like a child about it, this image of his . . .

—What was the letter?

—The letter? This? Yes, that warehouse, the place in New Jersey where you had your things, it burned. And here, they send you a check for a hundred and thirty dollars.

—Really? That's fine.

—Fine? Aren't you upset? Things like those paintings, they can't be replaced.

—No, they can't, he said quickly, a hand to his chin where the blood had already begun to dry.

—Where are you going?

—To wash. I have to hurry, I . . . I have some plans to take in.

She caught him again at the front door, where he paused with a roll of papers under his arm. —No coffee? Nothing?

—I had some earlier. He pulled at the knob, but she had a hand on his arm.

—I wish you could rest, she said, and when he turned, looking at her as though he had suddenly been stopped in a crowded street: —Are you all right?

—I? Why yes, yes I'm all right, Esther, I . . . you mustn't . . . Goodbye, he broke and hurried toward the stairs.

A few minutes later, when she was standing pouring coffee into the cracked cup, the doorbell rang. It was a delivery boy with a dozen eggs. She put them on the kitchen table, and then took out a handkerchief and stood, steadying herself with a hand on the table, staring at the coffee, whose surface was broken with the regular beats of her heart.

•

It was dark afternoon when Esther came in, bearing in the forefront of her mind fragments of a conversation she had left a little earlier (on Rilke, not Rilke's poetry but Rilke the man, who refused to be psychoanalyzed for fear of purging his genius); but over this, and through the rest of her mind, skated an image far more familiar, plunging and surfacing, escaping under the applied hand of her memory, reappearing when she turned elsewhere, echoing, among faces and lanterns and the prows of boats, —Maybe we're fished for . . . , an image whose apparition she waited even now. Though it was dark in the studio, she opened the door and looked in there. Then she took off her coat, turned the radio on, and sat down, oblivious to the soprano singing nel massimo dolore, —Sempre con fè sincera la mia preghiera . . .

The door rattled, with muttering beyond it. She sat still. Finally he entered, in a state of some excitement. —I had trouble with the key, he said, and gave her a broken self-conscious laugh. She wanted time to study him before she spoke, but could not let him escape to the studio before she asked:

—Was it you I saw this afternoon? a little while ago?

—Me? Why? Where?

—Were you there, where they're showing Picasso's new . . .

—*Night Fishing in Antibes*, yes, yes . . .

—Why didn't you speak to us?

—Speak to who? You? Were you there?

—I was there, with a friend. You could have spoken to us, Wyatt, you didn't have to pretend that . . . I was out with someone who . . .

—Who? I didn't see them, I didn't see you, I mean.

—You looked right at us. I'd already said, There's my husband, we were near the door and you were bobbing . . .

—Listen . . .

—You went right past us going out.

—Look, I didn't see you. Listen, that painting, I was looking at the painting. Do you see what this was like, Esther? seeing it?

—I saw it.

—Yes but, when I saw it, it was one of those moments of reality, of near-recognition of reality. I'd been . . . I've been worn out in this piece of work, and when I finished it I was free, free all of a sudden out in the world. In the street everything was unfamiliar, everything and everyone I saw was unreal, I felt like I was going to lose my balance out there, this feeling was getting all knotted up inside me and I went in there just to stop for a minute. And then I saw this thing. When I saw it all of a sudden everything was freed, into one recognition, really freed into reality that we never see, you never see it. You don't see it in paintings because most of the time you can't see beyond a painting. Most paintings, the instant you see them they become familiar, and then it's too late. Listen, do you see what I mean?

—As Don said about Picasso . . . she commenced.

—That's why people can't keep looking at Picasso and expect to get anything out of his paintings, and people, no wonder so many people laugh at him. You can't see them any time, just any time, because you can't see freely very often, hardly ever, maybe seven times in a life.

—I wish, she said, —I wish . . .

How real is any of the past, being every moment revalued to make the present possible: to come up one day saying, —You see? I was right all the time. Or, —Then I was wrong, all the time. The radio is still busy with Puccini, *Tosca* all the way through: from the jumble at the end of the second act, Wyatt rescues her words, repeats them. —Questo è il bacio di Tosca! That's reality, then. Tosca's kiss, reality?

—I wish . . . she repeats (preferring *Don Giovanni*).

—Maybe seven times in a life.

Magic number! but she sits looking at him, waiting in the space populated by memory. One night when she was doing her nails, he came in. —Wyatt, you've never had a manicure? Never? Let me give you a manicure . . . But he said something in a tone apologetic, alarmed, and took his hands away one clutched in the other.

—But it can't really be that simple . . . (a discussion: did the coming of the printing press corrupt? putting a price on authorship, originality). —Look at it this way, look at it as liberation, the first time in history that a writer was independent of patrons, the first time he could put a price on his work, make it a thing of material value, a vested interest in himself for the first time in history . . .

—And painters, and artists? Lithography, and color reproductions . . .

—Yes, I don't know, if one corrupts the artist and the other corrupts . . . that damned *Mona Lisa*, no one sees it, you can't see it with a thousand off-center reproductions between you and it.

—But how . . .

—I don't know, I've tried to understand it myself. Spinoza . . .

Mozart? The air is full of him, you've only got to have a radio receiving set to formulize the silence, give it shape and put it in motion: *Sleigh Ride* hurtles from the grid and strikes her. She suffers the impact without surprise. —I know you've never said you didn't want children, but whenever I've mentioned it you just look . . . you just get a look on your face. He puts his hand there, his right hand to his forehead and draws it down with feverish application, as though in this to pull away the features so long forming, revaluing for this moment; but above his hand, his face comes back into shape, the forehead quickly rises and recovers its lines, then the brows, and the eyes vividly devious permit nothing to enter. —I wish we were in the dark, you can talk to me in the dark, in the light you tell me things like . . . Zero doesn't exist.

—But you asked me . . .

—Or bad money drives out good.

Esther watched him now, standing in the middle of the room, drawing his hand down over his face as though, again, to wipe out some past, how long ago, or how recent, or all of it? She did not know, but sought one area among the German festivals, Handel at Breslau, Shakespeare at Stuttgart, Beethoven at Bonn, all in May; *Egmont* at Altenburg, *Der Fliegende Holländer* at Nürnberg in June; *Die Ägyptische Helena* at München . . .

—Munich, she said, —when you were in Munich?

—What?

—You've never told me much about it.

—About Munich?

—And that boy you knew there that you spent so much time with.

—Han? I didn't spend a lot of time with him.

—You worked together, and drank together and traveled together.

—Traveled?

—That night you spent together at Interlaken, from what you've told me of that . . .

—We were there for almost a week, waiting for a look at the Jungfrau, it was hidden every day, I told you about that. And the day I left for Paris, early in the morning standing on the railway platform I looked

up, and there it was as though it had come from nowhere, and at that instant the train came in right between us, good God I remember that well, that morning.

—But . . . But he had turned and gone into the studio, and she went to the kitchen, stopping only to change the station on the radio. They were silent through most of supper, as though in deference to a symphony of Sibelius which reached across the room to jar them into submission, for neither of them would have confessed, even privately, to liking it.

Sensing the thought, If he does not love me, then he is incapable of love, —I wish . . . she said. Moments like this (and they came more often) she had the sense that he did not exist; or, to re-examine him, sitting there looking in another direction, in terms of substance and accident, substance the imperceptible underlying reality, accident the properties inherent in the substance which are perceived by the senses: the substance is transformed by consecration, but the accidents remain what they were. The consecration has apparently taken place not, as she thought, through her, but somewhere beyond her; and here she sits attending the accidents.

Her lips did not move, neither did the words laid out there on the stillness of the white page: the faculty of reading suspended in her dull stare, the syllables remained exposed, hopelessly coexistent. Then one caught her eye, drew her on through another, and so through six, seven . . . When her wet tongue clicked *t*, she looked up and the poem died on the page. —Did you know he was homosexual? she asked.

—Ummm.

—I didn't know it until Don told me today.

—Who?

—Don Bildow, he edits this little magazine, the . . .

—He's homosexual?

—Oh no, he isn't, Don isn't, don't you listen? He told me that this . . . this . . . She held up that *Collected Poems*, shunning to speak the poet's name. —Did you know it?

—What? Yes, I've heard something like that.

—Why didn't you tell me?

He looked up for the first time. —Tell you?

—You might have mentioned it, she said and put the book aside with its cover down.

—Might have . . . why would I mention it? What's that to do with . . .

—When we were sitting here listening to him read, it didn't occur to me, it's funny, it never occurred to me about him, pictures I've seen of him, and his poems, the things he says in his poems . . . and I'd wanted to meet him. Esther's eyes had come to rest on the floor, and the shadow thrown there from the chair, meaningless until it moved.

—And you're surprised? . . . upset over this?

—I'd wanted to meet him, she commenced, following the shadow's length back to its roots.

—Meet him? And now a thing like this . . . I don't understand, you Esther, you're the one who always knows these things about people, these personal things about writers and painters and all the . . .

—Yes but . . .

—Analyzing, dissecting, finding answers, and now . . . What did you want of him that you didn't get from his work?

Esther's eyes rose slowly from the floor the height of her husband's figure. —Why are you so upset all of a sudden? she asked him calmly. —Just because I'd mentioned Han . . .

—Han! he repeated, wresting the name from her. —Good God, is this what it is! That stupid . . . Han, why he . . . after all these years, a thing like this . . .

—And that painting you gave him, you've never given me . . .

—Gave him? It disappeared, that's what I told you. "You give it to me to remember you, because we are dear friends, this Memlinc you are making now . . ." He asked me for it, but it disappeared before it was even finished, when they arrested the old man, Koppel, that's what I told you. He subsided, muttering something, he'd picked up a piece of string and stood knotting it.

She murmured, her eyes back on the shadow's busy extremity, —You've told me . . .

—That stupid . . . Han, he went on, —in his uniform, pounding his finger with a beer stein, "You see? it couldn't hurt me . . ." At Interlaken, what else was there to do but drink? Snowed in, waiting, "There's something missing," he says, he hadn't shaved for three days, the blank look on his face, " . . . if I knew what it is then it wouldn't be so missing . . ." I've told you . . .

—Oh, you've told me, she said, impatient, looking up at him for a moment, then back at the shadow. —I don't know what all you've told me, what little . . . New England, all right, you're the Puritan, all this secrecy, this guilt, preaching to me out of Fichte about moral action, no wonder a thing like this upsets you, when I mention a poet I've wanted to meet and he turns out . . . you don't want to talk about it, do you! she

pursued him, where he had got almost across the room, about to escape into the studio.

But he stopped in that doorway, reaching a hand inside he snapped on the bright light which flung a heavier shadow across the floor to her. —Listen, this guilt, this secrecy, he burst out, —it has nothing to do with this . . . this passion for wanting to meet the latest poet, shake hands with the latest novelist, get hold of the latest painter, devour . . . what is it? What is it they want from a man that they didn't get from his work? What do they expect? What is there left of him when he's done his work? What's any artist, but the dregs of his work? the human shambles that follows it around. What's left of the man when the work's done but a shambles of apology.

—Wyatt, these romantic . . .

—Yes, romantic, listen . . . Romantics! they marry cows and all kinds of comfort, soon enough their antics betray them to what would have been fatal in the work, I mean being obvious. No, here, it's competence right here in the world that's rewarded with romantic ends, and the romantics battling for competence, something to eat and carfare home . . . Look at the dentist's wife, she's a beauty. Who's the intimate of a saint, it's her Jesuit confessor, and the romantics end up anchorites in the desert.

Esther stood up, turning her back as she spoke to him so that he could not evade her question with a look, or by turning away himself, but was left with, —Then tell me, what are you trying to do? And she picked up a magazine, and came back to a chair with it, not looking up to where he took a step toward her from the brightly lighted doorway.

—There's only one thing, somehow, he commenced, faltering, —that . . . one dilemma, proving one's own existence, it . . . there's no ruse people will disdain for it, and . . . or Descartes "retiring to prove his own existence," his "cogito ergo sum," why . . . no wonder he advanced masked. Kept a salamander, no wonder. Something snaps, and . . . when every solution becomes an evasion, . . . it's frightening, trying to stay awake.

Though his voice had risen, still Esther did not look up, but sat quietly turning the pages of the magazine, and when she spoke did so quietly and evenly. —You've told me, all your reasons for letting year after year go by this way while you . . . work? And even this, look. This magazine your company puts out, look at this picture, this bridge, it's something your company did, designed by Ben somebody, I can't pronounce it, the road bridge at Fallen Ark Gap.

—Do you like it? he asked, suddenly standing beside her, anxiety still in his face and sounding in his voice, but a different, immediate anxiousness.

—It's beautiful, she said. Then she turned and looked up to him. —Wyatt, you know you could do more, more than just the drafting, copying lines, wasting your time with . . .

—Look at it, he said, —do you see the way it seems to come out and meet itself, does it? He held his hands up in a nervous bridge, fingertips barely touching, the piece of string still hung from one of them. —Does it look that way to you? that sense of movement in stillness, that . . . tension at rest and still . . . do you know that Arab saying, "The arch never sleeps"? . . .

—Yes, it is dynamic. Wyatt, you, why can't you . . . Then her eyes, meeting his, seemed that abruptly to empty the enthusiasm from his face and his voice.

—It's derivative, the design, he said.

—Derivative?

—Of Maillart.

—I don't know him.

—A Swiss, there's a book of his work somewhere around here.

She looked at his hands, gone back to knotting the string, and watched a bowline form there. —Like a knot, she said, —pulling against itself.

—I'm going back to work, he said and turned away. She walked after him as far as the lighted doorway, and stood for a minute staring at the picture on the upright easel. —I've come to hate that thing, she said finally, and with no answer, left him removing corroded portions of the face with the sharp blade.

Most nights now Esther went to sleep alone, her consciousness carried in that direction by Handel and Palestrina, William Boyce, Henry Purcell, Vivaldi, Couperin, music which connected them across the darkness in the stream where everything that had once brought them together returned to force them apart, back to the selves they could no longer afford to mistrust. Sometimes there was a long pause between the records; sometimes one was repeated, over and over again.

She woke to the same exquisitely measured contralto, —*When I am laid . . .*, that had lost her to sleep what seemed so many hours before. She lay in the dark and saw herself as she had been, a week before was it? sitting with an open book. —Wyatt . . . ? —What is it? When she said nothing he looked up at her. —What is it, Esther? She looked at him. —I just want you to talk to me. He looked at her; and looking at him she heard herself saying something she had said another time and wanted to repeat but there was no

way to, for he simply sat, looking at her, and would not provoke it: —I wish you *would* lose your temper, she had said, —or *some*thing because this . . . this restraint, this pose, this control that you've cultivated, Wyatt, it becomes inhuman . . . He just looked at her.

The music, she realized now, was not the Purcell, not the contralto at all, but strident male voices in a Handel oratorio. Memories ran together, and she sat up in bed. Just her position, lying flat on her back, had advanced one memory, one evening and one conversation, into another, like streams commingling on an open plain. Bolt upright, everything stopped. She drew breath, and smelled lavender.

Esther got out of bed and went into the living room, where she sat down in the darkness. The door to the studio was open barely an inch. She sat, listening and remembering, as though he had been gone a long time. Would the music of Handel always recall sinful commission, the perpetration of some crime in illuminated darkness recognized as criminal only by him who committed it: Persephone, she sat now listening. And would the scent of lavender recall it? as it was doing now; for she felt that she was remembering, that this moment was long past, or that she was seated somewhere in the future, seated somewhere else and had suddenly caught the smell of lavender in the air, recalling this moment only in memory, that in another moment she would breathe deeply, destroying the delicate scent, that she would arise and go: queen of the shades, was her mother wandering in search of her? now where she waited, here on the other side of the door opening upon her husband's infernal kingdom.

She woke sitting straight up in the chair. The music was right where it had abandoned her: repeating? or had she been lost to it for no more than a transition of chords, as is the most alert consciousness. She stared at the shaft of light; and immediately she was up, and had pushed the door open.

Wyatt had modified his handwriting to a perverse version of Carolingian minuscule, in which the capital *S*'s, *G*'s, and *Y*'s were indistinguishable, and among the common letters, *y*, *g*, and *f*. *The* looked like *M*, and *p* a declined bastard of *h*. (Esther wrote in one continuous line, interrupted by humps, depressions, lonely dots and misplaced streaks, remarkably legible.) There were specimens of his writing strewn about the room; still, his childhood hand was apparent as the child father to the man. On the length of the table made from a door, on top of large sheets of unfinished lines drafted in origins of design pinned to the table, among opened books, and books with slips of paper profusely stuck between their pages, *The Secret of the Golden Flower*, *Problems of Mysticism and Its Symbolism*, *Prometheus and Epimetheus*, *Cantilena Riplœi*, beside an empty brandy bottle, lay open Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*, and there in the scrupulous hand of childhood, written on lined paper, a nursery rhyme which she suddenly had in her hand, standing alone in the room.

There was a man of double deed, it commenced,

Sowed his garden full of seed.
When the seed began to grow,
'Twas like a garden full of snow;
When the snow began to melt,
'Twas like a ship without a belt;
When the ship began to sail,
'Twas like a bird without a tail;
When the bird began to fly,

—Esther!

'Twas like an eagle in the sky;
When the sky began to roar,
'Twas like a lion at the door;

—Esther . . .

When the door began to crack,
'Twas like a stick across my back;
When my back began to smart . . .

—Esther, what is it? What are you doing here?

'Twas like a penknife in my heart;
When my heart began to bleed,
'Twas death and death and death indeed.

—Esther . . .

—I just couldn't stop reading it, she said. He had her, supporting her with one arm.

—But what . . . why . . .

—Are you here now? she said, looking at him, into his eyes.

The music stopped, and the automatic arm lifted, paused, returned to the grooves it had just left. He reached over and turned it off.

—Wyatt . . . ?

—I thought you were asleep, I just went out to get this, he said, holding up a bottle of brandy. He looked down quickly at his table, at the undisturbed plans and the books there. —I thought you were asleep, he repeated, looking at her. Then he saw what she had in her hand. —That, he said taking it from her, —what are you reading it for, it . . . it's just something I found here, here in this old book of Aunt May's. It's nothing, it's just something . . . He set the brandy down on the table. —Something she made me copy out.

He had no coat, and was dressed in a black suit. The bones in his face were smaller than Esther's. His hair was cut short, and his skull looked almost square. —Esther? . . . She put her arms around him. —Come to bed.

The dream recurs.

—Darling . . . the same one?

—Yes. The same. Exactly the same.

She thinks then, Perhaps . . .

—It doesn't really hurt, there isn't any pain and there aren't any flames, but just that my hair is burning . . .

Perhaps the consecration has not taken place yet after all, and the substance is still there, caught up in accident, waiting. Bedded in darkness she drew him over, and sweating he performed, and lay back, silent, inert, distant. —There are some cigarettes on the dresser, she said. He walked there in the dark, found them and lit one, sitting on the edge of the bed he smoked.

—Wyatt?

—What.

—How are you?

—Fine.

—I mean how do you feel?

—Empty, he answered.

She said nothing, but pretended sleep. After minutes of sitting abandoned he turned open the disrupted covers, and was asleep before she was, dwelling close up against the exposure of her back.

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The lust of summer gone, the sun made its visits shorter and more uncertain, appearing to the city with that discomfited reserve, that sense of duty of the lover who no longer loves.

Then, as someone in a steam-heated room (it was a woman named Agnes) said while mixing gin with sweet vermouth, —Christmas is almost down our throats.

In another apartment, a tall woman put down the telephone and said to her husband, —A party. I did hope we'd get to the Narcissus Festival this year. The Hawaii one.

On Madison Avenue, two deer hung before a shop by their hind feet, bellies split and paper rosettes planted under their tails.

On Second Avenue, a girl in a south-bound bus (her surname appeared 963 times in the Bronx directory) said, —But he don't even know my name. —Who don't? —The lipstick man, he was in today. I found out he's single. —Is he hansome? —He's not really hansome, he's more what you might say inneresting looking. With my hair and my complexion he says I ought to wear teeshans red. My favorite movie star . . .

On First Avenue, a girl in a north-bound bus (who used the same lipstick as her favorite movie star) said, —My doctor told me to ride this bus, he says maybe that'll bring it on.

In a Lexington Avenue bar, a man in a Santa Claus suit said, —Hey Barney, let's have one here, first one today. The bartender was saying —It's just the same as in Brooklyn, irregardless . . . —That's what I say, if you serve food you gotta have a rest room for ladies as well as men. A woman said, —Where do you come from? —Out on Long Island, Jamaica. —Jewmaica you mean. —Yeh? So where do you come from. —Never mind. —Yeh, never mind, I know where, it's nothing but a bunch of Portuguese and Syssirians up where you come from up there.

—Hey Barney, let's have another one here.

—OK Pollyotch, the woman called to Santa Claus.

—Hey Barney . . .

—Hey Pollyotch, don't start singin your ladonnamobilay in here.

—I need this drink like I need a hole in the head, said Santa Claus, interrupting the young man beside him who was staring at a dollar bill pinned on the wall, a sign which said, *If you drive your* FATHER *to drink drive him here*, and his own image in the mirror. He turned and nodded agreement. —You know what I mean? What's your name? —Otto. —You know what I mean, Otto? Otto held up his beer glass, half emptied, and nodded. —Can I buy you a drink Otto?

—He tole me ahedda time he's gonna get drunk, the woman said.

—Who's kiddin who?
—Some people never learn.
—Listen to this guy you'll go crazy.
—Can I buy you a drink?
—No, thank you, really. I feel just the way you do. I'm just waiting.
—You won't drink with me, hunh? You won't drink with me . . . ?
—Hey Pollyotch . . .
—Like I say, it's just like in Brooklyn, irregardless . . .
The juke-box came to life, and played *The World Is Waiting for the Sunrise*.

Fruit stores were busy. Taxi drivers were busy. Trains were crowded, in both directions. Accident wards were inundated. Psychoanalysts received quivering visits from old clients. Newspaper reporters dug up and wrote at compassionate length of gas-filled rooms, Christmas tree fires and blood shed under mistletoe, puppy-dogs hung in stockings and cats hung in telephone wires, in what were called human interest stories.

—Do I know him? We was like we was married together for four months, said a girl on Third Avenue. —I'm going to give him a presint this year, just for spite.

It rained; then it snowed, and the snow stayed on the paved ground for long enough to become evenly blackened with soot and smoke-fall, evenly but for islands of yellow left by uptown dogs. Then it rained again, and the whole creation was transformed into cold slop, which made walking adventuresome. Then it froze; and every corner presented opportunity for entertainment, the vastly amusing spectacle of well-dressed people suspended in the indecorous positions which precede skull fractures.

—Who made the first one? Will somebody tell me that? said The Boss at an office party in a suite at the Astor Hotel. His stiff dickey stood out like a jib as he flew before the winds of First Cause. —You may not have thought I'm a very religious guy, but I'll just ask that one question. *Who made the first one?* Then he dropped his glass on the carpet.

In a large private house on East Seventy-fourth Street, the girls entertained their gentlemen friends at a champagne breakfast. The gentlemen were away from home on business: at home, their aging children opened gifts bought by efficient secretaries, asked embarrassing questions, and were confounded to receive answers which common sense had told them all the time; they stared at their gifts, and awkwardly accepted this liberation from infancy, made privy to the reciprocal deceits which as children they had been taught to call lies. Miles away here, Daddy smiled munificently as the girl in the new housecoat ("Who gave you *that?"*) said, —And even with my own name on it and all. Are they real di-mins?

Hundreds of thousands of doors closed upon as many single young women in single rooms: there, furnished with the single bed, the lamp, the chair, bookcase full of encouragement, radio, telephone, life stepped tacitly and took her where she never saw the sun. Who would send flowers? Not him! And relatives again? A handkerchief from a cold-nosed aunt. She telephoned her mother in Grand Rapids, and was surprised to note that Mother seemed to have been weeping even before she answered the telephone. The radio, unattended, played *The Origin of Design*. And she still had her hair to put up. Flub-a-dub-dub, she washed her girdle in the basin, singing alto accompaniment to the Christmas carols on another station. Every hour on the hour consciousness blanked, while the disembodied voice spoke with respectful disinterest of train wrecks, casualties in a far-off war, the doings of a president, an actress, a murderer; and then suddenly warm, human, confidential (if disembodied still) of under-arm odor. Hark the herald angels sing! she sang (alto) accompanying the body-odor song which followed very much the same tune. Flub-a-dub-dub went the girdle in the basin while she sang, not too loudly, fearful of missing something, of missing the telephone's ring. —Glory to the new-born King! she sang, waiting for the lipstick man.

As it has been, and apparently ever shall be, gods, superseded, become the devils in the system which supplants their reign, and stay on to make trouble for their successors, available, as they are, to a few for whom magic has not despaired, and been superseded by religion.

Holy things and holy places, out of mind under the cauterizing brilliance of the summer sun, reared up now as the winter sun struck from the south, casting shadows coldly up the avenues where the people followed and went in, wearing winter hearts on their sleeves for the plucking. Slightly offended by Bach and Palestrina, short memories reached back, struggling toward Origen, that most extraordinary Father of the Church, whose third-century enthusiasm led him to castrate himself so that he might repeat the *hoc est corpus meum, Dominus*, without the distracting interference of the rearing shadow of the flesh. They looked; but he was nowhere about, so well had he done his work, and the churches were so crowded that many were forced to suffer the Birth in cocktail lounges, and bars. So well had Origen succeeded, sowing his field without a seed, that the conspiracy, conceived in light, born, bred in darkness, and harassed to maturity in dubious death and rapturous martyrdom, continued. *Miserere nobis*, said the mitered lips. *Vae victis*, the statistical heart.

Tragedy was foresworn, in ritual denial of the ripe knowledge that we are drawing away from one another, that we share only one thing, share the fear of belonging to another, or to others, or to God; love or money, tender equated in advertising and the world, where only money is currency, and under dead trees and brittle ornaments prehensile hands exchange forgeries of what the heart dare not surrender.

—Hey Barney, let's have another here. First today.

—Hey Pollyotch, the woman called. —Hey Sanny Claus.

—Why don't you drop dead?

—Don't give me none of your hocus pocus.

—Yeh . . .

—And who are you going to be miserable with New Year's Eve? asked Mrs. Bildow on the telephone. Esther, at the other end of the line, accepted this kind invitation for herself and her husband.

Mrs. Bildow laid the instrument back in its cradle and looked out the window of the sidewalk-level apartment. She could see four legs. —Don, she called. —Do you think she's all right with him? What's his name, Anselm? Outside, the four legs retreated, out of her sight.

It was a dark afternoon. To the north, the sky was almost black. Anselm rounded the corner with the little girl by the hand. He stopped there, met by a friend. —Hey Anselm, I've got one you'd like, old man.

—One what?

—Is it all right to kiss a nun?

—What do you mean, for Christ's sake?

—Sure it's all right, as long as you don't get into the habit.

—Ha, hahahaha . . . Anselm turned his thin face down to the little girl. She looked up. He had a bad case of acne. —Hahaha-haha . . .

—I knew you'd like that.

Anselm nodded, and looked serious again, as he had rounding the corner. He looked wistful.

—What's the matter with you, anyway?

—Afternoons like this, Anselm commenced, looking to the dark sky between the buildings to the north, —afternoons like this, he repeated, —I think about girls.

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—Happy New Year, if you'll pardon the expression.

—Goodbye Esther, tell your husband . . .

—Good night, I . . .

—Happy New Year, if you're sure you can't come? . . .

—No, Esther's voice came back on the smoke with theirs, —we've decided to go to a little Spanish place Wyatt knows about, just the two of us, good night and thanks, happy New Year.

—Good night . . .

—And happy New Year, I . . .

Then the smoke in the room stopped moving, the door closed on the draft, and the room hung with silence; until Esther came back in, moving the smoke around her, and speaking, —Well, that's over. She stood unsteadily.

—If you wanted to go to their party, Esther . . .

—Party? . . . It's always so frightening we thought we'd just hide at home this year, that's what she said. If you call that a party.

—I wouldn't have minded staying here, if you'd wanted to . . .

—Go alone?

—Well, I . . . there's some work I wanted to finish.

—Work, she repeated dully.

—The woman called about that picture in there, it's all done, it just needs a coat of varnish.

—You were varnishing it when we came in.

—Yes, I did a little . . . as a matter of fact it's done, he admitted.

Esther sat slowly against the edge of a table. The brightness of her eyes fluctuated, glimmering to dull, as she fixed them on him and away. Finally she said, —It was like you were trying to . . . escape. He started a motion with his hand, but did not make a sound nor look up from the chair he sat in. —I didn't think you'd mind, they're not . . . they're a nice couple, and the boy with them . . .

—Who was he?

—I've never met him, his name's Otto something. He just showed up, he said he'd been at a party uptown, at some playwright's house, he left when it got too noisy and some woman kept calling him Pagliacci . . . you liked him, didn't you.

—Yes, he was . . . he's quite young, isn't he.

—You might have offered brandy to someone else, besides just him. And yourself, she added. Her idle hand reached the new typewriter on the table, a Christmas gift (she had given him an electric razor), and her finger made a speculative stab at a key she would never use: she looked at the paper, where she had imprinted ã. —Poor Don, you might have been a little nicer . . .

—Nicer? I talked to him, I tried to talk to him.

—I heard you, I heard you saying . . .

—Did you hear him? . . . An extensive leisure is necessary for any society to evolve an at all extensive religious ritual . . . did you hear all that? . . . You will find that the rationalists took over Plato's state *qua* state, which of course left no room for the artist, as a creative figure he is always a disturbing element which threatens the status *quo* . . . good God, Esther. Did you hear us discussing *quid*dity? and Schopenhauer's *Transcendental Speculations on Apparent Design in the Fate of the Individual*? and right into the Greek skeptics . . .

—And I heard you with this. Her voice rose, she held up a small stiff-covered magazine, —And I couldn't believe it, I thought you must be drunk or . . . I don't know what, I've never heard you that way, that . . . being rude. You're grinning now as if you still thought it was funny, pretending you didn't know he was an editor of this, that he wrote the piece in here on Juan Gris . . .

—Esther, please . . .

—And ran this whole symposium on religion they had. Wyatt, it just wasn't like you.

—What wasn't? People like that . . .

—All that about mummies, you know very well what I mean, when you said that ideas in these pages are not only dead but embalmed with care, respecting the sanctity of the corpse, I heard all of it. Some daring person appears in one issue to make the first incision, you said, and then runs off to escape stoning for his offense against the dead, and then the embalmers take over. The staff of embalmers, a very difficult clique to join, do you think he didn't know you meant him when you said that? Like good priests dictating canons for happy living they disdain for themselves. You were actually referring to his piece on Juan Gris, weren't you, when you said the corpse was drained, the vital organs preserved in alabaster vases, the brain drawn out through the nostrils with an iron hook, I heard all of it . . . the emptied cavities stuffed with spices, the whole thing soaked in brine, coated with gum, wrapped up and put in a box shaped like a man. Esther brandished the hard roll of paper, and then dropped it on the table, looking for a cigarette. —Why you picked on him . . .

—I don't know, Esther, there was something about that translucent quality of his, that round chin and thin hair and those plastic-rimmed eyeglasses, that brown suit . . .

—He can't help what he looks like.

—Hasn't he got a mirror? And that yellow necktie with palm-trees on it. There's just something about soft-handed complacent fools like that pontificating on . . .

—He's not complacent, Don suffers a good deal.

—I suppose he's given you every heart-rending detail.

—He talks to me. He talks to me more than . . . She stopped to sniff, and lit her cigarette.

—More than what?

—Never mind. Do you know what it looked like?

—What what looked like.

—It looked like all of a sudden you were trying to impress that boy Otto.

—Impress him?

—You were being . . . really, you were being just too clever and . . . coquettish.

—Esther, good God! Esther. He got to his feet.

—Do you think he's homosexual too? she asked calmly.

—Otto? How in heaven's name . . . what do you mean, too?

—Nothing, she said, looking down.

—Too? Listen . . . good God. His hands dropped to his sides.

—Well why you should be so nice to a conceited pretentious boy, and try to make a fool out of a nice person like Don when he wants to talk to you about things that interest you, and his wife . . .

—Well damn it, there it is, his wife. That woman! do you know her? Did you hear her? . . . As Don says in his piece in the religious symposium, he has a religion too though maybe you wouldn't suspect it because he's so philosophical . . .

—All right, let's forget about it.

—Forget about it? forget about her? peering out through her granulated eyelids . . . Esther tells us you're so original, you must tell me more about *your* work, you must know all the tricks . . . The tricks!

—Well she tries, Wyatt, you mustn't be unkind, and she tries to paint herself.

—She can paint herself red and hang on the wall and whistle, I don't care, but not here . . . Esther tells us . . . Esther says . . . good God! what have you told them?

—What's the matter? I've never seen you like this, Wyatt, she said sinking into a chair.

—Well what have you told them? About me, that I need psychoanalysis?

—I've had to talk to someone.

—Well . . . you . . . listen, he stood before her with his hands quivering in the air. —Damn it, if you think I need a psychoanalyst . . .

—Please don't swear at me.

—Listen, did you see her . . . reading my hands? . . . My, they're strong aren't they, but you must give me the left one too, I hope it does something to justify *this* . . . Did you see her, dragging her grubby little fingers over my palm? . . . There, the left one is so much better, but I've never seen such a complete dichotomy, she said, . . . that's one of Don's words, it means two things that describe each other like black and not black, and your right hand is so rough . . . Even when I got away from her she went on, did you hear her? . . . Your left hand is so gentle, so soft, it understands, and your right hand is so rough, that means your judgment is much better than your will, why do you try to follow your will as though it ran your life? Your left hand does, but you work against yourself, don't you, so stubborn, not happy, not happy, your left hand has love, what a lonely person you are, good God!

—Wyatt . . .

—And then, . . . is it possible? can a man be jealous of himself? Damn it, listen Esther, did you see what she tried to do? she almost kissed me goodbye? Why, she's insane. But she goes out on the street and nobody's surprised to see her, she talks and nobody's surprised to hear her. It's suffocating. Right this minute, she's talking. They're down there right this minute and that woman with the granulated eyelids is talking. You look up and there she is, people . . . the instant you look at them they begin to talk, automatically, they take it for granted you understand them, that you recognize them, that they have something to say to you, and you have to wait, you have to pretend to listen, pretend you don't know what's coming next while they go right on talking with no idea what they're talking about, they don't even know but they go right on, trying to explain who they are because they take it for granted you want to know, not that they have the damnedest idea as far as that goes, they just want to know what kind of a receptacle you'll be for their confidences. How do they know I'm the same person that . . . Who are they, to presume such intimacy, to . . . go right on talking. And they really believe that they're talking to me!

—Darling you shouldn't have let her upset you so, Esther said to him.

—Upset me! Did you hear her talking about her analysis with her husband? Her *lay* analysis? . . . Don's being analyzed, but we can't afford it for both of us, so he analyzes me. My paintings help, they're really pure symbols in the process of individuation Don says . . . Lay analysis! and she titters, one of those . . . little minds where naughtiness breeds intimacy, when she said to you, I've been trying to make your husband come out of his shell but he just won't *come*, . . . and she titters. She was sitting there . . .

—That's enough, Wyatt, really.

—No listen, she was sitting there watching the two of you, you and Don, sitting here with her knees hanging apart and Otto staring up her garter straps, He should have an affair now, she said. Don, he needs one now.

—Wyatt, please . . .

—He knew Esther before she was married, she said to me . . . Don knew Esther before she was married.

—Where are you going? Esther asked when he turned away. He did not answer but walked toward the studio door. —Wyatt, she said, getting up to follow, —please . . .

—It's all right, he said, going on through the doorway, and the bright light came on overhead.

A few minutes later Esther appeared in the door, her make-up freshened, her hair pushed up to where she thought it belonged. A drying lamp had been turned on the portrait, and she looked at it. He had done an excellent job and she, fresh from her mirror, stared at the flesh of the face on the easel as clear as her own. —I'll miss it, she said. —I'll be glad to see it gone but . . . but I'll miss it. Something moved. She turned, but it was not he. In the mirror ("to correct bad drawing . . .") she caught his reflection, and realized he was behind the table. —I'm sorry, these things happen, but now, you're not upset are you? now?

—No, no, it's just that . . . the rest of us . . . He drank down some brandy, and sat staring at some papers on the table before him. —I don't know, there are things we have to do, so we do them together. We have to eat, so we eat together. We have to sleep and we sleep together but . . . all that? does it bring us any closer together?

—But you . . . can't . . . not . . .

—But they're gone, he went on more calmly, looking back at the papers. —Thank God you thought of

something, that excuse about our going somewhere else together, to get rid of them.

—But I . . . I really wanted to go.

—Esther . . . He got up quickly and came over to her. —Don't, don't, I'm sorry. Of course we'll go, if you want to, I didn't understand, Esther, but don't cry.

(For the first time in months) he put his arm around her; but his hand, reaching her shoulder, did not close upon it, only rested there. They swayed a little, standing in the doorway, still holding each other together in a way of holding each other back: they still waited, being moved over the surface of time like two swells upon the sea, one so close upon the other that neither can reach a peak and break, until both, unrealized, come in to shatter coincidentally upon the shore.

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It was colder, outside where the deer still hung by their heels, and the rosettes still bloomed where they'd been planted. A small army of men moved through the streets, collecting twenty-five thousand tons of boxes and colored paper, beribboned refuse from Christmas.

Esther started.

—What is it?

—Just a chill, down my back. It's chilly here. She stared up at the pressed tin ceiling. —It's not the kind of place I expected.

—What, what did you expect?

—You said gypsy.

—Some greasy Hungarian dipping his violin bow in your soup?

—I didn't mean . . . please. I didn't mean I don't like it, I like it. When were you in Spain?

—Spain? He looked up surprised. —I've never been in Spain.

—But you've told me . . .

—My father, my father . . .

—And your mother. To think you never told me.

—What?

—Your mother, buried in Spain. Why are you smiling?

—The music.

—It's exciting, isn't it. Exciting music. I wonder why the place is almost empty. No . . . , she stayed his hand tipping the bottle over her glass, —I can't drink any more of it, what is it? She tipped her head to read the label, —La Guita?

—Manzanilla.

—I don't feel very well, I shouldn't have had as much to drink earlier, martinis, and now this wine. I'm not used to just sitting and drinking so much wine. Wyatt?

—Eh?

—You've almost finished this bottle yourself.

—Yes, we'll order another.

—I wouldn't drink any more of it if I were you, Wyatt?

—Ah?

—I said . . . didn't you hear me?

—I was listening to the music.

—Can you understand it?

—The music?

—The words.

—Sangre negra en mi corazón . . . I can't speak Spanish.

—Wyatt, couldn't we go?

—You want to leave now?

—I mean go, go to Spain, couldn't we, together?

—What?

—Oh don't . . . never mind, no. You couldn't take me there traveling, with your mother there. No, you . . . Morocco, following ants through the desert to see if they're guided by the stars, more Moroccan than . . . I don't know, I wish . . . where are you going?

—Men's room.

She watched him cross the room unsteadily. He stopped at the bar. There was an elderly man with large features behind the bar, the waiter joined them, and then a stout and very pretty girl came from the kitchen. Esther watched them all talking and laughing, watched her husband buy them all three a drink, saw them raise their glasses, saw him pound his heels on the floor with the pounding heels from the music

on the record in the dark juke-box; and a few minutes later the waiter approached the table opening another bottle. Earlier the waiter had stood over them and detailed the plot of a moving picture he'd seen that afternoon. His English was very choppy, and before they knew it he was describing the moving picture he'd seen the day before. These were very enthusiastic descriptions, as though they were details from his own life. He said his name was Esteban, and he came from Murcia.

—But . . . did we order this? Esther asked, as he pulled the cork from the bottle.

—Oh yes. El señor, your husband. Es muy flamenco, el señor.

—What?

—Is very flamenco, your husband.

They watched him, standing now bent over the dark juke-box beside the pretty stout girl from the kitchen, saw him straighten up, laugh, and pound the floor again with his heel.

—You understand what it mean, flamenco?

—Yes, she murmured, watching him cross the room toward her, with his head up. He paused to say something to Esteban, and came on, looking at the floor. A chill touched her shoulders, and was gone. When he sat down, she said speaking quietly under the music, —How handsome you were just then.

—What do you mean? He paused, filling his glass.

—The way you were standing there, when you hit your heels on the floor, with your head up. Were you doing it on purpose, looking so arrogant?

—You . . . make it sound theatrical.

—No, but that's it, it wasn't that, up on a stage, not just you being arrogant, not just your expression, it was . . . you had the back of your head thrown back and kind of raised but still your face was up and open in . . . I don't know, but not like you are sometimes now. She watched the glass shake slightly in his hand when he started to raise it, and he put it back on the table. —Wyatt, it's . . . sometimes when I come in and see you looking down and looking so lonely and . . . but just now, it was the whole man being arrogant, it was towering somehow, it was . . . it had all the wonderful things about it, that moment, all the things that, I don't know, . . . but all the things we were taught that a man can be. He said nothing, and did not look up, but took out some cigarettes. —Heroic, she said quietly, watching him light a cigarette with his head down, and then in the same tone, —Could I have one too?

—What? he asked, looking up quickly, and his burning green eyes shocked her.

—A cigarette? He gave her one; and filled her glass while she lit it. She stared at his squared fingers gripping the thin stem of the glass, and after a minute asked, —What does flamenco mean?

—Flemish.

—Flemish? I don't see . . .

—From the costumes the Spanish soldiers wore back, after the invasion of the Lowlands in the seventeenth century. He sounded impatient and nervous, answering her. —Strange clothes, . . . the gypsies took them over, so they . . . called them flamenco.

Esther leaned toward him at the table, with a smile of intimate confidence, and starting to put her hand to his said, —Do you know what, Wyatt? I didn't even know Spain had ever invaded . . .

—Listen . . . , he said. He'd withdrawn his hand on the table top automatically. —That's what it is, this arrogance, in this flamenco music this same arrogance of suffering, listen. The strength of it's what's so overpowering, the self-sufficiency that's so delicate and tender without an instant of sentimentality. With infinite pity but refusing pity, it's a precision of suffering, he went on, abruptly working his hand in the air as though to shape it there, —the tremendous tension of violence all enclosed in a framework, . . . in a pattern that doesn't pretend to any other level but its own, do you know what I mean? He barely glanced at her to see if she did. —It's the privacy, the exquisite sense of privacy about it, he said speaking more rapidly, —it's the sense of privacy that most popular expressions of suffering don't have, don't dare have, that's what makes it arrogant. That's what sentimentalizing invades and corrupts, that's what we've lost everywhere, especially here where they make every possible assault on your feelings and privacy. These things have their own patterns, suffering and violence, and that's . . . the sense of violence within its own pattern, the pattern that belongs to violence like the bullfight, that's why the bullfight is art, because it respects its own pattern . . .

He stopped speaking; and after a moment Esther, who was looking down now too, repeated the word, —Suffering . . . suffering? Why . . . don't you think about happiness, ever?

—Yes, did you hear what that woman said? . . . I think it's the artist is the only person who is really given the capability of being *happy*, maybe not *all* the time, but *some*times. Don't you *think* so? Don't *you* think so? . . .

—And what did you say?

He put down his empty glass. —I said, there are moments of exaltation.

—Exaltation?

—Completely consumed moments, when you're working and lose all consciousness of yourself . . . Oh? she said . . . Do you call that happiness? Good God! Then she said, It was terrible about Esther's analyst, wasn't it, for Esther I mean . . . No, good God no, people like that . . .

From the other end of the room came the flamenco wail, —Sangre negra en mi corazón.

—Do you know that Spanish line, Vida sin amigo, muerte sin testigo?

—What does it mean? she asked quietly, her eyes still turned from him.

—Life without a friend, death without a witness.

—I don't like it, she said quietly; then she caught his hand before he could withdraw it: she felt it pull for an instant, then go rigid in hers. —I'm sorry they upset you, she said, —but they've been very kind to me, both of them, when I . . . needed friends. I have talked to them about you, I've talked to them about a lot of things, and things I can't talk to you about because you just won't talk to me.

—What things? he mumbled when she paused, as though obliged to.

—Well, my writing for instance, I know it's nothing to you but it is important to me, and what do you say? . . . partial to the word atavistic . . .

—All right, Esther, he said and suddenly got his hand back from her.

—If all you can say is . . .

—All right, listen, I have ideas but why should I oppress you with them? It's your work, and something like writing is very private, isn't it? How . . . how fragile situations are. But not tenuous. Delicate, but not flimsy, not indulgent. Delicate, that's why they keep breaking, they must break and you must get the pieces together and show it before it breaks again, or put them aside for a moment when something else breaks and turn to that, and all this keeps going on. That's why most writing now, if you read it they go on one two three four and tell you what happened like newspaper accounts, no adjectives, no long sentences, no tricks they pretend, and they finally believe that they really believe that the way they saw it is the way it is, when really . . . why, what happened when they opened Mary Stuart's coffin? They found she'd taken two strokes of the blade, one slashed the nape of her neck and the second one took the head. But did any of the eye-witness accounts mention two strokes? No . . . it never takes your breath away, telling you things you already know, laying everything out flat, as though the terms and the time, and the nature and the movement of everything were secrets of the same magnitude. They write for people who read with the surface of their minds, people with reading habits that make the smallest demands on them, people brought up reading for facts, who know what's going to come next and want to know what's coming next, and get angry at surprises. Clarity's essential, and detail, no fake mysticism, the facts are bad enough. But we're embarrassed for people who tell too much, and tell it without surprise. How does he know what happened? unless it's one unshaven man alone in a boat, changing I to he, and how often do you get a man alone in a boat, in all this . . . all this . . . Listen, there are so many delicate fixtures, moving toward you, you'll see. Like a man going into a dark room, holding his hands down guarding his parts for fear of a table corner, and . . . Why, all this around us is for people who can keep their balance only in the light, where they move as though nothing were fragile, nothing tempered by possibility, and all of a sudden bang! something breaks. Then you have to stop and put the pieces together again. But you never can put them back together quite the same way. You stop when you can and expose things, and leave them within reach, and others come on by themselves, and they break, and even then you may put the pieces aside just out of reach until you can bring them back and show them, put together slightly different, maybe a little more enduring, until you've broken it and picked up the pieces enough times, and you have the whole thing in all its dimensions. But the discipline, the detail, it's just . . . sometimes the accumulation is too much to bear.

Esther had been studying his face as he spoke, and did now, where nothing moved until she said clearly, —How ambitious you are!

He looked at her with an expression which was not a frown but had happened as an abrupt breaking of his features, an instant before apparently cast for good as they were but even now, in this new constriction, renewing an impression of permanence, as molten metals spilled harden instantly in unpredictable patterns of breakage. And Esther looked at him with the face of someone looking at a wound.

They left a few minutes later. —That seems like a lot of money to leave, Esther said to him.

—For the music.

—Well, I wouldn't tip so much if I were you, she said in the door.

—But you're not, he whispered hoarsely, holding it open.

It is a naked city. Faith is not pampered, nor hope encouraged; there is no place to lay one's exhaustion: but instead pinnacles skewer it undisguised against vacancy. At this hour it was delivered over to those who inherit it between the spasms of its life, those who live underground and come out, the ones who do not come out and the ones who do not carry keys, the ones who look with interest at small objects on the

ground, the ones who look without interest, the ones who do not know the hour for the darkness, the ones who look for illuminated clocks with apprehension, the ones who look at passing shoe-tops with dread, the ones who look at passing faces from waist level, the ones who look in separate directions, the ones who look from whitened eyeballs, the ones who wear one eyeglass blacked, the ones who are tattooed, the ones who walk like windmills, the ones who spread disease, the ones who receive extreme unction with salted peanuts on their breath.

The moon had not yet entered the sky, waiting to come in late, each night waiting nearer the last possible minute before day, to appear more battered, lopsided, and seem to mount unsteadily as though restrained by embarrassment at being seen in such condition.

—You do hate the winter, don't you. There were no taxicabs in sight, and they walked hurriedly. —You always look so much colder than other people do.

—Other people! he muttered, as they walked east. The sky ahead was already light. —Look at it! he said abruptly, catching her arm. —Can't you imagine that we're fished for? Walking on the bottom of a great celestial sea, do you remember the man who came down the rope to undo the anchor caught on the tombstone?

Then she heard his name called. It seemed to come from a great distance, like a cry in a dream, or under water: she might have imagined it; but it was repeated. Then there stood the priest before them, in a black hat and coat and the round collar, carrying a suitcase, —hurrying to catch a train, she heard him say. She heard him, heard her husband's voice, her own for a moment sounding especially loud, their greetings, the hurried slightly embarrassed renewal of their acquaintanceship, all as though they were suddenly met in a submarine landscape where only the others were at home, and she fighting desperately to surface, as she had that one moment when her voice burst, —How do you do . . . His name was John. She heard him say, —There was an air of legend and mystery about you even then, Wyatt . . .

She swayed. And it seemed a long time before they were walking again, and she heard her own voice, breathed again and controlled it as she spoke. —An old friend? you studied with him? You? You studied for the priesthood?

—For the ministry, Esther. He . . . he's high church.

—You studied for the priesthood?

—It's . . . yes, there's no . . . mystery about it. It was quiet except for their heels on the pavement, and sounds of constriction from Esther's throat. A block ahead, the street was lit up by a blaze where a Christmas tree burned in the gutter. —It's too warm to snow, he said. They walked on toward the blaze.

—But that sounded like thunder. He turned to support her with both hands. —Esther, Esther . . . They both swayed. —You have to *walk*. She let herself back in a shallow doorway, and the light of the blaze covered her face. It was a big tree.

—No mystery? she said. —No mystery? All the time he talked I could see you standing there with blood all over your face. All the time he talked I could see you dancing like a lunatic, all locked up like a . . . lock . . . She managed to stop her eyes on his face. —Tonight I can believe everything I've ever thought about you, she said. —And you never told me.

—Esther, now stop it. It never occurred . . .

—Why did you marry me? she demanded.

—Esther, I don't want to be unkind . . .

She looked at him, full in the face where nothing moved to betray the man she had loved; then her eyes, moving quickly, searching, lost and found and lost him again. —But you are, she whispered. —You are all the time. Her voice rose dully, and then it broke. —You shouldn't know other people if you have nothing to share with them. You shouldn't even *know* them, she cried. And she sobbed, —You haven't . . . ever shared anything with me . . . you won't help me do things, you do them for me but you won't help me . . . you . . . offer to do the dishes, but you wouldn't help me do them, I know you'd do them if I said yes but you wouldn't help me . . .

—Esther . . . In the distance a siren whined.

—That . . . set of Dante you had, *we* couldn't have it, it was as though it couldn't exist without being yours or mine so you gave it to me, but it couldn't be ours. You . . . even when you make love to me you don't share it, you do it as though . . . so you can do something sinful. And you never told me . . . She raised her head which had fallen as she sobbed, and the blaze caught it again as the sirens, distinguishable now and punctuated by bells, approached nearer. —Why aren't you a priest? You are a priest! Why aren't you one then, instead of . . . me . . . they don't share anything.

—Priests don't share anything? he repeated, holding her.

—Nothing! Nothing, any more than you share love with me. They hold out something, offer it down. They even give it but they never share it, they never share anything . . . Her coarse hair stood away from

her face in disarray as she looked at his profile in the fire's light, uneven shocks of flame as one branch blazed up and another fell glowing, which seemed to make his features move, though nothing moved but his hands, taking a closer grip from which she half twisted. —Precision of suffering . . . privacy of suffering . . . if that's what it is, suffering, then you . . . share it. She was looking down, and shook her head slowly. —If you can't share it, . . . you can't understand it in others, and if you can't understand it you can't respect it, . . . and if you can't respect it, if you can't respect suffering . . .

The firelight had suddenly been penetrated by the sharp white lights of a car, which stopped at the curb, its siren droning down too deep to be heard. Beyond, other sirens and the clangor of bells violated the night almost upon them.

—O.K. Jack, what d'you call this?

—I . . . we . . . it's nothing, officer.

—Is this here your campfire?

—I don't know anything about the fire, Wyatt said, turning to face him, still supporting Esther. —Do I look like I . . .

—O.K. Jack, take it easy. Who's the little lady?

—This is my wife.

—You live here?

—No, we live uptown. My wife has just had a little too much to drink.

—The both of you look like you've had a few too many. This your husband, lady?

—No.

—Esther . . .

—He *ain't* yer husband?

—Look at him, Esther said raising her eyes. —Can't you see? Look at his eyes, can't you see he's a priest?

—Esther . . .

Suddenly the night around them disappeared in a blaze of red and white lights and the harmonic explosion of the sirens and bells, as a hose truck, an emergency vehicle, and a hook and ladder arrived, it seemed at the same instant. The policeman turned his back on them in the doorway. —It's just somebody's friggin Christmas tree, he called out.

—Are them the ones that lit it? came a voice from behind a red beam.

—You better get home to bed, Jack, the policeman said, turning to Wyatt.

—There aren't any cabs . . .

—Come on. I'll give you a lift, Father.

They drove uptown, in silence except for the constant static voice on the radio at their knees repeating its esoterics, ——signal thirty, signal thirty . . . car number one three seven, signal thirty . . .

Wyatt handed the policeman a five-dollar bill when they got out, and the policeman said, —Happy New Year, Father.

As he fitted the key in the door, Esther murmured, —I feel so old. He let her in, to the darkness and the scent of lavender. She sat down and said, —Leave the light off, as he crossed to the bright shaft of light that came from the drying lamp set up before the portrait in the studio.

—Wyatt, she said, —can't you say something to me . . . ? Even if you don't believe it?

He did not appear to have heard, standing over the portrait. He turned off the hot lamp, lifted a small ultra-violet hand lamp and stood tapping his foot, waiting for it to warm up. There were sounds of Esther standing in the dark room, and her footsteps. The violet light gradually rose to its lurid fullness, and showed his drawn face and level unblinking eyes turned upon the portrait. The smooth surface was gone under the violet light: in the woman's face, the portions he had restored shone dead black, a face touched with the irregular chiaroscuric hand of lues and the plague, tissues ulcerated under the surface which reappeared, in complaisant continence the instant he turned the violet light from it, and upon the form of Esther who had come, looking over his shoulder, and fallen stricken there on the floor without a word.

Wyatt picked her up, and carried her across the dark room to the bedroom. —Don't try to carry me, she whispered, as he got her there and laid her down on the bed, losing his balance and coming down almost on top of her, where she suddenly held him. Then Esther reached out with one hand and turned on the soft bed lamp. He held her face between his hands, his thumbs meeting above her eyes, and drew his thumbs along her brows. Her eyes opened, bloodshot and the whites almost possessed by the flesh round them: his eyes above were still and hard, looking down unblinking. She reached up to catch his right hand and stop it, so that only his left thumb moved along her brow. —You look like a criminal, she said gently. His smile seemed to draw her lips together, her upper lip caught under her lower. —Why? she whispered. —Why do you fight it all so hard?

—There's still . . . so much more to do, he answered, as his smile left his face.

—So much what? If . . . you can't share your work with me . . . but does that mean you can't share anything? She moved under him, and put one hand up to his rough cheek. He did not answer. —You looked like a little boy, with the flames all over your face, she whispered.

—It was terrible, he commenced, —and that woman . . . !

—A lonely little boy, getting upset over silly people.

—But Esther . . . when I realized how much you've talked to them, told them about me, about my father and . . . my mother, and guilt complexes and that dream I have that comes back, and saying that I needed analysis badly, and all sorts of . . . He paused. She was not crying.

—I had to talk to someone, she said. She scratched the palm of his right hand with her fingernails. —I wish . . . she said, moving under him. His right hand closed on her fingers, and they stopped.

He stroked her hair.

Then she moved so quickly, raising herself on her elbows, that her dress tore. —Do you think it can go on like *this?* she said loudly. His tight black jacket, unpadded and unpressed, bound his arms, but he did not stop to take it off; and then her eyes closed, his thumbs on the lids, and they shared the only intimacy they knew.

—What do you think about? she asked him, as they undressed.

—Think about? he repeated, looking up confused.

—Just . . . now, she said.

—Not thought. I don't *think* of anything, but . . . He drew on his cigarette, which was half smoked away. —It was strange. There were sapphires. I could see sapphires spread out, different sizes and different brilliances, and in different settings. Though some of them weren't set at all. And then I thought, yes I did think, I thought, if only I can keep thinking of these sapphires, and not lose them, not lose one of them, everything will be all right.

She turned out the light. —That must mean something. Like your dream. Your dream isn't hard to understand. Certainly not . . . after tonight.

—There's always the sense, he went on, —the sense of recalling something, of almost reaching it, and holding it . . . She leaned over to him, her hand caught his wrist and the coal of tobacco glowed, burning his fingers. In the darkness she did not notice. —And then it's . . . escaped again. It's escaped again, and there's only a sense of disappointment, of something irretrievably lost.

He raised his head.

—A cigarette, she said. —Why do you always leave me so quickly afterward? Why do you always want a cigarette right afterward?

—Reality, he answered.

•

—Reality? Otto repeated. —Well I always think of it as meaning the things you can't do anything about. This was an argument which many women might have welcomed; and, from the way he raised one eyebrow, it might appear that many had. Nevertheless, Esther continued to stare into the cup before her. —I mean . . . Otto commenced.

—I think he thinks of it as . . .

—Yes? he asked, after pausing politely.

—As nothing, she said. —As a great, empty nothing.

Before Otto could look (or try not to look) as uncomfortable as this made him, he was startled by her looking him square in the face across the table, to ask, —Do you like him?

—Why, yes, he answered, looking down, in a tone which she might have taken for insincerity, had she not been able to see his embarrassment. —I mean, I don't really know him, he went on as she looked back into her empty coffee cup, —but I . . . he is sort of hard to get to know, isn't he.

Esther nodded. —Yes, she said, and looked up for what he would say next.

—I mean, I can't imagine that anybody really knows him really well. Except you of course, he added hastily, offering her a cigarette.

—I'd better not take time, she said.

—And I mean, Otto said, lighting a cigarette, —I think you can learn so much from him. I mean I think I can. I mean little things that you don't learn at Harvard. Like the way he was talking about the Saint Jerome in El Greco's painting being the real Saint Jerome, the neck and chest all sort of drained of decay, and the sort of lonely singleness of purpose of insanity. That kind of thing. And he doesn't talk down to me, he just sort of . . . talks, like . . . well we were talking about German philosophy, and he was talking about Vainiger, and something about how we have to live in the dark and only assume postulates true which if they were true would justify . . .

—Romantic, German . . . Esther murmured.

—Yes but, and then Fichte saying that we have to act because that's the only way we can know we're real, and that it has to be moral action because that's the only way we can know other people are. Real I mean. But look, there's something, I mean do you think he minds me . . . taking you to lunch like this? Esther looked up and smiled across the table for the first time in some minutes. —Because you know, I wouldn't want . . .

—I think he'll be grateful, she said.

Otto turned for the waiter, whom he'd been having trouble reaching since they sat down. He'd brought her to a small restaurant which, with excess of garlic in everything but dessert and coffee (though it lingered even there), and very dry martini cocktails served by disdainfully subservient waiters one and all in need of a shave, sustained a Continental fabric that would have collapsed entirely without the expense accounts of the publishing world. —His mother breathed for him before I married him, said the woman at the next table, who was seated nearer to Otto than Esther was. —His job is to scrub the kitchen and the bathroom . . .

Otto studied the bill.

—And thank you for the book, Esther said as she did her lips. —It was kind of you to bring it, just because you heard me mention it the other evening. Did you like it?

—As a matter of fact, he said, unable to interrupt himself so that he paid the thirty-cent overcharge without question, —I haven't had a chance to read it yet.

—Well then you take it back. She pushed it toward him.

—No, no, I brought it to you. But maybe, I might come up and borrow it when you're done? I mean, if neither of you mind?

—I hope you will come up, she said. —He would too. I know he would, because he . . . because you can talk to him. And you must, she said taking Otto's hand in hers as they reached the sidewalk outside. Her eyes darted back and forth, looking from one of his to the other. —And you . . . mustn't be put off by the way he seems to withdraw. He does like you. And I'm glad you like him. I'm glad you told me you did just now, because I told him you did last night.

—What did he say? Otto asked anxiously.

Esther smiled. —It was funny, she said. —He said it made it like there were three of us in the room where there should only have been two. He said I shouldn't try to make explicit things that should be implicit. She was looking beyond him as she said this, into the crowd of people passing on Fifth Avenue, looking searchingly. Then she looked quickly back at his face. —But you understand, don't you?

—Yes, I . . .

—You . . . it's as though you bring him to life.

Otto turned to watch her leave him. Then, a hand moving in his pocket, he counted his money by memory. Then he looked at his watch. Then he took a slip of paper from his pocket.

—Chr-ah-st. Otto. I mean what are you doing standing in the middle of the street writing a note?

—Oh Ed, I . . . it's just something I thought of for this play I'm working on.

—A play? Chrahst, how unnecessary. Who's in it? asked Ed, who, though he did not know it, was himself in the play, with the unlikely name of Max.

—Well no one yet, Otto said, returning to his pocket the slip of paper on which he had just written: Gordon says nt mke thngs explict whch shd be implict ie frndshp. —I haven't finished it. The plot still needs a little tightening up. (By this Otto meant that a plot of some sort had yet to be supplied, to motivate the series of monologues in which Gordon, a figure who resembled Otto at his better moments, and whom Otto greatly admired, said things which Otto had overheard, or thought of too late to say.) —The whole plot is laid . . .

—Chrahst what lousy weather, I mean I've been everywhere and wherever you go all you find out is that it's hot as hell in summer and cold as hell in winter. Got time for a drink?

—Why yes, yes fine, I . . .

—I mean Chrahst what else do they expect you to do? he said as they walked south.

—Are you going to the reunion?

—What reunion?

—Our class, the class reunion, it's going to be . . .

—My Chrahst, I mean who wants to go to a thing like that? I mean Chrahst you just get drunk with the same stupid guys you were drunk with for four years, except every year they manage some goddamn way to get a little stupider and lose their hair and bring their wives instead, and why go all the way up there to get drunk? I mean Chrahst it's as though you hadn't grown up any.

—Say, while we're near here I want to stop in at Brooks for a minute, Otto said. —I have to get . . .

—O Chrahst I might as well stop too. I've got to get some drawers. I mean, I'm going to get married next week, and I've got to get some drawers. We could take my car . . .

—But it's only four blocks away.

—I know, and I lost the goddamn car anyway.

—You lost it?

—Last night, I left it somewhere. I think it was uptown, but I mean Chrahst, you can't expect me to remember everything.

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Pillaged by a cold wind about his midriff (for fashion confided that he might button only the bottom button of his jacket, hybrid heritage of the Guards, which forbade an overcoat), Otto reached their doorway. He paused there to look back up the street, and then take a slip of paper from his pocket. Gordon's speeches were becoming more and more profound. Gordon would soon be at home only in drama; and, though his author had not considered it, possibly closet drama at that. Otto often disappeared at odd moments, as some children do given a new word, or a new idea, or a gift, and they are found standing alone in some private corner, lips moving, as they search for the place where this new thing belongs, to get it firmly in place and part of themselves before they return to adult assaults, and the incredible possibility that they may one day themselves be the hunters. Like their lips, his pencil moved, getting the thing down before it was lost, not to himself but to his play; for once written, it need be reconsidered only for sound and character, and the scene it would best fit in, while he returned to the assaults and possibilities that only the hunter knows. In the past few months, Gordon had begun to lose his debonair manner, and become more seriously inclined; he tossed off epigrams less readily, but often paused and made abrupt gestures with his hands, as though to shape his wisdom in plain view of the large audience, halting between phrases to indicate the labor they cost him; he was liable to be silent, where he had chatted amiably; and where he had paused upstage, thoughtfully silent, he was liable not to appear at all. Grdn: We hate thngs only becse in thm we see elemnts whch we secrtly hate in rslves, Gordon's creator wrote, at the foot of a page almost covered with notations (one of which covered half the page, and only two of which were not Gordon). He paused for a moment, tapping his lip with the pencil; then, Grdn: Orignlty not inventn bt snse of recall, recgntion, pttrns alrdy thr, q. You cannt invnt t shpe of a stone. N. Mke Grdn pntr? sclptr? By now Gordon was some three or four inches shorter than he had been, and considerably less elegant. With this note that Gordon's profession was still open to change, Otto pushed at the outside door and found it open. He entered and climbed the stairs. He was commencing to envy Gordon.

A full minute passed before the door was answered. Even then, Esther returned quickly to her typewriter and sat over it biting a thumbnail, while he crossed the room to stand and look out the window, turned to stare into the empty studio, and finally sat on the couch and opened a book. It was a collection of plates of the work of early Flemish painters. A single snap of the typewriter brought him up straight. —What was that? he asked.

—A comma. She looked regretfully at the page before her. —It makes a lot of difference sometimes, a period or a comma. She suddenly looked round. —Where is he, he isn't with you?

—I just left him, we've been up at the Metropolitan. He said he wanted to take a walk.

—I knew he wasn't with you, she said sitting back and speaking more slowly, —and yet, by now sometimes I just don't know, I don't even know whether he's here with me or not.

Otto looked up, to see her staring at the floor, and he cleared his throat. —Is this his, this book on Flemish painters?

—No, it's mine, she said looking up vaguely. —He has something against reproductions.

—Yes, Otto agreed, open upon a Dierick Bouts, —but these are especially good, aren't they. This kind of stringency of suffering, this severe self-continence of suffering that looks almost peaceful, almost indifferent. But in a way it's the same thing, this severe quality of line, this severe delicacy and tenderness. She was staring at him, but he did not look up. He turned pages, and continued to speak with casual and labored confidence. —You can see how well these men knew their materials, using color like a sculptor uses marble, not simply filling in like cartoons but respecting it, using it as a servant of the pattern, the tactile values, . . . this, this van Eyck, the white headdress on Arnolfini's wife, how sharp the lines are, look at how smoothly they flow, it's perfect painting in stand oil, isn't it. It isn't difficult to see why Cicero says . . . what's the matter? He'd glanced up, to see her eyes fixed on him.

—Nothing, go on, she said, fascinated.

—Nothing, I was just going to say . . . that passage in Cicero's *Paradoxa*, where Cicero gives Praxiteles no credit for anything of his own in his work, but just for removing the excess marble until he reached the real form that was there all the time. Yes, the um . . . masters who didn't have to try to invent, who knew what

. . . ah . . . forms looked like, the um . . . The disciple is not above his master, but everyone that is perfect shall be as his master.

—Who said that? she asked after a pause, still looking fixedly at him.

—Yes, Saint Luke. He was the patron saint of painters.

—Was?

—Well I mean I guess he still is, isn't he. Otto closed the book and stood up looking for a place to put it.

—Is that all? she asked finally.

—All what?

—About Flemish painters?

—Well Esther, I like them, and the . . . I mean the discipline, the attention to detail, the separate consciousnesses in those paintings, the sort of . . . I guess it's both the force and the flaw of those paintings, the thoroughness with which they recreate the atmosphere, and the, I mean a painter like Memling who isn't long on suggestion and inferences but piles up perfection layer by layer. But, well it's like a writer who can't help devoting as much care to a moment as to an hour.

—Otto . . . She got up and came toward him.

—But God devotes as much time to a moment as He does to an hour, Otto brought out abruptly, as though defending himself, or someone very close to him. She stood before him, looking into his face querulously.

—Esther . . .

—Do you have a cigarette? she asked, stepping back. He fumbled and gave her one, lit it for her, then got the package out and took one for himself.

—Esther, look, is something wrong? he asked as she sat down on the couch and started to turn pages of a book, without looking at the words.

—Nothing, it just gets . . . I don't know, she said, and started looking at the pages, running her thumb down the lines as though seeking an answer there. He stood over her, blowing out smoke, as though the cigarette were an occupation in itself, until she said, —Here's a lovely passage, it's something of Katherine Mansfield's, a review she wrote. She held it up and he took it as though he might find some solution there himself. —It's too bad, such a lovely thing hidden away in an old review.

—Yes, he said, covetously, and read it again. He got out his pencil. She saw the book in his pocket and asked what it was.

—Spinoza, Otto answered taking it out. —I'm glad you reminded me, he lent it to me a long time ago, and just asked me if I'd leave it here.

Esther thumbed the pages. —Did you get all the way through it?

—Well, I mean not all the way really. We were talking about quiddity once, and he . . .

—About what?

—Quiddity, what the thing is, the thing itself, and he said that Kant says we can never know . . .

—Is this all you talk about? Quiddity, philosophers . . .

—But Esther . . .

—Doesn't he talk about himself to you?

—Well, I mean in a way he's always talking about himself, but he, you know, for instance when he said, But aren't we all trying to see in the dark? I mean . . . you know.

—I know, she said, staring at her hands. —But he must say something about me?

Otto stood looking down at her hair, at her shoulders and the curve of flesh at her neck. He laughed, a slight, nervous, and confidential sound; and when he spoke his voice was more strained with casualness than before. —As a matter of fact, today he said sometimes he felt like the homunculus that ah, I forget, the Greek god of fire made, and then um another god criticized it because he hadn't put in a little window where they could see its secret thoughts. She did not move, and when she remained silent Otto repeated his nervous sound of a laugh. —I mean, he didn't mean anything, you know . . . What?

—I know, she repeated in a whisper.

—He didn't mean . . .

—Do you know what it's like?

—What what . . .

—Do you know what it's like? Living with someone like him, living with him, do you know what it's like? Do you know what it's like, being a woman and living with him?

—But Esther . . .

—To come into the room, and see him staring, without blinking, just staring, not an insane stare but just sitting and looking? Last night he was sitting there, that way, and the music on the radio, I can still hear the announcer's voice afterward because it was such a relief, it was the Suite Number One in C Major of Bach,

and afterward all he said was, *such precision. Such precision*.

—But that's true, it's . . . Otto came down on the sofa beside her.

—Yes but it isn't human . . . He put a hand on hers. —It isn't a way to live, she said in the same dull voice, her hand dead under his. —It isn't . . . is it strange that he has ringing in his ears? Is this dream of his strange, this damned damned dream he has? That after an hour's silence he can say, The one thing I cannot stand is dampness . . . That's all, it took him an hour to work that out. Strange? that he can drink down a pint of brandy, and be just as he was before. Nothing happens. Nothing happens, except he blinks even less. Yes, a . . . man of double deed, I sow my field without a seed . . .

—Esther, you mustn't get so . . .

—When the seed began to blow / 'Twas like a garden full of snow.

—Look, it won't last, he said taking both her hands. —He can't just go on, like this.

—I know it, she said, moving her hands in his. —Sleeping, clutching his throat with both hands. I found him that way, when I got up in the night, sleeping on his face with both hands to his throat. I took them away, and when I came back, back from the bathroom he was like that again. Or jumping out of bed in the middle of the night, barefoot, and he comes back muttering something in Greek, apologizing, he'd gone to look up the word accusative. No, no, argue? We can't even argue, he goes into the studio there and finishes the argument alone, I hear him behind the door, answering me. Damn all this business, these shapes and smells, I heard him one night, and a wife, he said, trembling before everything that doesn't happen, weeping for everything we'll never lose. Do they really know each other, do they really give anything to each other? or is all they have to share this . . . same conspiracy against reality they try to share with me?

—And . . . then what? Otto asked, when she paused, and her hands stilled.

—He said, You can change a line without touching it. She was silent until Otto started to interrupt, then, —Is she surprised? I heard him say. Why, I have to tell her why, good God do I always have to use words when I talk to her? Is she surprised to see me when she comes in? when she wakes in the morning and sees me there? She's never been surprised. Everywhere, Esther said looking up slowly, —everything, as her eye caught a shiny magazine on the low table, —even there. There's a story in that about a girl who goes to Spain, during Holy Week she meets the mother of a man she was in love with, then one night when she's seen one of those holy processions with the Virgin in tears going by, she meets her old lover with his wife, the girl who took him away from her, and she forgives the girl.

—Yes, but that sounds . . .

—But all he could say is, What a . . . what rotten sentimentality, I can still hear his voice. What a vulgarizing of something as tremendous as the Passion, this is what happens to great emotions, this is the way they're rotted, by being brought to the lowest level where emotions are cheap and interchangeable. Has there ever been anything in history so exquisitely private as the Virgin mourning over Her Son?

—But Esther, don't you see that? Don't you feel this . . . this way we're all being corrupted, by . . .

—Don't you know that I love him? she cried. —Do you think that there's anything more . . . exquisitely private than . . . that, for me?

Otto found her head in his lap, and looking down upon it, stroked her hair. —Esther, he whispered, —Esther . . .

—To have him say, she commenced again, sitting up as suddenly, —if something, if I . . . if we talk about having children, and to have him look surprised, and then to, . . . once, once he said, A daughter, a daughter? he said, a daughter! and he said . . . I don't remember, and then it disappeared, then what we're talking about just disappears, it . . . He studied to be a priest. Did you know that? To be a minister, did he ever tell you that? He, and then that's what I say, I say that, and I ask him why aren't you then? Why aren't you a priest, if you are one! because, because I want him to . . . I want him to . . .

—Esther . . . Otto reached out to hold her, but she drew back.

—And then as though it was the most real thing in the world he says, Because I should rebe . . . I should believe in my redemption that way, because I should have to believe that I am the man for whom Christ died.

Otto took out a cigarette. He lit it, and taking it from his lips quickly said, —I'm sorry. Unprofaned, the word Christ embarrassed him.

She took it from his outstretched fingers. —You shouldn't apologize, she said. —You could at least pretend that you lit it for me.

He smiled, and leaned toward her. But his smile made hers suddenly the less real, less a smile as its life drained from behind it while the smile remained fixed on her lips; then her lips opened again and it disappeared. Esther stood up, away from him, smoking, and he took out another cigarette. —For a woman, she said, —do you think it's easy for a woman? She was turned toward the half-open door of the studio. —Reality! He talks about reality, despair. Doesn't he think I despair? Women get desperate, but they don't

understand despair. Despair as a place to start from, he said to me. And that. And that. She turned on Otto, who looked uncomfortable and as quickly brought his cigarette to his lips. Hers hung forgotten in her hand, running the smoke up her wrist. —Just being a woman, do you know what a woman goes through? You don't, but do you? Can you imagine? Just trying to keep things going, just . . . A man can do as he pleases. O yes, a man! But a woman can't even walk into a bar alone, she can't just get up and leave things, buy a boat ticket and sail to Paris if she wants to, she can't . . .

—Why not? Otto asked, standing.

—Because they can't, because society . . . and besides, physically, do you think it's easy then, being a woman?

—No no, no I don't. Otto stepped back as though threatened with it.

—And do you know the worst thing? she went on. —Do you know the hardest thing of all? The waiting. A woman is always waiting. She's . . . always waiting.

He took a step toward her, where Esther had started toward the door of the studio. —Do you remember once, when you first knew us? she asked, —when you'd been out with . . . him, and seen a painting, a portrait of a lady, you said it was quite beautiful, a woman looking just beyond you, her hands folded across in front of her shutting you out, she was holding up a ring . . .

—Yes, yes I remember it, he said, relieved at the calm in her voice. —A . . . um, Lorenzo di Credi, though he said as a painting . . .

—Do you want to see this picture of his mother? she demanded.

—I remember he said, that picture reminded him of his mother, on account of the hands or something.

—Do you want to see it? she challenged. —Yes, she must have been a very beautiful woman.

—Really? I mean, is there a picture of her?

Esther stood with a hand on the knob of the door, but moved no further. —He has one he started, fifteen years ago. It's just hanging in there, she added dully.

—Well . . . Otto stepped back. —No don't bother, it isn't important.

—Isn't important! He can't paint me, because of her we can't travel, to Spain because she's there. She turned to the dark doorway. —At night, night after night he works in there. Works? she repeated. —He's in there, night after night. That music, night after night. She stared in. —And to hear him, Damn you! damn you! Oh, talking to himself he said. Yes. He's in there now.

Otto came up behind her and took her shoulders. —Esther, he said, holding her. Then she coughed, his cigarette so close to her face. —I work at night too, he said, trying to recover her reasonably.

—It's this crazy Calvinistic secrecy, sin . . .

—Esther it isn't the secrecy, the darkness everywhere, so much as the lateness. I mean I get used to myself at night, it takes that long sometimes. The first thing in the morning I feel sort of undefined, but by midnight you've done all the things you have to do, I mean all the things like meeting people and, you know, and paying bills, and by night those things are done because by then there's nothing you can do about them if they aren't done, so there you are alone and you have the things that matter, after the whole day you can sort of take everything that's happened and go over it alone. I mean I'm never really sure who I am until night, he added.

—Alone! She moved, enough that he loosed his grasp.

—That sort of funny smell, he said, standing uncertainly, then he took a step inside, as though he had left her of his own will, saw a piece of paper on the floor and picked it up, as though it were that he was after all the time. —And I mean things like this, he said holding it up, —these sort of magical diagrams and characters and things he makes . . .

—That, she said looking at it, —it's just a study in perspective.

—Yes, but, when you look in there, don't you think of things like . . .

—It's nothing, it's just a study in perspective. The little *x* is the vanishing point.

—Yes but, I mean today we were talking about alchemy, and the mysteries that, about the redemption of matter, and that it wasn't just making gold, trying to make real gold, but that matter . . . Matter, he said matter was a luxury, was our great luxury, and that matter, I mean redemption . . .

She swung him round. —Redemption!

—Esther . . . She had her arms round his neck. He held her, at the waist, so quickly that he withdrew his thumb which had touched her breast and stood with hands paralyzed, not daring to return it. —That sort of funny smell, he murmured after a moment.

—Lavender, she said to him. Then she asked, —And you too, you want to be alone?

He looked at her face which was very close, perhaps too close to appreciate the slight raising of his eyebrow, and the complementary urbanity of his faint smile. —It's rather difficult to shed our human nature, he said. She broke away from him, and stood in the center of the room looking at him. —Esther,

what's the matter?

—That too, you got that from him too! Didn't you?

—Well, I . . . sort of, I mean . . .

—What. Go on.

—Well we were talking about a philosopher, Otto said helplessly, —Pyrrho, about Pyrrho of Elis, who said that one state was as good as another, and one day his students found him treed by a dog and they taunted him, and he said that, It's difficult to shed our human nature.

She let him finish, and then said, —You don't have to repeat all these things to impress me, Otto, I've heard them all, from him.

—But . . .

—About Flemish painting, and stringency of suffering, that God cares as much about a moment as he does for an hour, I've heard it all from him. She paused, looking Otto over, and then said, —Do you know what he asked me once? when we first met you?

—What? Otto asked, coming toward her.

—He asked me if I thought you could be homosexual.

Otto stopped. —But . . . what? What did he . . . and what did you say?

—I said I didn't know, you might be.

—But Esther, why should he, I mean you, you didn't, did you think that? I mean why would you ever think . . . He stopped, before her, beside the couch.

—You never tried to kiss me, she said.

—But I, he . . . I mean Esther, Esther. I love you, Esther. With that, Otto commenced a silence which he broke himself minutes later. —Esther, we can't, I mean not . . . suppose he should come in?

She drew her head back, resting it on the arm of the sofa, and looked at him. —Suppose he should? she said.

Late that night, Gordon stood poised in the doorway of a summer cottage, about to speak. (As a matter of fact, Gordon had been holding that screen door open for about a week now, laboring, as one hand shaped the air, to reduce Priscilla with some painful profundity.) Suddenly, in a rush of typewriter keys, he spoke. Gordon: Suffering, my dear Priscilla, is a petty luxury of mediocre people. You will find happiness a far more noble, and infinitely more refined state. Priscilla sobbed, and someone pounded on the floor from below, warning Gordon that he had said enough. There was, however, little chance of Gordon's going on tonight. At a stroke, Gordon had recovered his former assurance, and his former height. He had acquired a few new habits (could, for instance, put away a pint of brandy without showing it) but, for all urbane intents and purposes, his profundities were to be spoken with that withering detestable cleverness of old, delivered with his former ease, as he dressed with his former elegance. What was more: Gordon had discovered Art.

The screen door slammed closed behind him; and Otto got up to look in the mirror. Then his expression changed, as he took his eyes from its reflection, and he hurriedly picked up a pencil and scribbled, Gd crs as mch fr mmnt as fr hr—wht mean?

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Zosimus, Albertus Magnus, Geber, Bernhardus Trevisanus, Basilius Valentinus, Raymond Lully, Khalid ben Yezid, Hermes Trismegistus, have they been transcended by our achievement? For today (at a cost of $10,000 an ounce) it is possible to transmute base metal into gold.

The alchemist, for Otto, was likely an unsophisticated man of a certain age assisting in a smelly hallucination over an open fire, tampering with the provenience of absolutes, as Bernard of Trèves and an unnamed Franciscan are pictured seeking the universal dissolvent in the fifteenth century with a mixture of mercury, salt, molten lead, and human excrement. Otto was young enough to find answers before he had even managed to form the questions; nevertheless, if anyone had stopped him just then as he hurried up Madison Avenue, and asked what he was thinking about, Otto (to whom thought was a series of free-swimming images which dove and surfaced occasionally near to one another) would have said, —Alchemy! without hesitation. True, like everyone else, he had never seen a copy of the *Chemā*, that book in which the fallen angels wrote out the secrets of their arts which they had taught to the women they married. As embarrassed by the mention of Christ as he was charmed by the image of gold, the only thing which kept him from dismissing alchemy as the blundering parent of modern chemistry (for a pair of plastic eyeglasses, or a white shirt made from coal-tar derivatives, were obviously more remarkable, and certainly more useful, than anything Bernhardus Trevisanus turned up) was this very image of gold. Coined or in heavy bars, or exquisite dust, it came into his mind, to be fashioned in that busy workshop in less time than it takes to tell (for it was more an assembly line than a manufactory) into cuff links, cigarette cases, and other

mass-produced artifacts of the world he lived in, mementos of this world, in which the things worth being were so easily exchanged for the things worth having. Gone to earth alone, as lonely as they had been in life, were the accidents of Bernard and his Franciscan fellow; and gone to earth Michael Majer, who had seen in gold the image of the sun, spun in the earth by its countless revolutions, then, when the sun might yet be taken for the image of God.

All this may have been in the way of progressive revelation, that doctrine which finds man incapable of receiving Truth all of a lump, but offers it to him only in a series of distorted fragments, any one of which, standing by itself, might be disproven by someone unable to admit that he is, eventually, after the same thing. Thus the good Dominican Albertus Magnus said he had tested gold made by the alchemists, and found it unable to withstand seven exposures to fire; chronicling their incredible history, he did not leave the hardly less extraordinary paths of his own, but contributed a book on the care of child-bearing mothers, no less careful here, than there, to abjure accident (for his concern was not the suffering or possible death of the woman, but keeping the child alive long enough for baptism). But with the age of enlightenment those lonely men were left far behind, to haggle in darkness over the beams which they had caught, and clung to with such suffocating desire.

Anti-histamine, streptomycin, penicillin and 606: few may question but that Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim ("better known as Paracelsus") was right. It was Paracelsus who emerged from the fifteenth century (castrated by a hog, so they said, in his childhood) to proclaim that the object of alchemy was not at all the transmutation of base metals into gold, but the preparation of medicines, thus opening the way for the hospitalized perpetuation of accident which we triumphally prolong, enlarge upon, finance, respect, and enjoy today. 3:3'-diamino-4-4'-dihydroxyarsenobenzine dihydrochloride, writes Doctor Ehrlich (after 605 tries), thereby dismissing the notion that syphilis might be a visitation upon that pleasure which, in its perennial variety, had until now afforded the gratification of which only sin is capable. For unlike progressive revelation, the enlightenment of total materialism burst with such vigor that there were hardly enough hands to pick up the pieces. Even Paracelsus was left behind (dead of injuries received in a drunken brawl); and once chemistry had established itself as true and legitimate son and heir, alchemy was turned out like a drunken parent, to stagger away, babbling phantasies to fewer and fewer ears, to less and less impressive derelicts of loneliness, while the child grew up serious, dignified, and eminently pleased with its own limitations, to indulge that parental memory with no doubt but that it had found what the old fool and his cronies were after all the time.

It was with some effort, then, that Otto took his eyes from the gold cube in the Madison Avenue window, a cube capable, at the flick of a thumb, of producing a flame, not, perhaps, the *ignis noster* of the alchemists, but a flame quite competent to light a cigarette. He looked at his stainless steel wrist watch, and hurried on. He was used to having engagements, which were always matters of fixed hours or half-hours, indicated, as he hurried to meet them, by this watch; thus he glanced at it now, as though it might confirm an engagement which he did not have. He forgot to notice the time, looked again, and almost bumped Esther who was coming out of the doorway. It was mid-afternoon.

—Otto!

—Are you just going out?

—Yes, but I'll be back in an hour or so. Do you want to wait?

—Is he up there?

—He's asleep. He didn't come in till about dawn.

—Is . . . I mean is everything all right?

—Yes, it is. I guess it is. Here, take the key and go on up, you can slip in without waking him. I have to run.

Otto had got in and closed the door quietly behind him before he heard anything; even then, he could hardly distinguish words. He stood uncomfortably looking round, toward the half opened door of the studio and away from it. —Like the eyes in the petals of the flower Saint Lucy holds in that Ferrara painting . . . he heard, quite clearly, and looked at his watch. He looked up again at the half-open door. —Like the swollen owl . . . watching Saint Jerome . . .

Otto turned to leave but had hardly taken a step when the door to the studio banged behind him. —This damned hole in the wall, he heard, and turned.

—Oh, I just . . . I mean I just . . .

—I didn't hear you come in.

—I'm sorry, I mean . . . I just sort of came in.

—I'm . . . I was just on my way out. For a walk, going for a walk.

—It . . . well I mean I was just out, and I mean it looks like it's going to rain.

—Yes. Well you . . . you stay and read, if you like. There are some . . . books here, he said, gesturing.

—Here. You read French, don't you?

—Why . . . why yes, Otto said, —of course, I . . .

—Here. Take this. Keep it. Read it. He picked up, as though from nowhere, a small book whose spine was doubly split, the thin leather facing, torn around the edges from the cardboard, of olive green almost entirely covered with gold stamping of scrolls and fleurs-de-lis.

—*Adolphe*, Otto read, on the cover. —I don't think I . . .

—It's a novel, he said, —it's a good novel. You read it.

—Well thank you, I . . .

—I'll . . . get on with my walk now.

—Do you mind if I come along? Otto asked.

He had not looked surprised when he saw Otto; but he did now. He stood, his hands at his sides, opening and closing on nothing.

—I . . . I mean I wouldn't want to . . . well, you know, I . . . Otto put *Adolphe* into his jacket pocket as he spoke. —I . . .

—Well, let's get on then.

As they walked toward the park, Otto said, —You look tired.

—Tired?

Otto turned to look at him, as though this response invited him to do so, or permitted it, since he had, for two blocks, been looking from the corner of his eye, awaiting some change in the face beside him, though even now, as the single syllable left its lips, it relapsed into the expression of intent vacancy which it had not lost, even in the interruption of surprise, a peremptory confusion which had seemed, for that instant, to empty it even further.

—Yes, Otto said, —I know. I mean when I stay cooped up like that working, I mean staying inside working on this play, it gets . . . I mean I get . . . I mean it doesn't seem to sound right after awhile.

—Yes, yes. I imagine it might not.

Though the tone of this response was an absent one, Otto was encouraged to go on, looking away, just then, from something he would never forget, a detail, he would tell himself, of no significance or consequence whatever; still Otto would remember him unsurprised, his lower lip drawn, exposing his lower teeth, as he spoke and finished speaking. —I mean, trying to get everything to fit where it belongs, there's so much that . . . well you know what I mean, I mean you've talked to me about these things before, but . . . well, you've really taught me a great deal.

—Have I?

—Yes but, well I mean to know as much as you do, it must be . . . I mean you can really do anything you want to by now, I mean, you don't feel all sort of hedged in by the parts you don't know about, like I do. Otto finished speaking, and looked anxiously for response; there was none but a sound which indicated that he needn't try to repeat what he had said. They walked on in silence, but any silence was a difficult state for Otto, most especially in the company of another person it seemed an unnatural presence which must be assailed and broken into pieces, or at least shaken until it rattled. Finally he said, —I've been wondering, I mean are you on a vacation now? Or are you just sort of taking time off.

—From what?

—Well I mean from your job, the drafting . . .

—Oh that. That. I'm through with that.

—Really? That's wonderful. I mean, it is, isn't it? From what Esther's said, now you'll be able to . . . do what you want to do.

Attentive only to pools of water, the curbs, and shining bits of ice, they walked on. Before they reached the block they had set out from, Otto had looked at his watch a half-dozen times, and drawn only one response which he turned over in his mind, not to try to understand it immediately, face to face, for itself, nor the source from which it came, but fitting it to the lips of Gordon, through whom, though he did not know it, nor plan it so, he would one day overtake himself. As he walked he pictured Gordon in one after another setting, saying to one after another of the characters who were distinguished only by sex, —And if I cannot teach anyone how to become better, then what have I learned?

—It's just as though that dog's following us, Otto said looking back. He snapped his fingers. The black poodle bounded away. —But I mean, you don't see dogs like that running around loose in the streets. Otto looked up. It was the first time his companion had shown any interest in anything but the ground before them. —I mean, somebody must have lost it.

—Yes, she is odd. Running around us in circles, getting a little closer each time.

—Looking for its master probably, and all it sees is two strangers, Otto said. —But with all that fine trimming, that fancy coiffure and red collar, look at it, just another dog, crouching on its belly.

—Here. Come here.

—I've heard they're terrifically bright, though. The dog was off again. But when they got up the steps, they looked round to see the black poodle halfway up behind them.

Esther was putting her hat on when they came in. —What . . . wherever . . . she said, as the dog ran past her, entering as though it knew the house better, had more right there than she did.

—I thought you'd be just coming back, Otto said to her.

—I did, but the Bildows just called and asked us down for drinks. Do you want to come?

—Why yes, I mean if I . . .

—Well *he* wouldn't come, certainly, she said good-humoredly. —He's never forgiven her for trying to kiss him New Year's Eve. They both turned to include him on this, but he had stepped inside the door of the studio where he was fumbling with the phonograph.

—Esther, I . . .

—He . . .

—I'll just be a minute, she said going toward the bedroom.

Otto stood, examining his fingernails. Then he looked at his watch, and music burst upon him. —What is it? he asked, approaching the door of the studio.

—This? Something of Handel's, an oratorio *Judas Maccabaeus*.

—Oh. It's . . . it's splendid isn't it, Otto went on, unable to show his appreciation by listening. —*Lo the conqueror comes*, sang the bass.

—It always seems too bad when they have to translate these things. I mean, it must sound much more impressive in the original.

—The *original?*

—I mean . . . in German, he said, as Esther entered, emptying the unexamined jumble of one purse into another. She dropped a lipstick. Her skirt pulled tightly against the long line of her thigh as she stooped to pick it up. The day had begun to darken. The poodle watched them both without interest.

—Please don't let the dog mess up the house.

—Goodbye, I . . .

—Goodbye.

On the first landing of the staircase, Esther fumbled in her purse and got out a piece of paper. —Can you read it? She handed it over. —It's their address, I never remember it.

—What's this?

—No. The other side. God knows what that is, something of his.

—The equation of xn plus yn has no nontrivial solution in integers for n greater than 2.

—The other side. She pulled the outside door open herself.

—He is so . . . strange by now, Esther, Otto said catching up with her. —You can hardly . . . I mean all this time we were walking I couldn't reach him at all.

—I hardly know him at all now. It is strange. She looked up at Otto as they walked. —Do you know, there's something alike about you both.

—Yes, but . . . with his ability . . .

—With his ability and your ambition, she said taking Otto's arm, and looking away too soon to see the expression she brought to his face, —I'd have quite a remarkable man.

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The poodle, lying on the floor with its forelegs extended, watched him drink down a glass of brandy. —The original! Good God, how can anyone clinging to such foolishness keep any hope in his head? He walked over to the window and stood before it, his back turned upon the room. Outside it had begun to rain. The room was warm, water clattered against the glass. As these minutes went by, the place took on the aspect of any quiet room on a winter's raining afternoon, the room cut away from everything else which the sun and opened windows allow, and here even the music an extensive furnishing which served rather to order the silence than to break it, building upon the impression that the room shall not be returned as part of the world until it has enclosed an assignation. —A boy, brittle as a preconception, I suppose I ought to thank him, I ought to thank him for getting me out of that damned feeling that . . .

The dog stretched its forelegs, and digging its nails into the floor pulled itself toward him, inclining its head slightly to one side as it listened. He turned, and they stared at each other, the man and the dog: and the dog saw a man whose appearance held nothing in the least remarkable, though dressed to confirm the fact that he looked some years older than he was. The dog raised its forequarters and sat, without taking its eyes from him, to watch him go over and turn the phonograph down until it was almost inaudible. He stood beside it for a moment, and then picked up a book. When he opened it, a slip of paper fell out, which he

caught between his fingers. As he sat down to read, the dog's eyes caught his again, each eyed the other obliquely, he as though to discountenance the dog's presence, the black poodle to suggest that the book was a distraction unworthy of notice.

"The first discovery" (it was an account of the oracle at Delphos) "is said to have been occasioned by some goats which were feeding on Mount Parnassus near a deep and large cavern, with a narrow entrance. These goats having been observed by the goatherd, Coretas, to frisk and skip after a strange manner, and to utter unusual sounds immediately upon their approach to the mouth of the cavern, he had the curiosity to view it, and found himself seized with the like fit of madness, skipping, dancing, and foretelling things to come . . ."

—Damn you! he cried out as the dog barked. —If I have to share this room with you, he commenced, lowering his tone, though the black animal did not seem at all upset by his curse. —Damn you, he repeated, confirming it more quietly, and threw down the book, —skipping, dancing, and foretelling things to come . . . He got up and poured himself another glass of brandy. The dog watched him look around the room. The music was still going on, and he suddenly crossed to stop it, so suddenly that the dog reared as though ready to jump behind him. He stood beside the silent phonograph, looking at the slip of paper between his fingers. —I A O, I A E, he read, copied in a delicate Italian semi-gothic hand he'd once worked on. Before him, on the wall and in sight of the other room where the dog sat poised, watching him, hung the soiled beginning of Camilla on gesso. He stood looking at it; then something moved. He swung about. It was the dog's reflection in the mirror. But the dog sat still in the door. —Damn it, he said directly to its face, —what is it you have, or don't have, that you sit there completely self-contained, that you can sit and know . . . and know exactly where your feet are? Yes, that's what makes cats incredible, because you know they're aware every instant of where their feet are, and they know how much they have to share with other cats, they don't try to . . . pretend . . . He came out muttering, and drank down this third glass looking out the window at the rain. The black poodle had followed and was quite close upon him, sitting looking up at the back of his head. He did not realize it, and when he turned, he dropped his glass and it broke on the floor between them. The dog did not move. —What are you doing in here? he burst out. —What do you want here? What are you . . . what do you want of me? He swayed a little, wiped his cheek with his hand, and found he was perspiring freely. Then he suddenly wiped his cheek again. The dog watched him drop his hand slowly, met his eyes, and did not move.

—Move! he demanded. —Get out of my way, get out! The dog sat with the broken glass at its feet, looking up at him. The rain beat on the glass behind him. Then instead of pushing the dog aside he turned and went round the couch. He had started for the brandy bottle, there on the table where the dog blocked his way; but he stopped again at the door of the studio, and went through a pile of records on the floor. The dog came over and stood sniffing at the doorway. He put a record on the turntable, and stood with a fingernail in the groove as it turned. Then the dog startled for the first time, when he put the needle on the record and turned up the volume. The music was Arabic. The dog put its head on one side, then the other, watching him. —There are shapes, he murmured, raising his right hand to move it on the air as though shaping the line of the flute from the dissonance. The dog had laid its ears back, its mouth was closed, no longer panting, no longer exposing teeth. —There are shapes, and . . . exquisite strength . . . They both watched his hand move slowly between them. —Change a line without touching it . . . there's delicacy. The dog turned slightly to look up at his face, at his perspiring forehead, as though seeking there evidence or betrayal of the signs he made in the air between them. —Not a word. Not an instant of adultery. "You can really do anything you want to by now!" The dog bared its teeth at his harsh laughter, and watched his hand drop, all the way to snatch up the slip of paper he'd dropped a few minutes before. —I A O, I A E, in the name of the father and of our Lord Jesus Christ and holy spirit, iriterli estather, nochthai brasax salolam . . . yes, very good for cows in Egypt . . . opsakion aklana thalila i a o, i a e . . .

The dog growled at him. He crumpled the paper and hurled it, but it fell slowly, at the dog's feet. The dog stood up instantly and backed into the other room, which was already getting darker, though not yet as dark as the studio, where he'd sat down gripping the edge of the table, looking feverishly over the books and papers spread before him. He caught at Remigius' *Demonolatria* and pushed it aside, raised the cover of the *Libro dell' Arte*, and pushed it off to the floor, then found pen and paper, and the ink bottle already opened, and wrote, slow, and with great care and application,

Emperor

His lips moved over the letters, as the flute disappeared, the music broke, recovered, rose into collision, fell in clangor, and the dog in the other room commenced trotting in irregular circles, sniffing the air which the heat seemed to have weighed down the more heavily with lavender.

. . . *by the power of the grand ADONAY* . . . his lips were moving, over letters, then words,

. . . *to appear instanter, and by ELOIM, by ARIEL, by JEHOVAM, by AQUA, TAGLA, MATHON, OARIOS,*

ALMOAZIN, ARIOS, MEMBROT, VARIOS, PITHONA, MAJODS, SULPHÆ, GABOTS, SALAMANDRÆ, TABOTS, GINGUA, JANNA, ETITNAMUS, ZARIATNATMIX . . .

He stopped and listened. Then,

A. E. A. J. A. T. M. O. A. A. M. V. P. M. S. . . .

The music stopped, leaving the sounds of the dog's nails clicking on the wood floor. Then as abruptly that stopped, and the pen hung in his hand over the wet black letters on the paper. A movement caught the corner of his eye; he turned his head quickly, saw the arm of the phonograph raise itself, pause. He looked through the door, unable to see the black poodle. —Dog, he whispered in a hoarse tone. —*Dog! Dog! Dog!* No sound contested his challenge, no recognition of men imprisoned in the past for spelling the Name of God backwards, no response to God, if not the Name, reversed three times in his whisper.

He jumped to his feet, slipped against the table, spilling the ink on the papers there, and in three steps was through the door to the other room. The dog lay in the darkened foyer before the front door, facing the door and apparently at rest. —Damn you! he said. —I'll . . .

The dog turned to look at him, as he threw his hands out before him. —Damned . . . animal out of hell are you . . . The dog, only partially distinguishable in the darkness, got up, the hair on its shoulders bristling as he took two steps closer, and paused. They both listened to the footsteps on the lower staircase, he with his hands still in the air as though counting the steps, heavy and even, neither casual nor hurried, reaching the hallway below, the foot of the stairs, and up the stairs with no more apparent effort than one step at a time, though too soon *knock knock knock*

The rain, silenced by inattention, took up its beating against the glass; then the dog whined and clawed the door, movement which broke the still arrangement where every object seemed tense in suspension. He walked to the door, and as he put his hand to the latch the hand on the other side, as though responding, moved too: *knock knock knock*. And he drew back as though threatened.

The dog clawed the door, and when he pulled it open the dog jumped so fast that he had no chance to restrain it. But the visitor who waited in the darkness had apparently expected the attack, for he caught at the red collar and held the black poodle down.

—Hello. Hello, said that voice in the shadow, a voice at once cheerful and unpleasant. —Some kids in the street saw you bring her in here.

He opened the door more widely. —Come in, he said, in a tone which seemed to reassure him, for he repeated it. —Come in . . . Who are you?

The visitor extended his hand as he entered, a stubby hand mounting two diamonds set in gold on one finger. —My name is Recktall Brown.

He took the hand and said his own name in reply, distantly, as though repeating the name of an unremembered friend in effort to recall him.

Recktall Brown entered and strode to the middle of the room, looking round it through heavy glasses which diffused the pupils of his eyes into uncentered shapes. —Good thing you brought her in, he said, and waved the diamonds at the dog where it lay on the floor, licking itself. —She hates the rain. Then he turned, a strange ugliness, perhaps only because it looked that a smile would be impossible to it.

—Would you . . . like a drink?

—No. Not now. Not now.

—Yes, but . . . there, yes, sit down.

Recktall Brown dropped into a heavy armchair facing the open door of the studio. He tapped the diamonds on the arm of the chair while he continued to look around the room, his head back, his face highly colored with the redness of running up flights of stairs; yet he breathed quietly, almost imperceptibly, for his stoutness absorbed any such evidence before it reached the double-breasted surface of his chest. —I know your name. He smiled, a worse thing than the original, turning for a moment to the man who stood watching him as he poured brandy into a glass, and said, —Yes, I . . . I think I know your name, but in what connection . . .

—A publisher? A collector? A dealer? Recktall Brown sounded only mildly interested. —People who don't know me, they say a lot of things about me. He laughed then, but the laughter did not leave his throat. —A lot of things. You'd think I was wicked as hell, even if what I do for them turns out good. I'm a business man.

—But . . . how did you know my name?

—What's your business?

—I'm a draftsman.

—And an artist? Recktall Brown was looking beyond him to the studio, and back at him as he approached and sat on the couch.

—I . . . do some restoring.

—I know.

—You know? He sat forward on the couch, holding the glass between his knees, and looked at his visitor and away again, as though there were some difficulty which he could not make out.

—You did some work for me.

—For you?

—A Dutch picture, a picture of a landscape, an old one.

—Flemish. Yes, I remember it. That painting could hang in any museum . . .

—It does. The hand which carried the diamonds was folded over the other before him. —You couldn't tell it had been touched. Even an expert couldn't tell, without all the chemical tests and X-rays, an expert told me that himself.

—Well, I tried, of course . . .

—Tried! You did a damn good job on it. He looked around the room with an air of detached curiosity, and finally asked what the funny smell was. Because the glasses obliterated any point in his glance, it was difficult to tell where he was looking, but he seemed aware that he was being watched with an expression of anxiety almost mistrust, not of him, but an eagerness to explain anything which might be misunderstood. His questioning was peremptory.

—Lavender. I use it as a medium sometimes. The smell seems to stay.

—A medium?

—To mix colors in, to paint with.

—You do a lot of work here, don't you.

—Well, I . . . I've been doing some of my work at home. This drafting, bridge plans.

—No. The painting, the painting, Recktall Brown said impatiently.

—Oh, this restoring, this . . . patching up the past I do.

—You don't paint? You don't paint pictures yourself?

—I . . . No.

—Why not?

—I just . . . don't paint.

Recktall Brown watched him wipe his perspiring forehead, and drink part of the brandy quickly. —All this work, all these books, you go to all this trouble just to patch up other people's work? How come you've never painted anything yourself?

—Well I have, I have.

—What happened, you couldn't sell them?

—Well no, but . . .

—Why not?

—Well people . . . the critics . . . I was young then, I was still young.

—What are you now, about forty?

—Forty? Me, forty?

—Why not, you look forty. He took a cigar from his pocket, and continued his gaze at the man across from him. —So they didn't like your pictures. What happened, the critics laugh you out of town?

—Well they . . .

—And you got bitter because nobody gave your genius any credit.

—No, I . . .

—And you couldn't make any money on them, so you quit?

—No, it . . .

—And you decided the only thing you could do was patch up other people's pictures.

—No, damn it, I . . .

—Don't get mad, I'm just asking you. He had unwrapped the cigar, and he raised it to his ear, rolling it between fingers as thick as itself. —Don't you want me to ask you?

—Why yes, yes. And I'm not angry, but, damn it . . .

—Why, do you want to tell me you can do more than patch up old pictures? There was no sound of dryness as he rolled the cigar, lowered it to trim the end off with a gold penknife, and thrust it among uneven teeth.

—Of course I can.

—But you won't, because they won't all stand up and cheer and pay you a big price.

—It isn't that, it isn't those things. They don't matter . . .

—Don't matter? Don't tell me they don't matter, my boy. That's what anybody wants, Recktall Brown said, lighting the cigar. —Everybody to stand up and cheer. There's nothing so damn strange about that.

—But it all . . . it isn't that simple now.

—Now?

—In painting, in art today . . .

—Art today? The uneven teeth showed in a grin through the smoke. —Art today is spelled with an *f*. You know that. Anybody knows it, he added patiently and waited, offering an oppressive silence which forced an answer.

—It's as though . . . there's no direction to act in now.

—That's crazy. You read too much. There's plenty to do, if anybody's got what you've got.

—It isn't that simple.

The smoke from a cigarette mingled with that of his cigar, and he asked, —Why not? and smiled patiently.

—People react. That's all they do now, react, they've reacted until it's the only thing they can do, and it's . . . finally there's no room for anyone to do anything but react.

—And here you are sitting here with all the pieces. Can't you react and still be smart?

—All right then, here I am with all the pieces and they all fit, everything fits perfectly and what is there to do with them, when you do get them together? You just said yourself, art today . . .

—Today? Maybe you put the pieces together wrong.

—What do you mean?

As the smoke rose before him, it became apparent what was wrong. It was the ears. They were hardly ear-shape at all, their convolutions nearly lost in heavy pieces of flesh hung to the sides of the head, each a weight in itself. —You look forty years old and you talk like you're born yesterday, Recktall Brown said. He stared through his glasses, and the voice he heard was more distant, hardly addressed to him in its first words, —In a sense an artist is always born yesterday.

—Come on now, my boy . . .

—Damn it, am I the only one who feels this way? Have I made this all up alone? If you can do something other people can't do, they think you ought to want to do it just because they can't.

Recktall Brown gestured with his cigar, and an ash fell from it like a gray bird-dropping. —So you're going to stay right here, drawing pictures of bridges, and patching up . . .

—Those bridges, those damned bridges.

—What's wrong with them.

—Who are they all, driving over those bridges as though they grew there. They don't . . . they don't . . .

—They don't give you the credit.

—No, it isn't that simple.

—I'm afraid it is, my boy.

—Damn it, it isn't, it isn't. It's a question of . . . it's being surrounded by people who don't have any sense of . . . no sense that what they're doing means anything. Don't you understand that? That there's any sense of necessity about their work, that it has to be done, that it's theirs. And if they feel that way how can they see anything necessary in anyone else's? And it . . . every work of art is a work of perfect necessity.

—Where'd you read that?

—I didn't read it. That's what it . . . has to be, that's all. And if everyone else's life, everyone else's work around you can be interchanged and nobody can stop and say, This is mine, this is what I must do, this is my work . . . then how can they see it in mine, this sense of inevitableness, that this is the way it must be. In the middle of all this how can I feel that . . . damn it, when you paint you don't just paint, you don't just put lines down where you want to, you have to know, you have to know that every line you put down couldn't go any other place, couldn't be any different . . . But in the midst of all this . . . rootlessness, how can you . . . damn it, do you talk to people? Do you listen to them?

—I talk business to people. Recktall Brown drew heavily on his cigar, watched the cigarette stamped out, the brandy finished.

—But . . . you're talking to me. You're listening to me.

—We're talking business, Recktall Brown said calmly.

—But . . .

—People work for money, my boy.

—But I . . .

—Money gives significance to anything.

—Yes. People believe that, don't they. People believe that.

Recktall Brown watched patiently, like someone waiting for a child to solve a simple problem to which there was only one answer. The cigarette, lit across from him, knit them together in the different textures of their smoke.

—You know . . . Saint Paul tells us to redeem time.

—Does he? Recktall Brown's tone was gentle, encouraging.

—A work of art redeems time.

—And buying it redeems money, Recktall Brown said.

—Yes, yes, owning it . . .

—And that's why you sit around here patching up the past. Recktall Brown leaned forward, resting his elbows on his broad knees. —That's why old art gets the prices, he said: —Everybody agrees on it, everybody agrees it's a masterpiece. They copy them right and left. You've probably done copies, yourself.

—Not since I studied. And who wants them? Who wants copies.

Recktall Brown watched him get up suddenly, and walk over to the window, there the rain streaked the glass into visibility. —Nobody wants copies. He ground out his cigar in an ashtray. —The ones who can pay want originals. They can pay for originals. They expect to pay. He paused, and then raised his tone. —As long as an artist's alive, he can paint more pictures. When they're dead, they're through. Take the old Dutch painters. Not even the best ones. Some small-time painter, not a great one, but known. Exclusive, like . . . like . . .

—The Master of the Magdalene Legend, came from across the room, blurred against the window.

—No chance of him not selling. Suppose some of his pictures, some of his unknown pictures, turned up here and there. They might turn up a little restored, like the kind of work you do. Look at that canvas in there, what is it? He did not look at the canvas inside the door of the studio where he motioned, but at the perspiring face that turned toward it.

—Nothing. A canvas I prepared two or three years ago. I never . . .

—Well just suppose, Recktall Brown went on, not allowing him to interrupt, —suppose you did some restoring on it. If you worked there for a while you might find an undiscovered picture there by Master what-ever-he-was. It might be worth ten thousand. It might be worth fifty. He got to his feet, and walked quietly toward the back turned on him. —Can you tell me you've never thought of this before?

—Of course I have. They were suddenly face to face. —It would be a lot of work.

—Work! Do you mind work? Recktall Brown reached out his two heavy hands, and took the arms before him. —Is there any objection you've made all this time, over all the work you have done, and can't do, that this doesn't satisfy?

—None, except . . .

—Except what?

—None.

Recktall Brown let go of him, and took another cigar out of his pocket. His mouth seemed sized to hold it, as he unwrapped it, trimmed the end, and thrust it there. —The critics will be very happy about your decision.

—The critics . . .

—The critics! There's nothing they want more than to discover old masters. The critics you can buy can help you. The ones you can't are a lot of poor bastards who could never do anything themselves and spend their whole life getting back at the ones who can, unless he's an old master who's been dead five hundred years. They're like a bunch of old maids playing stoop-tag in an asparagrus patch. His laughter poured in heavy smoke from his mouth and nostrils. Then he took off his glasses, looking into the perspiring face before him, and a strange thing happened. His eyes, which had all this time seemed to swim without focus behind the heavy lenses, shrank to sharp points of black, and like weapons suddenly unsheathed they penetrated instantly wherever he turned them.

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When Esther came in alone she paused in the entrance to the living room, not listening to the music but sniffing the air. Then she jumped, startled. —I didn't see you, I didn't see you standing there . . . She sniffed again. —That funny smell, she said. The smell of the dog, weighted with cigar smoke, had penetrated everywhere. —Has someone been here? She turned on a light. —What's the matter, who was it? She stopped in the middle of taking off her wet hat. —Recktall Brown? she repeated. —Yes, I've heard something about him. What was it. Something awful. She coughed, and got her hat off. —I'm glad I can't remember what it was. As she crossed the room she said, —What *is* that music?

In the doorway of the bedroom she stopped. —Do you remember that night? she asked. —In that Spanish place? . . . She stood looking at his back, and finally said, —Oh nothing. She put her hand to her hair. —Nothing, she repeated, turning toward the bedroom, —but I liked you better flamenco.

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“Most people make a practice of embellishing a wall with tin glazed with yellow in imitation of gold, because it is less costly than gold leaf. But I give you this urgent advice: to make an effort always to embellish with fine gold and with good colors, especially in the figure of Our Lady. And if you try to tell me that a poor person cannot afford the outlay, I will answer that if you do your work well, and spend time on your paintings, and good colors, you will get such a reputation that a wealthy person will come to compensate you for your poor clients; and your standing will be so good as a person who uses good colors that if a master is getting one ducat for a figure, you will be offered two; and you will end by gaining your ambition. As the old saying goes, ‘Good work, good pay.’ And even if you were not adequately paid, God and Our Lady will reward you for it, body and soul.”

—What in the world are you reading?

—I don’t know, Otto said closing the *Libro dell’ Arte*, staring at its worn spine before he put it down. —It was something of his.

The telephone rang, and as she went in to pick it up he walked over to the mirror hung in the living room at his suggestion. He could hear Esther’s voice from the bedroom, where she’d had the telephone moved. —Yes, yes, but . . . I don’t know. To tell you the truth, it’s . . . some time since I’ve seen him myself. But . . . what? Well, I think he’s taken some sort of studio downtown, on the west side. I think it’s Horatio Street. What? Oh. I don’t know. To tell you the truth, honestly, I don’t know.

—Who was that? Otto asked, ducking away from the mirror as she returned.

—Somebody named Benny, it’s somebody from his office who’s been trying to reach him for months.

—It’s funny, isn’t it, Otto said looking at the floor. —I mean it’s strange, without him anywhere.

—Do you want to go out tonight? The Munks asked us down for a drink.

—Do you want to?

—If you do.

—Well I, I ought to stay and get some work done.

—I thought your play was going to be finished by the end of April.

—Well it is, sort of.

—Why don’t you do something with it?

—Well it isn’t really . . . it’s all here, it holds together but . . . it doesn’t seem to mean anything. But I’ve got to do something, he said gripping his chin in his hand. —I’ve got to get hold of some money. They were both silent. Otto walked over, picked up a magazine and sat down beside her. The magazine was *Dog Days*. —What’s this doing here? he asked idly.

—That, it’s something he brought in once, when we’d talked about having children. Oh, sometimes he used to be so . . . Oh! . . .

—What’s the matter?

—The dream I had last night, I just remembered it, she said. —It was about my sister Rose, we were flying kites in a vacant lot like we used to, and some boys were there with a kite with broken glass on the edge of it, and they cut our kite right down out of the sky.

—But that doesn’t sound so frightening.

—It was terrible, it was . . . Otto pulled her over and silenced her mouth with his. Finally she said, —Will you do something for me?

—Shave before I come to bed?

—How did you know?

Later, he called from the bathroom, —This handkerchief drying on the mirror, can I take it off and fold it up? It’s dry . . . Esther? did you hear me? This handkerchief . . . ?

—Yes yes, she cried out, suddenly, then caught her voice and controlled it. —Yes, take it down. She picked up Otto’s jacket from the couch and went toward the bathroom where she heard the sound of the electric razor.

—It’s all right if I use this isn’t it?

—Why yes. Yes, of course. I’m glad you’re using it.

—There’s a straight razor here, he said turning to her where she stood in the doorway with his jacket, the machine whirring in his hand, —but I don’t think I could manage it.

—I know, she said. —It’s strange. That he left that. Then she went in to hang up the jacket. —What’s this book in your pocket? she called out.

—That? Otto stopped to look at himself in the glass. —It’s a novel, a French novel he gave me once.

—Have you finished it?

—Well, I . . . I haven’t got all the way through it yet. It’s a . . . I . . . Oh incidentally, I found a paper in it, he must have written it out when he was little. About the whole creation working to be delivered from the vanity of time, about nature working for this great redemption. It sounds like a sermon.

—A sermon of his father's, she said, hanging up the jacket as Otto came in and sat on the bed.

—But it's sort of nice. Even for a sermon, he said, taking off a shoe, which he sat there and held for a minute, staring at it.

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It was a dark night, especially for spring or so it seemed on the lower West Side, near the river where there is little illumination, and day and night the air carries in far above the city's quota of black silt from the railway and the boats on the water. Sounds were few, for the later the night became the fewer were the sounds of wanton circumstance, the casual sounds of fortuity, the reckless sounds of accident; until all that rose on the silt-laden air were the sounds of necessity, clear and inevitable, which had earlier been so eagerly confused by those who had retired from the darkness now and slept, waiting for the dawn.

Still, now, the sky contained no suggestion of dawn, in its absence a chimera to be dreaded in actuality by loneliness, and even that forsworn and gone to earth, carrying with it that substance of which all things eventually are made, the prima materia it had sought to deliver from the conspiracy of earth, air, fire, and water binding it here in baseness. "For me an image slumbers in the stone," said Zarathustra, no more content to let it lie bound so than those since gone to earth, disappointed? or surprised were they? by fictions, and followers who summoned them back, vicars demanding of them vicarious satisfaction in life for that which they had suffered in the privacy of death.

Itinerant drunkards and curious neighbors sometimes saw him at night, near the docks, and the slaughterhouses a block away, gathering the wood of broken crates to carry back to the fireplace which squatted at one end of the sub-basement room. Benny had stopped in every doorway looking for the name, and could not find it. Then he saw a figure, knew it a block away, and ran toward it, to take an arm and stop him before he could step into one of the doors and disappear. —Thank God I found you! Benny said, when he caught him standing under a streetlamp with broken wood under his arm. —Where have you been? It's been months, we haven't seen you in the office for months.

Benny was an anxious man in gray flannel, single-breasted, a silk foulard tie which caught the wind, a cigarette in his hand.

—What's happened? What are you doing? Are you all right? You look fine, you look better than I've ever seen you, but wait, wait . . .

—But wait, wait a minute for me, listen to me, are you . . . have you done any plans, have you done any more of them?

—Bridge plans . . . don't you know who I am? Bridge plans, I have to have another one, I have to submit another one now.

—But listen, I know it, I hardly know what I'm saying, but listen. We have one up now, a very important one, and if I bring you the location and the problem will you do it?

—But listen to me. It's months since I've submitted anything. Once. Listen, I submitted a plan of my own and they laughed at me, they laughed at me, they thought it was a joke, they said, You're not serious with this are you Benny? After the Cooper City viaduct? and the bridge at Fallen Ark Gap? You used to be a genius Benny, what happened to you? Wait, listen to me, listen, just one more. Listen, old J. W. died last month, did you know that? He died. Don't you see? I can be a vice-president, and I'll never have to draw a plan again, a vice-president in charge of design, and I can do that. I can do that. You know I can do that. But it all depends on this, it all depends on this one new job, to show them.

—Just this one, this last one. And I'll pay you for this one, I know I never paid you before, but I'll pay you for this one, I'll pay you whatever you want.

—Listen maybe I never thanked you right for all you did, but you know how much it meant. I can pay you now. I can pay you. You've got nothing to lose, and I've got everything.

—Everything, and I . . . and you . . . Look at you. What is it? What are you doing, what are you doing to yourself? You like fine, I said you look fine but not like you, fine for somebody else but not like you.

Benny reached out to take his arm again, and a nail in one of the broken crates tore his sleeve.

—You're the only one who can do this for me. You're the only one who can save me. One more. And we can forget the whole thing, as though it never happened . . .

The silk foulard stirred on the wind. Then Benny turned away too, leaving the cone of light empty, to east and the city where the flood caught him and the ebb bore him away, as though from an empty beach and no trace on it at the feet of the figure pausing for an instant to look at the tide's recession and then going on, gathering driftwood.

•

When Esther came in alone she paused in the entrance to the living room; then she jumped, startled. —I didn't see you, I didn't see you standing there. She turned on a light, and stood in the middle of the room taking off her hat, looking at his back. —Posing there, she said finally, and dropped her hat on a table, —like he used to. Like an old man.

Otto turned from his reflection in the glass window, streaked into visibility by the spring rain. —Yes, he said, looking to the floor between them. —More than a year . . .

—What?

—And he used to warn me against youth. Did you know that? The trap of being young. He warned me about it. He said that youth is a trap that . . .

—Please, I don't want to hear any more about it.

—But . . . I just can't believe, a whole year's passed, and I'm still . . .

—Otto, if you spend all your time fretting and . . . fooling around . . .

—But I've got to get hold of some money.

—And this obsession you have about money . . .

—Yes but money, you need money to . . .

—You seem to take not having it as a reflection on your manhood.

—But money, I mean, damn it, a man does feel castrated in New York without money. And this, I mean you say he puts plenty in your checking account, but it, I mean for me to, well not take it out and use it but to let you actually pay . . .

—Otto, you know I've never understood why you've never looked up your father. If he lives right in New York, and you've never seen him. And I should think he could give you some money.

—But I don't . . .

—And it would probably help clear up this obsessional neurosis you have about . . .

Gordon: When we lose contact with the beloved one, we lose contact with the whole world.

—What are you writing?

—Just something I thought of. For this play. Otto had followed her in, and he sat on the foot of the bed which had become a refuge, no longer a beginning but a desperate end, no longer a vista of future conquest but sanctuary where failure in all else made this one possession unbearable, unearned and come too soon. —It's all like a play, a bad play with nothing but exits and entrances. And your work, your novel, he mumbled contentiously. —You haven't . . .

—My what?

He looked up at her. —Who is this guy Ellery that you keep seeing?

—He's in advertising, and he's very interested in analysis. Haven't you thought of going into . . .

—Analysis! Haven't we been over that enough?

—I was going to say advertising.

—Advertising! Do you think I've sunk that low? And what . . . what do you go out with him for anyhow? You're going out tonight?

—Yes.

—But why?

—It does me good to be seen in successful company.

Otto cleared his throat. He was staring at the floor between them. He raised his eyes, slightly, enough to reach her feet flattened on the floor with her weight. He mumbled, —Sometimes I wish I was old, an old man.

—Otto?

—What.

—You . . . Oh nothing but, I liked you better a boy, she said from the closet where she stood putting on her slip:

The women who admonish us for our weaknesses are usually those most surprised when we show our strength and leave them.

—I . . .

—We . . .

—You . . .

—Esther?

—Ellery? . . . Oh, Otto? Otto went away, says Esther from the closet where she stands, taking off her slip. —He went to Central America, to work on a banana plantation.

Images surround us; cavorting broadcast in the minds of others, we wear the motley tailored by their bad digestions, the shame and failure, plague pandemics and private indecencies, unpaid bills, and animal ecstasies remembered in hospital beds, our worst deeds and best intentions will not stay still, scolding,

mocking, or merely chattering they assail each other, shocked at recognition. Sometimes simplicity serves, though even the static image of Saint John Baptist received prenatal attentions (six months along, leaping for joy in his mother's womb when she met Mary who had conceived the day before): once delivered he stands steady in a camel's hair loincloth at a ford in the river, morose, ascetic on locusts and honey, molesting passers-by, upbraiding the flesh on those who wear it with pleasure. And the Nazarene whom he baptized? Three years pass, in a humility past understanding: and then death, disappointed? unsuspecting? and the body left on earth, the one which was to rule the twelve tribes of Israel, and on earth, left crying out —*My God, why dost thou shame me?* Hopelessly ascendant in resurrection, the image is pegged on the wind by an epileptic tent-maker, his strong hands stretch the canvas of faith into a gaudy caravanserai, shelter for travelers wearied of the burning sand, lured by forgetfulness striped crimson and gold, triple-tiered, visible from afar, redolent of the east, and level and wide the sun crashes the fist of reality into that desert where the truth still walks barefoot.

—This place needs a good airing out. One look at that room in there and anybody can see that your husband . . .

—My husband . . .

—He . . .

—I . . .

The music is Mozart's, the Concerto Number Seven in F Major for three pianos. —I wish . . . Esther says. In a feverish conspiracy of order the notes of the music burst from the radio in the other room where it is dark. They thrust there in the darkness against hard surfaces and angles as sharp as themselves. Possibly molecules are rearranged, set dancing, in a sympathy which lasts no longer than the duration of the note; possibly not, but there is the lighted doorway, to be entered in a concerted rush, the naked soles of a man's feet hung over the end of the bed, calloused and unlikely targets. —I wish . . . Esther says. Her hand moves quickly, but too late, where she has been pausing, holding cloth. Her breast, bared, and not especially full but standing out, centered and still, is very real to her and to no one else: her hand moves there quickly but too late as a note from one of three pianos strikes with the purpose of a blade, and has entered with the cold intimacy of a penknife in the heart. —I wish . . .

—You don't think he'd walk in, do you?

—*He?*

IV

> Les femmes soignent ces féroces infirmes retour des pays chauds.
>
> —Rimbaud

In the dry-season haze, the hills were a deep blue and looked farther away than the sun itself, for the sun seemed to have entered that haze, to hang between the man and the horizon where, censured and subdued, it suffered the indignity of his stare. The heat of day was as inert as the haze which made it visible; and it only mitigated with the dissolution of the haze in darkness.

From that darkness outside the window came a bird cry, staccato, sound of a large alarm clock being wound in the next room late at night. Otto was sitting in a pair of underdrawers, writing. When his door was flung open and a man wearing only faded dungarees, with a bottle in one hand and a glass in the other, entered, Otto put down his pen and said, —Hello Jesse.

—Hello Jesse. How do you like that. Hello Jesse. What are you doin anyhow? said the tattooed man, and sat down on the other wooden chair.

—I'm writing.

Jesse put the bottle and glass on the table and looked around him. The corners of his mouth twitched, momentarily confused about something, but something which was going to be pleasurable. He looked over the table, littered with papers illegibly scribbled upon, and at the pictures on the wall.

—Do you want a cigarette? Otto asked him.

—Yeah, give me a cigarette. Jesse put out his hand, and then waved away the green package of MacDonald's Gold Standard. —What do you smoke those things for? That ain't even American-made stuff.

—I don't know, I . . . anyhow it is Virginia tobacco, I . . .

—Yeah what do you smoke those lousy things for? Why don't you smoke American cigarettes? He knocked one of Otto's clean socks from the corner of the table into the cuspidor with his elbow, and watched suspiciously while Otto got up and went behind him to retrieve it.

—What are you doin anyhow? Jesse asked. Then he said, —You're a religious bastid ain't you.

—Not exactly, why do you say . . .

—That. That's a religious picture ain't it?

—Why no, that's just a print of a painting, an Italian Renaissance . . .

—Looks like some friggin madonna, said Jesse, mistrustful, and looked back at Otto. Then he spat into the cuspidor. —Give me a cigarette, he said.

—All I've got are these, said Otto. He held forth a packet of Emu, locally manufactured.

—What do you smoke these lousy things for? Why don't you smoke American cigarettes? Jesse spat again, on the floor. Otto pushed the cuspidor nearer with his bare foot. —I didn't get any on me, did I? Jesse looked down at his chest, where a ship struggled through a mat of hair. Toward each brown nipple a bluebird dipped. On one shoulder, a peacock; on the other, a palm-tree seascape. The arms wore anchors, a tombstone with MOTHER on a scroll, and a dagger. The gallery swelled as he watched it. —That's pretty good, hunh? What do you think of that, hunh? He turned his head to one shoulder and then the other, admiring the rippling art there. Then he looked Otto over.

Otto lit a cigarette. It was too late to get up and put on a pair of trousers.

—Why don't you get out and build yourself up a little? Jesse Franks returned to his own splendor. —That's a real man, hunh?

—Yes, it's just . . .

—Hunh? What do you think of that, hunh? Then he looked at the scribbled papers sticking to his forearm on the table. —What's all this crap?

—That's my play.

—That's your play, hunh? There, he said, getting a handful of the papers and pushing them to Otto, —read me your play.

—Well I . . . this act isn't . . .

—Read me your play.

—"Gordon: Wit, my dear Priscilla, is the vulgar currency of wisdom.

"Priscilla: But darling, no one could accuse you of being vulgar. Though to tell the truth, there are moments when I feel absolutely suffocated by witty people.

"Gordon: You are surrounded by people who take a half-truth deliberately misunderstood to be one of the privileges of wit." It's not quite . . . I mean this act is . . .

—Read another act.

—"Priscilla: You know I love you, Gordon. Do you fear it?

"Gordon: Any rational person fears romance, my dear Priscilla.

"Priscilla: And so you will not marry me, because I love you.

"Gordon: Romantic love, my dear, romantic love. The most difficult challenge to the ideal is its transformation into reality, and few ideals survive. Marriage demands of romantic love that it become a reality, and when an ideal becomes a reality it ceases to be an ideal. Someone has certainly commented on the seedy couple Dante and Beatrice would have made after twenty years of badly cooked meals. As for the *Divine Comedy*, it's safe to say that the *Purgatorio* would have been written, though perhaps a rather less poetic version. But Heaven and Hell rejuvenated, I think not, my dear. There is a bit of verse somewhere on this topic concerning Petrarch and his Laura, but I cannot recall it. But even Virginia, you may remember, preferred drowning before the eyes of her lover to marrying him. Paul at least had the pleasure of seeing her drown nude, but she knew what she was doing. A wise girl, Virginia.

"Priscilla: But then, what you're saying is . . ."

—What the hell is he saying?

—Well, Gordon is saying that love, I mean romantic love . . .

—That's all they do, talk?

—Well, it's a play, and I mean . . .

—When does he slip it to her?

—Well on the stage you can't very well . . .

—So they get married?

—Well no, I mean not really, but they . . .

—But he's been slipping it to her anyway, hunh?

—Well he . . . I mean . . .

—Who's Gordon, anyway?

—Well he's the hero of the play.

—The hero? He don't sound like much of a hero. Why don't you write about Jesse?

—Well I . . .

—You want something to write about? O.K., take this down. Gordon was the kind of guy that walked into . . . shouldered his way into a bar. He came in and got what he wanted. If anybody wanted to make trouble . . . no. He was a nice guy, but if anybody wanted to make trouble . . . you got that?

—Yes, Otto said with a pencil.

—If anybody was looking for trouble . . . no, that don't sound so good. Leave that out. He watched Otto's pencil to be sure it was marking out. —O.K. now start with this. I was around in Chilano Bay in Colombia with no money of the country, see? I had some money, I had about a hundred dollars, but no money of the country, see? But I have to have a little to get around the country. I was on a boat with a contraband cargo. So I run into a chuleta. You know what a chuleta is?

—No, I . . .

—Then you're not so smart, are you. Just because you went to college. It's a money-changer, a guy who changes money and takes some out for himself. O.K. So a cayuga come out to the ship, wanting to buy her cargo. But no sell. Worth too much see? You got that?

—Yes I . . .

—O.K. now where was I?

—A cayuga came out to the ship . . .

—Yeah. So this guy is only wearing a pair of dungarees, tight-fitting, see? He's well-built, wearing a pair of tight-fitting dungarees. You got that?

—Yes.

—How do you say it?

—He was a well-built fellow wearing tight-fitting dungarees.

—O.K. So he goes into town and finds a girl in a bar. She wants to go into bed with him. But he can't take no chances on account of that cargo. The police, see? The girl visits him at his house, but he can't take no chances. So he tells her, take it easy . . . Jesse stopped and looked at Otto. —You're goin to get paid for this and I ain't goin to get nothin.

—I've never sold anything yet, Otto said.

—Yeah. Well you can sell this, see. This is what people like to read about. Where was I? O.K. So she wants to stay, but he wants everything he has in his mind for shark-fishing. Chilano Bay, that's the place for shark-fishing. So he dives for sharks. The white ones and the nigger sharks. Those are the black ones. They don't kill the white ones, but he'll do it, see? He's not scared. He'll dive for any shark. Period.

Otto waited.

—How's that? asked the author.

—Well it isn't quite a story yet . . .

—What do you mean it isn't a story. You think I don't know what a story is? This is what people like to read about, realism, real men doing something, not a lot of crap in fancy trimmings. You get me?

—Yes I . . .

—You're goin to get paid for it and I ain't goin to get nothin. Jesse returned to admiring his chest.

Otto stood up and walked over to the bed. He scratched his arm, to give his hand something to do.

—Yeah, you're pretty, all right. Where'd you get hands like that? They aren't men's hands.

—They just grew, Otto started to reason, —like yours did . . .

—Like mine! Jesse made a fist, as Otto sat down again. —Yeah, you got to wise up to yourself, see? Jesse approached with the flat bottle in the palm of his hand, and stopped, swaying over him. He made the motion of smashing the bottle in Otto's face, then stood laughing.

—I have to go to bed, Jesse.

—Yeah, you have to go to bed. Look, rabbit, I'm looking for a shack-job, see?

Otto sat still.

—Get me?

—I get you.

Jesse stood swaying for a moment. Then he said, —I got to go dump my bowels.

—Well, I'm going to bed, said Otto. He stood, stretched as though at ease, yawned a feigned yawn. Jocularly, man-to-man, he said, —Good night, Jesse. I don't want to seem to throw you out, but . . .

—Throw me out! Why rabbit you couldn't throw me . . . you just try, if you want me to kick you from one end of this room to the other. Throw me out, rabbit, that's a good one . . . said Jesse, out the door carrying the bottle, leaving the dirty glass.

The plantation outside was quiet, the jungle held at distance by thousands of pert green erections rearing on the stalks of the banana plants. There were no poisonous snakes, no poisoned darts. Few years before, within every discouraged native memory, they had managed in primitive content selling a consistently inferior grade of sisal, hands of green bananas, and occasional loads of hardwood to ships which came in

leisurely to trade. Then an American fruit company arrived, tired of buying thousands of hands of bananas, set on hundreds of thousands of stems. The Company replaced the shaky wharf in the port with two firm piers, cleared and planted a tremendous plantation; and while waiting for their own trees to mature offered eight dollars a stem to local growers, since the Company ships were ready to call regularly. The natives gathered bananas in frenzied luxuriance, and planted thousands more. Then the Company's crop started to ripen. The price dropped to three dollars. The Company's bananas were cut and loaded, filling the Company ships to capacity. The Company ships were the only ones to call, since the Company owned the two new piers which the people had been so proud of at first. The local banana market disappeared. It simply ceased to exist. Ships passing the coast sailed through the smell of the fruit rotting on the trees miles out to sea. (It was now said that a plywood company in West Virginia was planning new and similar benefits for these fortunate people, so recently pushed to the vanguard of progress, their standard of living raised so marvelously high that none of them could reach it.)

The single bare bulb swung on its cord so slightly that shadows on the floor moved with the faint reciprocity of breathing, inhaling and exhaling in swell and recession the bare boards over which Otto trod in silence picking up a shirt, then a necktie, seemed to breathe the silence of that sullen night before the rains.

The walls were white painted board. There was a metal bed with a discolored mattress on it, a metal chest of drawers with the mirror, table with two chairs, a long shelf and cuspidor. The room was high-ceilinged, with vents around the top to let what moving air there was circulate. It was through those vents that the strident crack . . . crack-crack of his typewriter had first roused his neighbors against him, and after his first interview with Jesse he had settled to write his play in longhand, and transcribe it on the typewriter in the Company office on days when he was not working.

The mirror had a frame which looked like brown wood, but it was metal painted to appear so. This was because of the termites, which work so industriously in the tropics. A fifty-year-old Funk & Wagnall's dictionary the size of a suitcase standing on a rickety table in the telegraph office down in the port was eaten through by them, hardly a whole word remained. But this mirror frame retained its patina. It might as well have been a picture frame, by now it had enclosed his image so often that it would seem it could not accommodate anyone else. He looked out the window, and saw on the ground only his own shadow. Jesse's light had gone out. He returned to the mirror.

He was now wearing a white linen suit which Brooks Brothers, who kept his measurements two thousand miles away, had sent him. He was wearing a Brooks Brothers shirt of off-white Egyptian cotton, and a gray silk hound's-tooth pattern (Brooks Brothers) tie. One thing more. With a casual over-the-shoulder glance into the mirror he turned and walked across the floor, took a Canadian cigarette from the table and lit it, his mirrored reflection intent upon him. He smiled at himself in the mirror. He raised an eyebrow. Better. He moistened his lips, and curled the upper one. Better still. The smile, which had shown his face obsequious, was gone. He must remember this arrangement: left eyebrow raised, eyelids slightly drawn, lips moistened, parted, down at corners. This was the expression for New York.

Having recovered himself, he flicked his cigarette into the darkness beyond the open window, and glanced again at the shreds on his upper lip which would be a mustache by the time he left the job. Then with a sursum corda on his lips in farewell to the image abandoned in the mirror, he undressed again and lay down on his sweated mattress. Before he was asleep, it had begun to rain.

The specially prepared matches lit easily, but cigarettes fell apart between the fingers. Weeks went by with mortal slowness, parade of heat, insects, water, paper work, stupidity aggressive and fearful, and the scribbling on the play. Weeds grew luxuriously. The only way that Otto was certain that time was passing was the frequency with which he had to pare his nails. His shoes, left under the bed, turned green.

Red flowers drooped at the end of long stalks, then dropped revealing the fruit in infant impotence. Week by week the fruit grew larger, pointed outward, then upward, and was cut in the full erectile vigor of youth.

Then it was over, early that year; and the minute the wet season was done it was forgotten. Near the horizon the haze appeared and the sun, part in and part out, rose warped out of shape like a drunken memory of sunrise. Black ashes hung over the plantation houses from a fire some distance away. Next door, from a radio, Enesco's Third Rumanian Rhapsody was being played on a harmonica. Otto counted his money.

The months of waiting were over, the months of non-entity. Saint Paul would have us redeem time; but if present and past are both present in time future, and that future contained in time past, there is no redemption but one. This one Otto now pressed with his wrist to be certain that it had not disappeared while he was dressing, leisurely, like a tired Colonial on the stage of a West End theater, for he had returned his wallet to his inside breast pocket. The man with the kewpie doll tattooed on the inside of his forearm (signed up for two years) said, —Two years isn't long, not if you say it real fast. For those nomads

who sold the time of their lives, time was either money being made or money being spent, and life a cycle of living and unliving, as the sailor's life loses the beginning, middle, and end of the voyage from port to destination and becomes repetition of sea and ashore, of slumber and violence. The hours of work were hours of vacant existence, but the minutes were pennies, and in each dollar was held captive the hour gone for it: here time was held in thrall, to be spent at a man's wish. So as misers keep years bound up in mattresses and old tin boxes, wrapped in newspaper, sewn into linings (and ashore they sing —What shall we do with a drunken sailor?), he came forth with months in his pocket, and himself to dictate their expenditure.

—I wouldn't reach up my ass for the whole city of New York, said the man with the kewpie doll tattooed on his forearm, who stood before a mirror in the communal lavatory eating cold chili out of a can. He ate before the mirror so that he could see where his mouth was, for he had been drinking for three days. He was not working because of the burn on his back, which he said he had got when someone took a chicken out of a boiling pot and threw it at him, in a brothel down in the port. The wound on his back was not the shape of a chicken. It had been painted with a purple solution, a great island the shape of Australia the first day, now contracted to the proportions of New Zealand, the stroke of Tasmania out to sea for the doctor's hand was not a steady one.

—That's where I live, Otto said. He enjoyed coming into this lavatory, because the mirrors all in a row over the wash basins gave the pleasant illusion of passing one's self at many windows. —That sounds like quite a revolution they're having, Otto said washing his hands at the next basin.

—Them bastids don't know how to have a revolution, said the other, turning with such Anglo-Saxon indignance that the orange chili ran down his chin. —You know what I'd do if I was up there. All you got to do is get them dumb cops on their motorcycles, and string a good piece of piano wire across the road, then get down at the end of the road and take a couple of shots at them. They come after you on their motorcycles and zing zing zing there go their heads just like that. All you need, a good piece of piano wire. They don't know how to have a revolution. They're afraid somebody'll get killed. If I was up there . . .

—I've got to go pack, Otto said. —Have you seen Jesse?

—What do you want to see that dumb son of a bitch for?

—I'm leaving. I just wanted to tell him goodbye.

—You goin somewhere?

—New York. I told you. I'm going home.

—New York! What do you want to go there for? I wouldn't reach . . . But he was busy eating.

Otto had suddenly remembered his manuscript, the manuscript of his play. He was certain he had not packed it, for he had kept it out to look at until the minute before departure. It was nowhere in his room. All he found was a newspaper, in which he had been looking up sailings from nearby ports (knowing all the time that he would take the Company boat), found only a want ad for a male Chihuahua sought for breeding purposes. This paper he threw across the room, and with a cigarette in his fist like a smoking weapon he strode out, down the porch toward the shanty where the cleaning women settled about this time of day.

—Quién limpian mi cuarto mañana? he asked when he arrived, getting out in one breath the question it had taken him the distance of his walk to phrase in mistranslation.

An ancient timid hand went up among the women. —Yo, answered its owner, letting it drop. One by one they got to their feet before him.

—Hay visto una manuscripta aquí? Otto had made up the word manuscripta. One of the triumphs of his stay was his successful evasion of learning more than some thirty mispronounced words of the language.

—Qué dijo?

—La manuscripta de mi playa, said Otto forcefully. He knew that by adding *a* he could translate any English noun satisfactorily. The ladies were vastly confused. He turned from the doorway and set off toward his building. They followed.

—Qué dijo de *playa?* asked one, drawn on by the mystery of a man looking for a beach. None tried to answer her. They tramped up the dirt in silence. Inside his room Otto turned on the woman who had admitted to cleaning it. —El está para la máquina, he said pointing to the typewriter. —Esta mañana.

—Perdido, said one woman, satisfied that something was lost.

—Sí, perdido, said another equally agreeable. She started to look under the mattress.

—Qué cosa? asked the accused bravely.

—Papel, said the master. —Papel que yo escribo mi playa al máquina, finishing in triumphal confusion. —Mi playa, he repeated, menacing.

—Es muy misterioso, said one of the women.

—Sí.

—Muy misterioso, repeated the third, while the fourth let go the mattress (it was where she would have hidden anything) and stood silently marveling at this man who had lost a beach right here in the room.

—Titulito The Vanity of Time, Otto recommenced.

—No entiendo, the eldest came back at him, helplessly defiant.

—The Vanity of Time, he said more loudly. —La Vanidad del Tiemplo, God damn it, he almost shouted. Illiterate, illiterate old fools. He looked around for a pencil, found none, returned. —Tiene una . . . una . . . He made scribbling motions in the air. —Por escribo.

One held a pencil out to him. —Un lápiz, señor? she asked. Lápiz, of course; though anyone looking at it could see that it was a pencil. He took it from her and wrote, T H E V A N I T Y O F T I M E, in large letters. —Mucho papel, he said.

—Aïe . . . said the old one, dawning. —Pero sí, sí señor, with happy relief. She was uncomfortably familiar with this pile of paper. It had once been pointed out to her as mucho importante, and she had daily dusted the title page with care: the words were as unforgettably meaningless to her as the Latin legend circumscribing the largest local Virgin. —Aquí está, she said reaching to the top of a pile of linen on a shelf. —Lo pusé aquí cuando empacaba, todo estaba tan revuelto que tuve miedo de que se perdiera, o se ensuciara . . . she got out, in what sounded like one wildly relieved word.

Otto, breathing heavily, took it from her muttering, —Gracias, gracias, señoritas, without raising his eyes from the precious bundle. The four smiled, murmured —Nada, de nada, señor, and trundled out the door clustering about the acquitted for an explanation.

He carried the sheaf of clean papers over to a chair. The words were beautiful. The letters themselves were beautiful. His handwriting, in careful notes along occasional margins to give the thing a casual look, was beautiful. He read at familiar random, smiling to himself. Every page, beautiful, except one which would have to be retyped, he had killed a cockroach on it. Or perhaps, perhaps it had style in itself, that dark smudge. There were (though he had never seen one) tarantulas in Central America. Or was it black widows? And would a black widow make a brown smudge?

Then he raised his face to the empty door. The obsequious smile was gone. Left eyebrow up, lips moistened, slightly parted and curled, he waited while a producer approached, welcoming hand extended. Otto eyed the vision, nodded casually, reached for a cigarette. There were none in the linen suit. He was interrupted while he went to the dirty striped shirt for the necessary property; and returned to the chair the long way round the room, pausing (at the mirror) to light the cigarette. Putting the papers on the publisher's desk he fumbled a little, able to use but one hand. —Here, let me help you, the publisher said. —Nothing serious, I trust? —Nothing, nothing at all, Otto answered, elbowing the sling back under his jacket. —A scratch. Central America, you know.

He read a few lines in the second act and blew a perfect smoke ring on the quiet air. There was Esther. Where would he meet her? At the apartment? But he did not want to see her husband again. The thought of that man barely ten years his senior made him curl inside, the man who had seemed at first almost a father, then a fool, finally near maniac. It would be better to call Esther for a drink. Or for luncheon. Better still to meet her casually, by carefully prearranged accident.

—How wonderful you look, Otto.

—A little color . . . How have you been?

—Oh the same old things, you know, but without you it's been so dull and so lonely. But you, what about you? And what's happened to your hand?

—A revolution. Just one of those things, a regular occupational hazard down there. Possibly you saw something of it in the papers?

—Oh I never read them, you know that, not any more. But they tell me you've written a wonderful play.

And then as he took off his shirt and his trousers, —And you're so brown, all of you, and all in white . . .

Outside the sun poured its heat over the endless green of the fan-leaved banana trees. As Otto struggled down the porch carrying two suitcases and his typewriter, a voice came from an open door, —Hey come here, I want to show you some pictures.

—I've got to get the train for the port, he called to the man with the kewpie doll tattooed on his forearm. —It leaves in twenty minutes.

—Come here. I want to show you some pictures.

Otto had, on occasion, pictured fine man-to-man farewells, close handclasps, and a few words of curt but constant friendship. He put his bags down in the door and entered. Snapshots of all sizes and degrees of fading surrounded the man sitting on the rumpled bedcover. —I'm putting them in an album, he said. He could hardly sit up. —See this one? This here is me with my first car, in Pennsylvania. He put glue all over the back of it, and then took an envelope of those black art corners used to mount snapshots in albums, and stuck them on the corners. As he licked them they came off in his mouth, and the glue on his chin, colored

with dry chili. —See this one here? he went on, blowing the art corners out of his mouth and getting fresh ones. —This is me with my old man. That's my first car behind us. That was 1931, see that? A new car. Even then I wasn't doin so bad. On the pages he had completed, snapshots were firmly stuck with artistic disregard for angles, size, and number of art corners. All were consistent in one thing, however: —This is me. This is me in a bar in Brooklyn with some Greek sailors, one of them had a camera, I was workin in the Navy Yard. This is me in Panama, I worked in the Canal Zone before I came up here. This is me in Darien on a hunting trip with some Indians. Here, this is me with some Sand Blast Indians . . .

—I have to go, I have to get that train. It leaves in about ten minutes.

—Here, look at this one . . . By now he had got glue over most of his chin, and art corners stuck to his wrists and arms, framing the kewpie doll. —This is me . . . he started as Otto went toward the door. —Look can you hand me that bottle on the table before you go, I don't want to get up and make a mess of all this. My grandchildren . . .

As Otto started down the porch, there was the rending sound of breaking wind from the room behind him, and the voice, —There's a goodbye kiss for you, kid.

The fine particles of ash in the air settled on his white linen as he hurried.

•

The small town of the port might have had but one place in this world of time, and that to make itself presentable for Otto's departure, after which it could settle down to a long and uninterrupted decline. He walked in and out of its streets, looking about casually, pausing only when he saw his sudden reflection in a shop window. Stopping at the shops he appeared to be looking at the goods spread before him, while his stare got no farther than the image in the glass. Then he crossed to the shaded side of the street. On a veranda as he passed three black men were playing cards. When they saw him they pointed up, over their heads, smiling, nodding. On the open porch above a girl stood, as black and smiling as those below. She was wrapped only in a white towel, held together with one hand. He did not turn. —You want chikichig? one of the men asked. —Boy change you luck, called another after him where he walked on. —Pretty boy get all what he want . . .

The whiteness of the Company boat was a glitter in the strong sun. Few passengers were in sight, but the pier was crowded with people selling and begging and looking for a penny's worth of work. Their colors rose from a soft tan to hearty black. They were dressed in clothes which they had never seen new, and each carried something worthless, a basket of dolls made of straw, bundles of papers, inedible confections.

—La limpia, a child cried at Otto, pointing to his shoes, and then lost interest. Those shoes were perfect. The white linen suit had got becomingly crumpled on the trip down, and in this blazing light the gray tinge from the ashes did not show, clearly the definition of cultivated diffidence. He had a French book, labeled *Adolphe*, in a side pocket which he carried when he traveled and appeared to read in public places. As he started toward the dock with a boy who came barely to his waist carrying his bags, the sun cast his shadow striding with vain certainty before him.

Beside the boat, he took the change from his pocket to count. There were a few coins of the republic which he was leaving, mixed in with E Pluribus Unum dimes and quarters, odd-looking shiny coins (he had made certain to put aside new ones) which he would drop on New York bars, by mistake. He felt a hand touch his arm, and turned to see a black face of sudden age which held no beauty for him.

—Una limosnita, por el amor de Dios . . . The face had tufts of hair at chin and lips, so separately white that they looked to have been stuck there a moment before. Otto looked at his coins. The shiny two-and-one-half-cent piece looked like a dime. He felt that the beggar would make the same mistake, or think that he had made it unwittingly. He gave the lesser coin into the old hand and turned away. —Dios se lo pague, said the voice, in beneficent threat.

The luggage and its carrier disposed of, Otto walked through the town, into the wide open plaza of cement benches and palm trees. In the center was a dry fountain, and children who would seem to have nothing to laugh at laughed at nothing. They quieted for a moment when the priest passed. He was a long black-skirted affair with magenta buttons from throat to feet, five magenta buttons on each cuff. Around the largest part of him came a wide sash of glorious purple. His round black hat carried a purple corded band. He made no sign, marching toward the cathedral.

The broken face of that old building was covered with the sun. It was difficult to believe that it had ever been new, actually been built stone by stone under the surface of the plaster. The saints, some armless and headless, waited in still niches smoothed and quietened by the rain. The towers hung heavy with silent bells. But in places the plaster had come away, showing the walls built brick by brick, separated by lines of mortar laid by men's hands. Just inside the door waited a Virgin; the priest went in not glancing at her, passed her with proprietary certainty. When he was gone the children forgot him and remembered

themselves. The birds, forgetting nothing and remembering nothing, dashed the benches with spots of white.

Otto walked more rapidly, for fear of one of them catching his linen, and was suddenly brought up face to face with a girl beside the waterless fountain. The darkness which she wore about her gave her an air of richness, her skin a color never burned by one sun; and in an evanescent instant he loved her. Recovering, he was as suddenly embarrassed, and got round her through the plaza.

Around the weight of the cathedral, the town looked transitory, brightly colored and haphazard, as though without that weight it might disintegrate, to wander off and be lost in the green hills.

•

The white boat slipped away from the pier, away from the black and brown and tan upturned faces, the hands extended for a last tossed coin and those few raised in farewell. The water was shallow and clear green. Slowly the heat of land fell away, and two people stood, a distance apart, at the boat-deck rail, watching the buildings lose their form and become smears of color, the palms lose their majesty and fade into the heavy green of the countryside. The harbor was still, nothing could be seen to move, and its sounds and cries were lost: there was only the throbbing of the boat, moving with certainty out upon water which became deeper and deeper blue. Otto, walking up to the bow, was taking the sun of this lost country with him.

He took a case out of his pocket, opened it, and caught his quivering lower lip with his teeth as a jarring of the boat hit his hand against the rail and sent the gold-rimmed dark glasses down into the white water. He stood clutching the emptied case tightly, looking over the bow to where it tore that water open, as though there must be some way of recovery.

—Too bad, said a cheerful voice beside him, a fiercely sun-pinkened American. —Looked like a nice pair of glasses. Otto closed the case and put it into his pocket. —Why don't you throw the case in too? asked his witness.

—I can use it for something, Otto said, surly, defensive.

—Carry pills in? said the traveler, and laughed again. —Hot as hell, isn't it. It'll cool down when we get out a ways.

—Possibly, said Otto, and walked aft.

The mirror in his cabin was smaller than he would have liked, framed in wood covered with thick green paint. He looked at his luggage. It was all there, with Wanted-on-Voyage tags tied to the handles. Then he thought to look at his fingernails. Not as a man does, the fingers turned in upon the palms, but like a lady, at the back of the extended hand so that she may admire the slim beauty of her fingers. Otto admired the taut dark figure of his hand, forgot to look at the nails and had to look back again (fingers turned in upon the palm). He was immediately troubled about covering that fine hand with a bandage. Still, injury might have been to the wrist: in which case the white gauze would go splendidly across the base of his hand, set off the dark length of the fingers like a lady's evening glove. He made certain that he had two extra packages of Emu which he would offer (preferably to ladies), casually indifferent to their choking fumes. He considered unpacking, but there was no hurry. The sling he had fashioned was in the top of the small suitcase. There would be time that evening to try it again, to decide where the bandage would go, where the wound was.

The sun moved down toward the sea, its redness heightened in hurry to be gone, moving as though pursued. The land was far behind, a soft haze behind the slowly curving wake of the boat, a white wake already floating with garbage where white birds dove and lifted themselves away. Otto saw none of this. He had started to post the Italian print on his wall (*Lady of the Junipers*), thought of Jesse's words, shrank, put it out of mind. He thought of his wallet, and pressed the bulge under his coat with his wrist. His hair, like his nails, was grown just the right length. The mustache, sparse and golden, the same. He tightened the knot in his tie and pulled down the skirt of his jacket. With the smoke from a fresh cigarette he blew a perfect circle against the hard surface of the mirror, where it clung growing larger and thinner around this image of his importunate face.

Up the coast of the New World the ship bearing ten million bananas ground out its course, every minute the waste heaving brokenly around it more brilliant as the moon rose off the starboard bow and moved into the sky with effortless guile, unashamed of the stigmata blemishing the face she showed from the frozen fogs of the Grand Banks to the jungles of Brazil, where along the Rio Branco they knew her for a girl who loved her brother the sun; and the sun, suspicious, trapped her in her evil passion by drawing a blackened hand across her face, leaving the marks which betrayed her, and betray her still.

V

America is the country of young men.

—EMERSON

—NOTHING, said Maude Munk.

—Nothing? Arny Munk repeated.

—Nothing, she confirmed, dropping ice cubes into a glass. —The same things. They ask the same questions they've been asking for three years. *Was* I conscious after the accident, and if I wasn't how could I have reported it all to the police, and did I have pains in my back *then*, and if I did why don't the hospital records show it. Then my doctor and their doctor argue, and my lawyer and their lawyer argue, and the cab driver who was driving the cab I was in lives in Detroit now. I wish you'd put your shoes away somewhere when you take them off.

—Well I could tell them your personality's changed. And you never used to drink before that accident. It used to upset you because I drank.

—It still does, Arny. Terribly. And you don't have pains, like I do. Today I even asked the judge, Would you have two operations and wear a spinal brace if you were malingering?

—Maude look, you're spilling your drink, he said, righting the glass which tipped toward him in her forgotten hand. The radio offered cocktail music, *When Buddha Smiles*.

—What is it? Are you tired? Arny? . . . Oh, I just wish you got tired doing something you liked.

—You don't make a living doing things you like.

—But selling . . . and year after year . . . and . . . things like last week.

—Maude.

—Does your father know about that? Or does he just pretend he doesn't know, and he's glad you've sold another order, playing cards in a hotel room where they send naked women in for your out-of-town buyers. And all the time your father's such a fine dignified old man. Why if my Daddy ever . . .

—Maude.

—Anyhow, my Daddy was a man.

—What do you mean by that? Just because I have a rupture . . .

—I don't mean your old rupture. It's just that . . . She looked at him a moment longer, got up and freshened her drink, and turned the dial on the radio. Finally she asked, —What are you reading? Arny? You're not even reading, are you.

—Maude.

—As though you were all alone. Sometimes I come into the room and you're sitting here with a book open, but you're not reading. You're just sitting looking at the page, but you're not reading? Are you lonely?

——that looks better, smells better, tastes better, and is better, said a young man's voice on the radio.

—But how can you be lonely? *I*'m here.

——the next number on our program, the Academic Festival Overture, by Tschaikovsky.

—Arny, have you filled out the papers?

—What papers?

—*The* papers, what other papers. For the Red Heart Adoption Center.

—It's the Sacred Heart. Red Heart's a dog food.

—Well anyway, have you?

—Yes Maude.

—And can we go up and get it in the morning?

—We may have to wait.

—How long?

—Maude, please don't have another drink.

—A little brand-new one, Arny. It will make everything different between us again, won't it? for you? I mean for me, it will make us more like we used to be, won't it?

—Is dinner ready?

—Do you want chutney?

—Chutney?

—With the curry.

—Yes.

—Then you'll have to go out and get it. There isn't any.

—Never mind then.

—But I want chutney.

—I'll wait while you go out and get it. The walk might do you good, he added, looking up at his wife's

eyes, wandering past him wed to nothing. —There's someone at the door.

—Oh Herschel, I forgot, Herschel called and you can't get him off the telephone until you make some kind of date with him, he said he'd stop in . . .

—Are you going to answer the door?

—Herschel! . . . Arny, it's Herschel, and . . . he has a girl with him!

Outside the door stood a young lady adjusting a garter. Her companion watched. —Anyhow, come in, said Maude. Herschel waited until the garter was taken care of, the stocking smoothed over the knee, the skirt over the thigh. Then he said:

—Baby! looking up to see Maude for the first time, and he offered both his hands. Herschel was tall, and had always been handsome. He had been the handsomest boy in his home town, and the only one in that part of Ohio to own dinner clothes. His picture, in dinner clothes, still stood in the photographer's window on Front Street where, faded and fly-specked, it continued to exact a certain prestige, for it was some years since he'd been home. —I brought along a little two-legged friend, he said. —Arny and Maude, I want you to meet . . .

—Adeline, the blonde supplied.

—Adeline.

—How do you do, I'm sure, said Adeline.

—Baby is your name really Adeline? I had a nurse named Adeline, a black one, big West Indian black Adeline. One day under the apple tree I bit her right square . . .

—Herschel! . . . your head is brachycephalic, Maude said from where she'd gone to pour drinks, whisky with water (she'd heard soda was bad for the stomach lining). —It's the coming shape in heads.

—Aren't you kind, baby. No one's ever told me *that* before.

—Maude.

—Arny, it's true. Head shapes are very important. Arny thinks I'm silly, reading books about heads, that book there. Do you see the picture it's open to? That's a good domestic. That's why I want to look at the babies first, we don't want one that will be a domestic. On the next page there's one kind of sticking out in the back, that's the Intellectual. And the kind of big square one is a Leader of Men. We're going to have a baby, she said pausing on her way to the kitchen for more water. Adeline stopped her drink halfway to her lips and looked at the other woman's figure curiously. —Tomorrow morning. Adeline looked downright insulted.

—Oh God, baby, again? Herschel sank back in his chair.

—No, this time we're really going to get there, aren't we Arny? Tomorrow morning at nine. Oh, did you want a drink? I didn't know you wanted one, Arny.

—I shouldn't tell this, baby, but if you're shopping for a bargain . . .

Maude cried out from the kitchen. —Oh . . . a cockroach. I hate New York, no matter where you live, you have them. The people downstairs have them, they chase them up here and then I chase them back down, up and down the drain.

—Why don't you use D.D.T.?

—It's no good, it just makes them hysterical, Maude said, coming in with water. —They run around screaming.

—Cockroaches?

—Well you can't really hear them, but you can tell that's what they're doing, that's what you do when you're hysterical.

—Baby . . .

—Yes, tomorrow morning at nine. Have you finished that already, Arny?

—If you're not in a wild rush, Herschel said slyly, —I know someone who might help you. Someone who's going to have one. I mean really have one. Not just yet, though.

—A woman? But how does that help . . . ?

—Because she doesn't want it, baby. Someone told me she was looking for a doctor, someone who must be nameless, and he asked me. Can you imagine *me* knowing such a thing?

—A doctor? I know so many doctors, what kind? Back doctors, bone doctors . . .

—No, a doctor to take *care* of it for her, one with an *in*-strument.

—Oh!

—Maude, you're spilling your drink.

—You know Esther, baby . . . well I'm not to tell but . . .

—I saw her on the street, Maude said. —She has such bad luck.

—She told *you* about it?

—About Rose?

—Oh no, everybody knows about Rose, that they've sent her sister Rose back from the tee-hee farm and Esther has to take her in. But this is something you mustn't tell, baby. This is for your tomblike little ears. She has a turkey in the oven.

—She has what?

—She's preg, baby.

—But . . . her husband?

—Her husband! No one ever sees him. I've never met him. I'm sure if he had ever said anything amusing I would have met him somewhere, but I understand that he lives underground. Or underwater. Some really absurd part of town. No one's ever been there.

—He used to paint, didn't he? used to paint things?

—Oh who didn't, so did I, said Herschel, —the naughtiest . . .

—No one's seen him since that boy Otto . . . do you remember Otto?

—Otto? Nobody's named Otto any more, he must be an impostor.

—Herschel, you've met him, silly. He used to show up everywhere with Esther before she and her husband . . . I mean after she and her husband . . .

—Oh I do remember him, Otto. He talked all the time. He was rather cute. Yes, I remember Otto, for almost a year he and Esther made half of a very pretty couple. You mustn't repeat this, but I was told that Otto and Esther's husband . . .

—Herschel, don't . . .

—Baby I'm not responsible for all the queer things that go on. It was all explained as a father complex or a mother complex or something vulgar. Why, no one has secrets any more.

—But Esther's husband, what . . .

—You mustn't tell, but he's mixed up with an international counterfeit ring, he makes gold down there, out of fingernail parings . . .

—Herschel, silly . . .

Adeline looked very interested.

—But baby everyone knows it. And there's a skinny little girl he keeps there . . . well, there are simply terrifying stories about *her*. It's known she takes dope. Known simply everywhere.

At that, Maude took out a small round Battersea enamel box, with the words *We Live in Hope* on the cover, and took out a pill. —Arny, not another drink, tomorrow morning . . .

—Don't you want another?

—No, I have a little headache.

—Don't be put out if I ask you this, Herschel commenced, —after all we all had the same analyst.

—I wish Arny had finished, I almost finished mine, Maude said. —He reminded me of Daddy. He introduced us, did you know that?

—You and Arny?

—Yes, he thought we could help each other, so he thought we should get married. I guess that's why we never finished. Analysis I mean. Arny you've almost finished that bottle of whisky. You know what happened Saturday.

—But . . . you can tell me, why don't you just go ahead and *have* a baby?

—It's easier . . . it's easier this way isn't it Arny, and besides how can you have a baby these days in a . . . a place like this, how can you . . . Maude looked suddenly about to cry. When the doorbell rang she ran to answer it, but stopped for a moment before she opened the door.

Outside stood a tan, summer-clothed, rather embarrassed young man. —Otto! she said. —Why Otto, how funny! It's Otto, she said into the room, and —How brown you are, following him in.

——I beg your pardon, ladies and gentlemen, that was the Academic Festival by Brahms. Our next number, by the French composer Clair . . . I mean Claude, Debussy, Alla-press, midi, dun-fon . . .

Otto raised an eyebrow, brandished his sling, and tripped over the pair of shoes by the table.

Arny got up and offered him a drink. Herschel got up and said, —Baby what are you doing in an outfit like that? You'll freeze to death. And Adeline looked at the golden mustache, and the arm-in-a-sling, and said nothing at all.

—I am, but I haven't any others. They're all following me, somewhere between here and banana land.

—Who's following you, baby?

—No, I mean my clothes. I've been on a banana pl . . .

—Oh yes, you were on a banana plantation, said Maude. —Esther told me. It sounded so . . . so quite hideous I'd tried to forget it.

—I didn't know people ran off to banana plantations any more. No, don't go to a banana plantation, baby. It's old hat.

—Herschel, silly. He's just come back.

—All the more reason. What are you wearing that thing for? Herschel pointed at the sling.

—My hand, I . . .

—Did something happen to it?

—There was a revolution. Why, they're regular occupational . . .

—I couldn't understand why you wanted to go down there in the first place.

—It wasn't so bad. In spite of the revolution I got a play written . . .

—Did you, asked Maude. —About bananas? Arny, please don't drink any more. Tomorrow morning at nine, we've got to be there this time. She turned to Otto who was busy raising an eyebrow at Adeline. —We're going to have a baby, she said.

—Really? That's wonderful, I . . .

—Tomorrow morning, we're going up and adopt one.

—That's wonderful, I . . .

—Do either of you want to come to a party? Herschel asked. —That's where we were on our way to.

—Whose party? Maude asked.

—I don't know, baby. It's a party for a painting. Somebody did a painting so they're giving a party so everybody can see it. Don't you understand?

—Where is it?

—I've got the address here. Somebody wrote it down for me. He took out a rumpled slip of paper with Memorandum across the top in bold face, and then in gothic characters, *United States Senate*. —Sullivan Street.

—I couldn't stand a Village party tonight. Could you Arny? They're always so quite ha . . .

—Hideous, Herschel supplied.

—I wasn't going to say that, silly. I was going to say harrowing. I couldn't stand one tonight, that special Village quality of inhuman ghastliness and dirt. And tomorrow morning, Arny please don't have another drink. No really, Herschel, it sounds too hideous.

—You're right of course, baby. Now you've made me feel awful about going myself. But everybody who goes feels the same way. Do you want to come down and see the painting? he asked Otto, who had just lit an angry black-tobacco cigarette with her help, beside Adeline's chair. —Oh, I am sorry. Adeline, this is Otto. Do you want to come down with us? The painting's called *L'Ame d'un Chantier*.

—Herschel, how silly. Really? Really. What's a Lom?

—I haven't a notion who's giving it, said Herschel. —It doesn't matter, you always see the same people.

—It means soul, said Otto. —The soul of a . . .

—And chantier is a singer, said Maude. —The soul of a singer.

—You coming baby? said Herschel, with his coat and Adeline's.

—Have you seen Esther recently? Otto asked, faltering slightly. —I mean, do you think we might . . .

—Not for months, said Herschel.

—Well, I used to know some people down there, I . . .

—Don't be afraid. Everybody has a Village past. The ones who stay down there just don't know it's past.

—No, that isn't what I meant, I . . .

—Arny, please. No more. You remember what you did Saturday night. Maude turned to them. —Arny sat up drinking late Saturday night here all alone, and when I got up Sunday I found he'd undressed and put all his clothes carefully into the refrigerator.

•

Up four flights of stairs, Herschel instructed Adeline. —They all talk about painting. Now remember, no matter what anyone says, you just comment on the solids in Uccello. You can say you don't like them, or say they're divine. Can you remember that? The *solids* in Oo*chel*lo, can you say that? They arrived at a room full of people who spent their lives in rooms.

Adeline directly sought the bathroom; Herschel lay against the doorjamb getting his breath; and Otto (thinking only of what it looked like to see Otto entering a room) entered. He was dressed comfortably for the temperature. It was not a large room. The established guests were too engrossed in talking, or waiting for opportunity to talk, to attend the new ones. Some of them glanced up, as residents of a railway coach glance up at a new passenger struggling down the aisle after a seat; but all maintained a composure which reflected the impertinence of the new arrivals for arriving at all. Everyone, that is, but the two policemen, who were disposed like clocks which must be stood at odd angles to tell the time.

On the gray chipped mantel lay a spray of flowers, which someone had gaily lifted from the door of a bereaved Italian family downstairs. Above it hung the painting. No one was looking at it. The unframed

canvas was tan. Across the middle a few bright spots of red lead had been spattered. The spots in the lower left-hand corner were rust, above them long streaks of green paint, and to the upper right a large smudge of what appeared to be black grease. It looked as though the back of an honest workman's shirt had been mounted for exhibition, that the sleeves, collar, and tails might be found among the rubble in the fireplace.

A young man in tortoise-shell glasses, who clutched in his hand some papers entitled *Toilet Training and Democracy*, was saying, —But you've got to understand New York. New York is a social experience. Someone else said, —Don't tell me how sincere he is. He dabbles in Rome the way some people dabble in *The Joy of Cooking*. A bearded man was saying to a girl, —Since I've been married, I've never looked at another woman. Do you find me attractive? Someone cried out, —Queer! Even the cockroaches in his house are queer.

—Really, said Herschel, when he had his breath, —how artsy can we get.

—Yes, said Otto, who had stopped looking at the painting. —Who is that? A sun-tanned woman in a white dress had been exposed momentarily by an opening in the curtain of trouser seats round her, and as quickly hidden again. Her voice, however, carried on. —Darling, I was there for six weeks, and we didn't have dinner at home the whole time, except four or five times and those were dinner parties.

—Don't you know her? It's Agnes Deigh, she just got back from Puerto Rico. Thank God, she's plastered too.

—No I don't know her, I . . .

—Know her brother? You don't? He's the cutest . . . well! Of course *I*'ve never really met him, she won't let me, for some girlish reason of her own. But I've seen his picture, in a soldier suit, the cutest . . . *Nothing* like her husband Harry, he's just the most . . . he's a writer too you know. "Publish and be damned," the Duke of Wellington said, remember? Harry's in Hollywood, spelled backward. Do you know what I mean? "Trade ye no mere moneyed art," spelled backward. Oh never mind. After all, it's just the impurities in gems that give them their exquisite luster isn't it. And their value! I mean Shelley did drink laudanum by the gallon, didn't he. And of course Swinburne! Dear! I feel so na-ked among all these people. It's like a masquerade isn't it. Look! do you see her? the girl on the couch? looking just *too* like la noyée de la Seine, that touching death mask they made from the face of some nameless child who life was just too much for. I mean real life you know. And wasn't it just so *french* to preserve her beauty when she was dead in a mask we could *all* enjoy, instead of squandering money to keep her alive and let her get . . . just all the things that women *get*. There, do you see her? just too noyée for words, why I'd run right out and drown myself tomorrow if I could be that beautiful, wouldn't you? I feel so naked, don't you? among all these frightfully masked people. Remember? de Maupassant, Guy de Maupassant of course, writing to that Russian girl, "I mask myself among masked people." Remember? They'd never met, you know. They never did meet, did they. Of course he was just as mad as a hatter, and her name was Marie Bashkirtseff. She painted. She died too, you know, before she could gain three hundred pounds in all the most obvious places and turn into a woman. She was Russian. And there goes that awful boy who told me about Thomas à Becket. No, or was it à Kempis? plagiarizing the *Imitation of Christ*, imagine! See him? him, with the rather bad skin, he's cute isn't he. But imagine *pla*giarizing the imi-*ta*tion of Christ. Why, Handel plagiarized the most delightful things, didn't he. But then that was music, wasn't it. And he was finally stricken blind by the hand of you-know-Who for being so cavalier with other people's work. Wasn't he. But what about *you*. And so brown. Like a tootsie roll. For all the world . . .

—Me? I . . . Otto had taken a step back, looking about the room with restrained anticipation in his eyes, and presentiment of greeting in his features as though he were searching for an old friend whom he had expected to see here. He was looking for a mirror.

—like the Negro of the Narcissus!

—Huh?

—You have to be so careful below Fourteenth Street, baby. There are certain words you just can't say. And imagine, you've known Agnes's brother all this time and never introduced me! And were you a soldier-boy in the late hate too?

—I . . . what?

—And I didn't know you knew her husband too. No one knows him. Even though he has the same name she has. The same last name, I mean. He took her last name when they were married, wasn't that sweet? because nobody could pronounce his. Before they were married she called him Mister Six-sixty-six, because that was the number of the first hotel room she took him to. Didn't you meet him then?

—No, is he here?

—Oh no, *no* baby. They haven't been out together since the gas stove exploded. When they got married they both wanted to write. Everything was fine until the books came out, then they found they'd written about each other. That was the only reason either of them wanted to get married, to study the other one.

They used to sit and ask about each other's childhood, and all kinds of things, and they both thought the other one was doing it for love. Now they just watch each other's sales, and whoever's ahead takes all the cream at breakfast.

—Is she . . .

—When they *have* breakfast. Together.

Otto strained for another look. He heard her saying, —It's absolute heaven, the people are so poor they work for almost nothing. We had a maid who did the laundry too and do you know how much we paid her . . . Under the loosely fitted white dress she wore an open-top brassière (They all wear them like crazy down there, she said) bringing her front up to where it could be seen with little difficulty. On her browned wrist, complemented with gold in all the garrulous ugliness of the Modernism heresy, was a Mickey Mouse watch. Otto was perturbed by the flourishing color of her skin, which the dress and (the trouser-seat curtain parted again and he saw her fingernails) white nail polish set off to better effect than the rumpled linen and the black silk sling did his own. He ran a fingertip over his golden mustache. —She doesn't look like she quite belonged here, he said. —That white gown.

—Baby what about you in your jungle suit?

—That's not what I meant, in the Village I meant, in that gown, it's so sort of formal . . . Otto faltered to a finish, awaited comment, and only heard someone say, —That's the plot, briefly. Now do you think I can call myself a negative positivist? —I think you'd be safer calling yourself a positive negativist.

—Everyone knows why the Bildows stay married, said a deep voice. —He's impotent with anybody but her. —You know the real reason? she was challenged. —It's because neither of them wash.

—Is it true, Arny and Maude are going to adopt a baby? Otto asked.

—Poor Arny, they've been trying for years, but they always feel too awful in the morning, poor Maude . . .

—Boy or girl? demanded a girl's voice behind them.

—A boy. Oh Hannah, said Herschel, —Baby . . . He looked afraid and unhappy, as though this plainly unattractive girl were someone to escape and forget. She stood firm, in the peasant's dress of the Village, a soiled man's shirt tucked into denim pants on a bunchy figure composed of separate entities, calves, thighs, chest, and head, like a statue of soft stone whose blocks have been weathered apart.

—He's probably a homosexual, said Hannah.

—The baby? Herschel asked helplessly.

—No, the father. He's the one who wants a boy isn't he?

—Do you know Arny?

—Arny who?

—Arny Munk. He's the one who's going to be the father.

—No.

—Then how can you say . . .

—It's psychologically obvious, that's the only reason queer men want boy children, to perpetuate their own kind.

—Hannah, please . . .

Hannah muttered an unpleasant sound in greeting to a tall stooped figure in a green wool shirt, who was about to go on across the room when she saw the book in his hand. —What are you doing with that, *The Trees of Home?* Reading best sellers?

The stooped figure stopped plodding and turned on her; so did his stubby companion, who stood looking slightly injured (he was a poet, with eye trouble, and since everything but the printed page was brought to a focus before it reached him, the world was simply a series of vague images and threatening spectacles, which he faced with lowered eyes as though seeking a book at hand to explain it all); he said, —A best seller! The guy that wrote it submitted it to a board that showed it to a cross section of readers, the reading public. So the reading public doesn't like the lousy end, so he puts on the kind of lousy end they suggest, and it's published. A best seller, for Christ sake.

—I'm reviewing it, the stooped man said, and started to plod off.

—You read it?

—No, he said over his shoulder, —but I know the son of a bitch who wrote it.

—That poor bastard, Hannah said after him. —He wants to go to Europe. They both do, the poor bastards, ask them why. They won't see anything, they're both myoptic. Where you going? she said to Herschel.

—I was just . . . Hannah . . .

—Have you got your tattoo yet? she asked in a humorless tone.

—No.

—How's your writing?

—Movie magazines, simply all sex, Herschel answered, making an effort, —the most obvious perversions. I'm writing a whole series now on movie stars and God. They're all exactly the same. They all believe that *Some*thing is carrying us on *Some*where, and they simply reek with the most exquisite sincerity.

—You mean you interview them?

—Baby, I just make a few notes on them and write these heart-to-heart confessions. The publicity agent looks it over and signs her name to it. *She* never sees it.

—She? Otto asked.

—She. These are lady movie-stars.

—What happened to your senator? Hannah said.

—The last speech I wrote for him, he never saw it until it appeared in the Congressional Record, and I said simply all the wrong things. Now he's being investigated and he's quite put out at *me*. Imagine! I'm simply going to have to write a novel myself.

—You write a novel! Who'll read a novel with no women in it?

—But baby, there will be, I'll do it just like Proust did, write it about simply everyone I know and then just go through and change boys' names to girls, I know the perfect Odette . . .

—You ought to go back to analysis. Or have a vagotomy and get it over with. Just because your analyst killed himself . . .

—He didn't kill himself, it was an accident.

—An accident! He ties a rope around his neck and climbs out a window, but the rope breaks and he falls forty-six stories, so it's an accident?

—Hannah, I'm going, going to get a drink, Herschel said turning on the room, no idea where he was going, but away.

—I didn't know he was a writer, Otto said.

—Writer! He ghosts. He just ghosted some army general's autobiography. A writer!

Otto looked after Herschel. —I'd say he was a latent heterosexual, he said, immediately regretted wasting such an inspired line on Hannah, and resolved to repeat it later to someone who would repeat it as his own. He even tried to think quickly of a spot for it in his play.

—Dissociated personality, said Hannah soberly. —He's not sure who he is any more, whether he's anyone at all for that matter. That's why he wants a tattoo, of course. Simply a matter of ego-identification.

—So that when he wakes up he'll know it's the same person he went to bed with, said a young man who had been standing with his back to them, turning now his unshaven face.

Herschel was coming toward them, leading a nice-looking confused boy toward the door. —You'd better go, he was saying, —on account of Agnes. Come on, baby. She asked me to help you go, she says you bore the tits off her and you wouldn't want to do that . . . But as they reached the door Agnes Deigh was between them with an arm around the boy. —But darling where are you going? You're not leaving? You can't leave now, it's so early. She plucked this petal back, and Herschel, mumbling something about her bosom, stumbled confusedly after.

—Poor Charley, said Hannah.

—Was that Charley? Otto had noticed a scar across the boy's throat, and a glitter in his hair. —What's that in his hair?

—That's a silver plate, they put it there when they took the bullet out he tried to kill himself with. Did you see his throat? And his wrists are covered with scars. He was in the army, in a plane that dropped an atom bomb, and he has intense guilt feelings. He hated the army. It's a good thing he got out.

—I should think they would have sent him to a hospital if he's like this.

—Oh no, this wasn't the reason he was discharged, said Hannah. —When he was still in he stayed at the place I was staying one night on leave. The next morning he went out to get some coffee, but his own clothes were a mess because he'd been sick the night before so he put some of my warm underwear on under his uniform. The M.P.'s picked him up at Nedick's and when they took him in and found him with girls' underwear on they thought he was queer. He was discharged.

—Oh.

—I think he's going to have a lobotomy, said Hannah. —What do you think of the painting? she said, looking above the mantel.

—The colors are good. Very bright.

—Bright?

—Well, I mean the orange and the green. Of course, a painter is limited by his materials, isn't he. I mean, there are pigments you can't just mix together in certain mediums and expect them to bind. There are certain pigments you can't lay over others and expect them to hold, I mean of course they break up, you

have to know your materials and respect them, but modern painting . . .

—I think it's the saddest thing Max has ever done. It's an epitaph.

—Léger, I mean Chagall . . .

—The emptiness it shows, it hurts to look at it. It's so real, so *real*.

—Soutine, of course, Chagall and Soutine, Otto continued, —there won't be one of them in sight anywhere in a hundred years, they'll break up and fall to pieces right on the canvas. Inherent vice, I believe they call it. There are certain pigments . . .

—I think it's the saddest thing Max has ever done.

Otto stopped speaking: who was Max? He remembered Max as someone he did not particularly like, someone he felt unsafe with. Aware of an unshaven face over his shoulder, he took out a package of his impressive cigarettes, and did not turn until the unshaven boy, not included in their conversation, went away rubbing a badly blemished chin. —Who was that?

—He's a drunk, Hannah said, —his name is Anselm. He gets all screwed up with religion.

In one corner of the room stood a thin young man with a heavy mustache which seemed to weigh his round head forward. At that moment it was being weighed toward a dirty window, which he studied wistfully. His coat was belted behind, and too short. His trousers fell in wrinkles, and dragged frayed cuffs on his shoe-tops. A candid look of guilt hung about him, as though he knew he should not be there, but saw no way of leaving but osmotically, through the translucent window glass. At his back a group, bulging with laughter, threatened to upset him. They were arguing. Then one of them called, —Is it "Ils vont prendre le train de sept heures" or "de huit heures," Stanley?

—Weet, he answered, and returned to the dirty window muttering, —How could it be anything but *weet*? Then he turned his eyes, and stared at whoever was seated on the couch, out of Otto's view.

—If modern painters won't study their materials, Otto took up, fingering the figure of the emu on the cigarette packet, and he spoke with urbane hesitations, indicating concurrent thought worthy of his words, —if they can't waste the time, a sculptor of course has to study every property of his medium before he . . .

—Do you know him? Hannah asked.

—settles down to his, what? Who?

—Stanley.

—No, is he a sculpt . . .

—Stanley? Why should he be a sculptor?

—No, but um . . . and as Praxiteles . . .

—What?

—I was just going to say, as Cicero says of Prax . . .

—Music, he writes music, organ music.

—Who?

—Stanley. Him. She pointed. —This one thing he's been working on a long time, a mass, he's trying to finish it in time to dedicate it to his mother. She's got diabetes, in the Hospital of the Immaculate something, it's around here, they just took her leg off, it had gangrene. She just lies up there with all these souvenirs in bottles around her, her appendix and her tonsils and something they took out of her nose, she wants to take them with her, she just lies there staring at her false teeth in an empty glass, gumming memories.

Otto offered a cigarette. Hannah did not smoke; and so the only way to impress her was to blow some in her direction. She coughed and stopped talking.

The funeral spray on the mantel had wilted, and the wires which held it taut were apparent. It had not been an expensive one. The clusters of guests moved vaguely before it and back like limp flowers dying in the earth where they had grown, shifting in the dust. Otto was looking over the room for someone he knew to talk with, or someone he did not know, to talk to. For just that moment he saw the face of a girl who was sitting alone on the couch, looking with a smile of newness over this moribund garden, allowing herself to be hidden by it. Then she was gone, with the silent consciousness of a painting obscured by a group of nattering human beings. He had stared at her in that moment of exposure: her eyes had been looking at him; and then they were not: and her smile went beyond him, like a face he knew so well he could never recall it to memory.

—She got fed up with him screwing the Sunday roast, so she shot herself, do you blame her? Anselm was saying suddenly at his elbow speaking, to Hannah, of the stooped man in the green wool shirt, whom he'd just left. —That's what breaks my heart, he added, and rubbed his chin.

—Who is it? Otto asked, turning.

—A half-assed critic, Hannah said, —he thinks he has to make you unhappy before you'll take him seriously.

—A three-time psychoanaloser, Anselm added, —for Christ sake. He just told me Bildow's going to sell The Magazine. Tragedy. Hannah reached for the yellow book he carried. —Have you read it, *Justine?* he asked, holding it back. —I brought it to show Stanley.

—Leave him alone tonight, Hannah said.

—There's a nice part, in this Benedictine monastery, where the abbot puts the holy wafer up her and defiles it . . .

—Listen, Anselm . . .

—Hey Stanley, come here, I got something to show you, Anselm called, and Hannah repeated, —Leave him alone, as Stanley worried his way toward them. Otto smoothed his own mustache with a fingertip.

—What are you reading? Anselm took the book from under Stanley's arm. —Malthus, for Christ sake. Do you want to get excommunicated, carrying that around in public? The next thing, you'll be peddling rubbers in the street.

—Malthus doesn't recommend . . . those, when he speaks of moral restraint . . .

—Moral restraint! Anselm laughed, waving his yellow book. —If you think the Church wouldn't do an about-face on contraceptives if it owned a block of stock in Akron rubber! And how much real estate do you think they own in this whorehouse of a world? Here, you ought to read this, he went on, opening *Justine*, —there's somebody in here you'd like, named Roland, he has a crucifix with a girl on it face-to . . .

—Listen, Anselm, Hannah commenced.

—can play hide-the-baloney . . .

—I heard you sold another book title, Stanley interrupted him.

—"Except for Fornication," fifty bucks. Matthew nineteen, nine, "Except it be for fornication . . ."

—I'm having a little difficulty, with a title, Otto lied.

—A novel?

—No, a play I've just finished. I've called it "The Vanity of Time."

—Corny, Hannah commented. —What a lousy party.

—It's from a sermon . . .

—Peanut butter, for Christ sake. Fifty million pounds of food a day eaten in New York, and what do I get? Peanut butter.

—Do you like the painting? Stanley asked her.

—The composition's good. Max is good with composition, he's successful with it, but he still works like painting was having an orgasm, he has to learn that it isn't just having the experience that counts, it's knowing how to handle the experience . . . what the hell are you smoking? she coughed, looking at the cigarette in Otto's brown hand.

Stanley turned and asked timidly, —And, Anselm? what are you doing now?

—I keep myself busy sawing toilet seats in half for half-assed critics, Anselm said without turning to him, without taking his eyes from the tall figure stooped in the green wool shirt.

Otto cleared his throat. —That ahm girl on the couch, she . . . do you know her? Anselm looked at him for the first time, and he added —I mean, and cleared his throat.

—That's Phryne. Anselm watched the lack of response on Otto's face. —Phryne. Don't you know Phryne, for Christ sake? I thought I just heard you talking about Praxiteles.

—Well yes I was but, I mean when Cicero says that Praxiteles, that all Praxiteles has to do is remove the excess marble, to reach the real form that was there all the time underneath, I mean inside . . .

—And he reached Phryne. Haven't you ever seen it?

—Seen what.

—Praxiteles' statue of Phryne. Who the hell do you think was hiding inside his block of stone but a high-class whore. They've got it in the Vatican with the rest of the high-class whores. I just wanted to be Eve before the Fall, Anselm mimicked in a whimper, —for Christ sake.

Stanley was staring fixedly at the floor.

Anselm wiped his mouth. —Look at Agnes, he said, —with all the little faggots around her. Christ. He looked vaguely in that direction for a moment, then returned to Stanley. —When are you going to Italy? he demanded, and as quickly turned on Otto, who drew up his cigarette like a smoking weapon of defense, but Anselm merely said, —There's this broken-down old church where he wants to play the organ, something he wrote he wants to play on their organ. "Seated one day at the organ," hey Stanley? How does it go, "weary and ill at ease"? And your fingers running idly over the . . . hey! He was gone, after someone with a bottle. —Give me some beer.

Somewhere a sober voice said, —I suppose you might call me a positive negativist. Elsewhere, —Of course he'll never write another book, his bookshelves are crammed with books in different jackets and every one of them inside is that book of his. From a conversation on the excellent abstract composition in

isolated fragments of Constable, rose Adeline's voice, —like the solids in Oochello . . . Above them all the Worker's Soul hung silent, refusing comment; though the red lead recalled bridges built by horny hands, sexually unlike any that fluttered glasses beneath it now, the spots of rust a heavy male back straining between girders, generically different from any weaving here. For all its spatters of brightness, that canvas looked very tired, hanging foreign and forlorn over the sad garden. There, Anselm paused with a glass in one hand, treating his chin with a piece of (No. 1/2) sandpaper in the other.

Stanley turned to Hannah and asked with solicitude, —But what about your painting?

—They took it Monday.

—Took it? Otto repeated.

—I rented a Modigliani last month, I couldn't pay another month rent on it so they took it back. I can't live without that painting. I don't have any place to hang it, but I can't live without it, it was more beautiful than my mother. But what do *they* care? All they want is their lousy twenty dollars.

—But that much money, you could buy a good print, Otto commenced, —a Picasso . . .

—Picasso, he paints like he spits.

—Well, of course . . . Otto said uncomfortably, —and the . . . I mean, if a painter is only after a um immediate effects . . .

—Some of them have set out to kill art, Stanley said quietly looking at the floor. —And some of them are so excited about discovering new mediums and new forms, he went on, looking up, between the two people he was talking to, —that they never have time to work in one that's already established.

—Yes, and when they haven't studied their materials . . .

—Or they don't care, they just don't care. They don't. They accept history and they . . . they thumb their noses at it.

—While you sit around and try to write music like Gabrieli.

—If a painter knows his materials and respects them . . .

—Oh Christ, what are you talking about? Hannah broke in. —The kind of crap you buy now in tubes, how do you know what you get?

—Well of course, Otto agreed, moving his moist hand in the sling, —one can get more ink powder in a tube of cheap indigo than there is indigo, or no madder at all in rose madder, but . . .

—All right, what do you blame the painter for, if a system of enterprise like this one screws him up?

—Well you . . . I mean . . .

—You can buy as good colors today as have ever been made, Stanley said, —but there's a sort of a satisfaction grinding your own colors isn't there, here where everything you pick up is ready-made, everything's automatic. Where Henry James says, "to work successfully beneath a few grave, rigid laws . . ."

—Oh, stuff Henry James . . . Hannah commenced, and coughed. Otto had lit another cigarette. He turned upon her seriously unattractive face as though to accuse her of having made it so on purpose.

—Of course, when Vainiger says . . . he began, but she turned and set off toward a plate of crackers.

—Are you a painter? Stanley asked Otto.

—Me? Oh no, I just, I'm a writer, a playwright, I just finished a play.

—I thought from the way you talked maybe you were.

—A playwright?

—A painter.

—Well I, no, in fact I would have thought that you . . . And, but what does Hannah do?

—She really doesn't *do* so very much, Stanley admitted.

A face lowered behind them, to contribute, —Hannah knows *The Sound and the Fury* by heart.

—The sound and the fury? Otto turned.

—*The Sound and the Fury*. Faulkner's novel, haven't you ever read it?

—Of course I've read it, Otto said without an instant's hesitation.

—Hannah knows it by heart.

—She paints some, Stanley said in a vindicatory tone.

—Paints! Did you see the abstract she did for the Army Air Force? the face persisted. —For a psychological test, they used it to pick out the queers, if you were queer the painting didn't look like anything, if you weren't it looked like a snatch.

—A what?

—What's the matter, you queer?

—She painted still lifes, Stanley interposed helpfully.

—It took her so long the fruit got rotten.

—But Cézanne . . .

—Now she paints landscapes but she has to put telephone poles in all of them to get perspective. Linear

perspective.

—How does she get on without working?

—She says work is death.

—People give her money?

—Work is death. She's too strong to ask for charity. When she really needs something, that's different, we all helped her when she got her front teeth knocked out. The ones she has now are made of cellophane. She washes and does all her laundry in a subway ladies' washroom.

—She's very . . . she has such integrity of purpose, Stanley said weakly.

—Purpose? Otto repeated. —What purpose.

—Just . . . purpose, Stanley said looking after their nameless companion. —I ought to leave, he added, shifting nervously, gazing toward that full-blown flower whose fey petals curled and yellowed round its white spore-bearing carpel, Agnes Deigh. She was reciting a limerick about Titian which ended, —climbed up the ladder and had 'er, to rhyme with rose madder.

—What is she, anyhow? Otto asked as they drifted in that direction.

—An agent, a literary agent, Stanley answered under his breath, and they arrived to fill a gap in the trouser-seat curtain around her. There was a silent moment: Agnes Deigh and Otto compared sun tans. Then she said, —I'm collecting members for Art for Labor and Democracy. It's a party.

—A party? someone from another cluster turned to ask.

—A political party, darling, she said, and he retired.

—I have no political interests, Otto said to her.

—But you don't have to do anything. You just give me two dollars, that pays your dues and they have another member.

—But why join if I'm not going to do anything?

—They need members. They just want your name, darling.

—I'm sorry, I'm afraid I really couldn't afford it.

—Two dollars?

—That isn't what I meant . . . But Agnes Deigh was talking to someone else. Otto retired, to recover composure with an eyebrow raised on nothing.

The funeral spray was on the floor; and in the sunless garden round it the flowers wilted one way and another, toward each other and away. There was music, briefly. A girl's voice counterfeited by the phonograph sang, "I sold my heart to the junkman . . ." until the needle broke and the song was lost in a whirr and momentary dimming of the electric light. A healthy baritone voice from a girl with a tubercularly collapsed chest said, —But it isn't really a good novel at all, the only perceptive chapter is where the boy discovers he's queer.

One, with an unconscionably persistent smile, his coat too long and trousers too short, was detailing the plot of his as-yet-unfinished novel, —slightly reminiscent of Djuna Barnes perhaps. A man is told that his girl is a lesbian, so he makes himself up as a girl and goes to a party where she'll be. He makes advances to her, she accepts, and he throws off his disguise and rapes her . . . The voice of Agnes Deigh rose, —But darling, you don't have to *do* anything.

Time, essential for growth, seemed to have forgotten the place, abandoned this garden which had never seen the sun, neither known the songs nor the fertilizing droppings of birds; still there might be worms, and one would hesitate to pry under to prove that there were not. In spite of not being tall, Otto looked loftily over the dusty scene, as he had upon the simmering market in the Central American port two weeks before. Here, as there, he poured disdainfully casual and acrid tobacco smoke over the traders, stood with one foot extended, an eyebrow raised. Occasionally he flicked at the ends of his new mustache, or affected difficulty with his sling. No one had mentioned either.

In spite of the fact that the couch was out of sight, he set off toward it, suddenly remembering the perennial hunt; and by now he had had enough to drink to encourage him toward the woman sought after in vain, die Frau nach der man sich sehnt (as Gordon called her in Act III). So he knew the eyes that looked beyond and did not acknowledge him, the hands which offered but protected, and these were the places one was forced to seek her in New York, no matter the shadows, the choking air, this Ewig-Weibliche, the Eternal Helen. Then he suddenly heard Jesse Franks's voice saying, —She looks like some friggin madonna, and, no more realizing the wonder in that remark than the man who had spoken it, shut it out.

—I haven't seen you for months, said someone beside him. They shook hands.

—I've been in Central America, said Otto, brandishing the sling.

—Were you? I didn't know it.

Otto recognized him: the young man who wore his coat too long and trousers too short. The unconscionable smile, Otto remembered unpleasantly, not a smile to make one feel cheerful in its presence

and persistence. Rather its intimation was that the wearer knew all of the dismal secrets of some evil jungle whence he had just come, a place of surreptitious traffic in fetid sweetish air where the fruits hung rotten on the trees. —How do you like my painting? This, of course, was Max.

—The colors are good, said Otto warily to his host. The smile was not cold, but its very attempt to show itself open and honest revealed disarming calculation. It was a smile that had encouraged many to devote confidences, which gaining the cold air of outdoors they regretted, and mistrusted him accordingly. He dealt largely in facts, knowing for instance that most Hawaiian grass skirts are made in Switzerland, that Scottish Border ballads originated in the Pacific islands, that Scotch tartans are made in Switzerland, British army swords in Germany. It was for these moments that Otto wanted to carry a gun, not to flourish, certainly not to fire, simply to feel it heavily protective under his arm. —Did it take you long? he asked.

—Thinking it out was the main thing, said Max.

—It always is. I've just finished a play and . . .

—Do you know Ed Feasley? He was at Harvard too, said Max, who had studied locally.

—Hello, said Ed. —Chrahst we were in the same class. You know, I called you up a couple of months ago. I looked you up in the phone book when I came to New York and called. I got some man. He seemed to know you, but he didn't know where you were.

—That must have been my father, Otto said.

There was the sound of collision across the room, as Anselm went down.

—That last time I saw you, said Otto. —you were playing golf down here, driving golf balls down Thompson Street.

—I was drunk, said Ed, whose father owned a battleship works. —Just happened to have some clubs in the car.

—What are you doing now?

—Not a God-damned thing. The old man told me he'd give me a ten per cent commission if I'd sell one of his God-damned boats, I think the old bastard's just kidding me. He wants me to go to work in one of his plants. Start from the bottom.

—What happened to that girl you were going to marry?

—O Chr-ah-st, Ed said wearily. His old-school drawl relieved him of the burden of blasphemy. —I've decided to write a book about her instead. He was a tall well-built fellow with a very small head, what was known as the university type before those institutions let down their barriers, now viewed by the frail round-heads who have penetrated as definite evidence of degeneration of the race.

—I guess we're all writing, Otto said cheerfully. —I've just finished a play . . .

—Wha'd you do to your hand anyway? Ed asked.

—I've been in Central America. A revolution . . .

—Wha'd you go down there for?

—I was working, but when this revolution started, well, you know, you get mixed up in things, before you know it. And to see a dozen policemen coming at you on motorcycles, after you've strung piano wire . . .

—Mister Feddle, said Max, —I'm so glad you came. This interloper was an old man, who seemed glad to be here.

—I feel young again, among all of you, he said. —And I must tell you since I know you'll be interested. My poems are being published.

—That's splendid. Congratulations. Things will be a lot easier for you and your wife now. Is she here?

Mr. Feddle looked out into the room. —She was, he murmured, —she was, as he tottered away.

—All you really need is a length of good piano wire . . .

—Did you say you were writing a novel? Max asked Ed Feasley.

—No, said Otto, —a play. I just finished a play, down in . . .

—Has anyone seen it? Max asked him.

—No, I . . . well . . .

—I'd like to read it, Max said.

—Would you? Let's see. I might get it to you tomorrow. It's one of those things, you can't really be sure of it until an outside person has seen it, said Otto explaining this sudden committal to himself and to them, as though he would show it to Max if he were uncertain. And Max smiled at Otto, as though he knew him very well, and had seen him often in another part of the jungle.

The sound of singing seeped through the smoke. The singer was not singing for the group, but to himself as in encouragement. If ever a tattered dahlia bloomed in that brown plot, it was Herschel. His lyrics remained the same, though the tune was under no such restriction:

—*I'm going down to Dutch Siam's, yes I am, . . . yes I am*

he sang from the floor, where he sat playing with his feet like any village idiot. He had not left his corner since introducing Max, Hannah, and Stanley, giving them all Christian names which he supplied himself, to a blonde Miss Adeline Thing. Those three were dumbfounded, then livid, and clamored to give Adeline their correct names; not bothering to ask hers they retired.

—*Yes I am* . . . (he was very drunk), —*yes I am* . . .

Miss Thing was across the room, as far as she could be from him in that place. —He is pretty far gone, isn't he? Otto said; and as they turned to look he added, —I'd say he was a latent heterosexual.

—I'm sorry, said an old lady at Max's arm. —Have you seen my husband? The old fool's probably drunk.

—Oh Mrs. Feddle, no he's not at all drunk. He looks fine. I was so glad to hear that things are working out. Life should be a lot easier for you now.

—Well, she said, weary, —it costs money to have things published, you know. She scanned the room, while Otto retreated to the bookcase.

When among people he did not know, Otto often took down a book from which he could glance up and note the situation which he pretended to disdain. One evening he had read seventeen pages in Thomas of Brabant's *On Bees* that way. Now he found himself staring at Robert Browning:

Well, and it was graceful of them: they'd break talk off and afford
—She, to bite her mask's black velvet—he, to finger on his sword,
While you sat and played Toccatas, stately at the clavichord?

—Oh God! Agnes Deigh screamed with delight. —Darling! Her laughter seemed to clear the room of the smoke that hung like marsh gas, for long enough to glimpse her abandon before the tall Swede who had just arrived to hand her a key. —It's to my box, he said, —and you mustn't lose it ever. I just don't trust myself, that's all. Why at any moment I'm liable to open that box and take out those divine dresses, those brrr beautiful bits of lingerie. Sometimes I just *have* to put them on. But if you have the key you won't let me give in, will you?

—But tell us about Rome, darling. Paris.

—I had the most divine trip back. You can't imagine anything more ghastly. On the very same boat with the right arm of Saint Ignatius of Loyola! Isn't that just too camp? You can't imagine, traveling with a relic. Victoria and Albert came with me. You can't imagine the contretemps we had when we landed . . .

— . . .

— . . . ?

—Tins of opium that he was trying to put onto himself with adhesive tape my dear, and in the heat of the cabin they blew up of course, simply blew up everywhere, and there they were covered with broken tins and that horrid sticky plaster *ev*erywhere, and poor Victoria had to drop a bottle of *Chanel* on the floor and smash it, just to cover up the *smell*. She's still sick with trench mouth. She got it kissing the Pope's ring.

—But what shall *I* do with the key, darling?

—Just keep it hidden until I come screaming to have it. Wasn't that wild? On the very same boat, my dears, with that odious right arm, I met the person who stole my passport in Venice. Can you imagine being introduced to yourself? You can't. Poor boy, they took him right off to prison, even though I offered to keep him in my custody. They wouldn't let me keep him. Isn't that divine? I hear the most touching stories about life in prisons.

—When did you get back?

—Just this very morning. And do you know the filthy trick they played? There I was, at Rudy's apartment, I left all my luggage there covered with the most adorable stickers from everywhere, my dears, every chic hotel you ever heard of. And when I came back tonight they had put all my bags out into the hallway, but do you know what they'd done? You cannot imagine. Simply torn off all those divine labels and stuck the most horrid vulgar things on, all over my beautiful bags, simply covered with labels from Shredded Wheat packages and Kotex boxes, isn't that the most vile thing?

—But Friday night. You'll have your dinner clothes?

—Never never again. I lent them to a divine young Sicilian boy on the way over. He committed suicide in them and I just didn't have the heart to ask for them back . . .

The smoke settled quickly, the guests were found again and knitted together with tendrils of conversation. The flat girl said, —A eulogy on a Wall Street man who lives in Westchester: Birth and commutation and death, that's all . . .

—Copulation, said Stanley, indignantly loud, cutting the asthmatic laughter she had earned. He was staring at the girl on the couch.

—Why Stanley, Agnes Deigh admonished from the chair below him, and reached a spray of white fingernails soothingly toward his face. But the consecrated mind thrust the vagrant heart aside. —It's "birth and copulation and death," he said to the profane girl.

—But she's joking, darling, said Agnes Deigh as her hand reached his trembling chin.

"Dust and ashes!" So you creak it, and I want the heart to scold.
Dear dead women, with such hair too—what's become of all the gold
Used to hang and brush their bosoms?

Otto looked up, avoiding the eyes of Max. She was watching him, suddenly, still hidden on the couch. Pretending he had not noticed her, he let a few pages slip under his finger and continued.

> *He never saw, never before today,*
> *What was able to take his breath away,*
> *A face to lose youth for, to occupy age*
> *With the dream of, meet death with . . .*

And she was alone. The sight of her had startled him: looking out at nothing, her lips silent and almost smiling while the rest chattered, her body still where everyone else shifted, conscious only in herself while all the others were only self-conscious. Alone on the couch, and alone in the room like the woman in that painting whose beauty cannot be assailed, whose presence cannot be discounted by turning one's back, but her silence draws him to turn again, uncertain whether to question or answer. Otto put the book back in the shelf, and started toward her. Then a tweed arm was around his shoulders. Beside him someone was saying, —There was a woman in Brooklyn who used to do it, but I think the police got her. She charged two hundred dollars. And someone else said, —Is this the first one she's ever had? You can't let it go much longer than two months. —She might make something on the side, a third person said, —You get two dollars an ounce for mother's milk these days.

—Someone has been very cru-el not introducing us, said the owner of the tweed arm. Otto freed himself and set off again, as someone in the other group said, —I'm surprised she's never been in a mess like this before.

Through the smoke, among the bumping buttocks and wasted words, he arrived. She looked up and smiled. —May I get you something? he asked her. He had taken out the cigarette package and put the last remaining cigarette between his lips, which were dry. —I'm sorry, it's my last, he said, struggling to light it, and then in confusion, —Oh I'm sorry, I should have . . . He stood gesturing at her with the fuming cigarette.

—I'd like a cigarette, she said.

—But I . . . here, take this. He had forgotten the casual stance, the raised eyebrows, lips moistened, slightly parted. His mouth was dry, and palms wet with perspiration. —I'm sorry. Let me get you one.

—No, I have some I think, she said, and reached for her bag on the floor. —My name is Esme, she told him when she sat up with a cigarette.

—Oh. Is it? said Otto, struggling to open a small match box with one hand. She helped him with the light, looking into the room beyond him. Her large eyes were exaggerated in their beauty by the hollows of her thin face, and the image he sought, distended afloat on their surfaces, drowned and was gone.

—Yes. And you?

—Me? Oh. My name's Otto, he said. A face to lose youth for, to occupy age, with the dream of, meet death with . . .

—But won't you sit down?

He sat.

The room was filled with smoke, dry worn-out smoke retaining in it like a web the insectile cadavers of dry husks of words which had been spoken and should be gone, the breaths exhaled not to be breathed again. But the words went on; and in those brief interruptions between cigarettes the exhalations were rebreathed. —I don't know, he told me he was a negative positivist. —Well he told me he was a positive negativist. —Incidentally have you read *Our Contraceptive Society?* —My dear fellow, I wrote it, for Christ sake. Adeline had been cornered by Ed Feasley, who was telling her that the trouble with America was that it was a matriarchy and had no fatherland myth. Someone said, —No one here really understands New York. It's a social experience. Max was discussing orgone boxes as though he had lived in one all of his life. Buster Brown had an arm around Sonny Byron, a young Negro said to be descended from an English poet of

whom few in the room had heard. One of the policemen was asleep. The other sat holding his glass, making faces at no one. Anselm was working his way round the wall, so as not to lose his balance, toward the window. The chinless Italian boy was standing all alone, looking at the painting. Charles was in the bathroom looking through the medicine cabinet. Hannah was divided between intellect and emotion: on the one hand, arguing that D. H. Lawrence was impotent with a youth in eye-shadow who insisted that at heart he was a "raving queen"; on the other, she was trying to protect Stanley from Agnes Deigh, where he sat on the arm of her chair with the white fingertips dug into his knee.

—Sometimes I know just what it must be like, being the left arm of Saint Ignatius of Loyola, said the big Swede, who looked ready to weep.

—Baby, don't touch me, said Herschel, —my head is brackaphallic, and he began to sing as he sank back toward the floor.

Anselm managed to reach the window, which he opened, and crawled to the fire-escape, making a mess in someone's yard below.

The critic in the green wool shirt was stooped over the poet, saying —These snotty kids who come out of college and think they can write novels.

Mr. Feddle was busy inscribing the fly-leaf of a book.

Someone came in at the door with a manila envelope under his arm, and went over to the policeman who was making faces. —The radio in your patrol car is making a hell of a racket, he said. The policeman buttoned his tunic over the mangy red sweater and went out. Then the boy who had come in said, —It's snowing.

—Chrahst, how unnecessary, said Ed Feasley. He had just told Adeline that the literal translation of the German word for marry, *freien*, was to free; for aside from immediate intentions she was being considered as a character in forthcoming fiction. This Harvard boy who had never learned a trade watched her with indulgent curiosity.

—Ye haven't an arm and ye haven't a leg, Hulloo, hulloo . . .

sang Adeline's sometime escort from a far corner, with sudden cheer as though he'd just discovered the song.

Ye haven't an arm and ye haven't a leg,
Ye eyeless noseless chickenless egg,
Ye'll have to be put in a bowl to beg

(he sang, delighted with such a device), and an unlikely chorus followed:

I'm going down to Dutch Siam's, yes I am . . .

Then someone said loudly what everyone had been suspecting. —There's no more to drink. The room quieted. Even the eyeless noseless chickenless egg was abandoned, as its chorister struggled to an optimistically vertical position against the bookcase.

—Oh God, said Agnes Deigh. —Give me my bag will you darling? she asked an anonymous trouser seat, pulling at the coat which hung above but did not match. She handed a folded twenty-dollar bill to a boy wearing her racing colors and stood, saying —I've got to go to the can anyhow, where is it?

Hannah had been watching her. She felt in the pockets of the deep-seated denim pants, came up with nothing, and said, —What time is it? to Max, probably the only other sober person in the room.

—Three-fifteen, said Max, for whom time was also a matter of the clock.

She sniffed, as with a personal grievance. —It's disgusting, giving a string of Mozart operas as benefits so they can buy new scenery for *The Ring*. Mozart pimping for Wagner. And that old bag, she added, —with her Mickey Mouse watch. Then she looked down the room and asked, —Who's that skinny girl on the couch, with that . . . Otto?

—She writes poems, her name's Esme. I think she's been modeling for some painter. She hasn't got any stomach.

—I've heard about her, Hannah muttered. —On the needle. A schiz.

—Manic depressive, schizoid tendencies, Max elaborated. —Has anybody ever seen her child?

—Child? She's a mother, her? She's too fucking spiritual.

—She says she has one four years old.

—Christ. And look at Herschel, he's simple, but Stanley, this thing he has on the Church, that's why he's stuck on that old bag with the Mickey Mouse watch, he wants to bring her back to the Church he thinks. I

wish he'd get off it.

—I wish he didn't smell, said Max. —I've told you before, he's an oral type. But if you want a real obsessive neurosis look at this, he said nodding to where Anselm approached on hands and knees, a beatific expression on his blemished face. —Have you read any of his poetry? I don't see why Bildow takes it.

—Why shouldn't he smell? Anselm demanded from below. —He doesn't wash.

—Screw, will you Anselm? Hannah said, with a step toward Stanley.

—What did Saint Jerome say? "Does your skin roughen without the bath?"

—Screw.

—"Who is once washed in the blood of Christ need not wash again."

Hannah reached Stanley and took his arm. —Don't you want to leave? Come on, I'll walk you as far as the subway.

—Yes . . . in a minute, he said looking down at the warm indentations Agnes Deigh had left in the chair.

Hannah muttered something. She was staring at Esme again, and suddenly said to Max, —She looks like she thinks she *is* a painting. Like an oil you're not supposed to get too close to.

—She's high right now, can't you see it? She's been on for three days.

Hannah snorted, and took Stanley's arm again. —Coming?

He looked down to see someone tugging at his trouser leg. —What kind of an ass-backwards Catholic are you? asked Anselm from the floor.

—Why . . . why . . .

—Shut up, Anselm, said Hannah. —For Christ sake, go home and take a nap.

—For Christ sake, you say to me! What do you know about Christ?

—Take a nap.

—Well I can't. Do you know why? Because of Christ. Because when I lie down and feel my hands against my own body, that's all I can think of, that thin body of Christ. I can feel it, with my own hands. Does that interest you?

—Please . . . said Stanley.

—Not a God-damned bit, said Hannah.

—Well don't try to talk to me about Christ then, said Anselm, and started away. Then he turned his head back to them. —Do you know who went around like this? Do you know that Saint Teresa went around on all fours, with a basket of stones on her back? and a halter? That's the ritu quadrupedis, if you think it's so God damn funny don't you. And do you know what Christ said to her? "If I had not already created Heaven, I would create it for thy sake alone." Don't try to talk to me about Christ, he said, and went toward the other end of the room, quadrupedis. Stanley stood still; and Hannah turned from him angrily.

Herschel was still propped against the bookcase, where he had left himself a while before. Hannah's approach woke him to a look of fear and no understanding. —By now you probably don't even know what your name is, she said, her tone merciless sobriety.

—Hannah . . .

—No. I'm Hannah, and who are you? He stumbled past her to the other side of the room and interrupted Ed Feasley, who was telling Adeline that the literal translation of the German word for surrender, *niederlage*, is to lie under.

—Adeline, said Herschel. —*Baby*, drawing his breath through his open mouth, liquidly audible. —Is your name really Adeline? I had a nurse once named Adeline, a west black woman Adeline. One day I bit her right square under the apple tree. What do you think of that?

The white Adeline thought enough of it to stand away from him. Herschel swung before her, like a man whose feet were grounded on springs. —Is your name really Adeline? he pled, now with such insistence that if she would answer, or even allow the affirmative by silence, it would legitimize anything to follow. But the door opened upon them, and four late arrivals appeared, hazy-eyed, with willowy movements, the three boys unshaven and the girl unclean, smelling like lives from the swamp. —We've been having a ball, man, one of them said. —Have you got any tea?

A policeman, his tunic unbuttoned, appeared in the doorway to announce loudly that he had had a call from headquarters to answer a complaint at this address . . . a party . . . too much noise . . . have to quiet down . . . and could somebody get me another drink?

Otto took Esme's arm and helped her up, almost using that arm which lay helpless in the sling. He recovered enough of his wit to say, —May I take you home? Now you're supposed to say, Sure, where do you live? Esme looked up, smiled pleasantly, blankly. She did not understand; and sophistry, confronted by simplicity, was lost. —It seems like we've always been just here, she said.

Someone appeared before Otto with a manila envelope. —Here's the story, the one you said you'd send to your friend on a magazine for me, he said, and disappeared.

Herschel stood mumbling to himself. All sense of humor was gone, all sense of anything. His eyes, looking and finding nothing, had stopped seeking and lay open and empty. Only when Hannah reappeared, reflected in their glassy surface, they clouded. —Now I suppose you want to get your tattoo? she said. He nodded helplessly. —Herschel, don't be such a fool. Go back to analysis. Do you think a tattoo will solve everything?

—Hannah . . . baby . . .

—What are you going to have tattooed on you, anyhow? Names? Pictures?

—Leave me alone, he whispered.

A discussion of fierce intellectual intensity continued in one corner. Someone had said that everyone knew that Tennyson was a Jew. In the middle of the room two young men met. —I thought you'd gone home, one said. The other embraced him. —I was waiting for someone to ask me. The Swede sat on the windowsill, head in his hands. —Those horrid horrid vulgar labels, all over my bags, he sobbed. —But I could hear them laughing behind the door, behind the locked door, I could hear them laughing . . . The flat girl said, —Aren't you going to say good night to our host? And her escort, a full-blown woman, said, —God no, I never speak to *him*.

Agnes Deigh returned, straightening her skirt and loosening her waist. Then there was Stanley's voice saying, —No, I promised I'd go home with Hannah, the tone of the seven-year-old's loyalty to the squat and eternal mother. A boy in a bow tie thanked Agnes Deigh for the party, and she cried, —Darling it wasn't *my* party, I'm leaving too. Will you take me home? As she went out she stopped with Max, who stood smiling under the forgotten scars of the Workman's Soul. —There's somebody in the can darling, she said, —somebody passed out in the tub, somebody I've never seen before. You'd better go in and look at him, there's blood all over the place.

At their feet squatted the late guests, smoking something the size of a thumbnail which they passed among them, like a pitiful encampment of outcast Indians satisfying the wrong hunger. —This stuff doesn't really affect me, one said, —but don't you notice that the ceiling is getting closer?

The policeman who had been making faces put down an empty glass, and woke up his buddy. They left.

Otto felt strange, holding her thin wrist: that Esme could give all and lose nothing, for the taker would find she had given nothing; plundering her, the plunderer would turn to find himself empty, and she still silently offering. When she looked up, he was lost to himself as though the woman in that painting had turned her unchanging eyes on his helplessness, and he looked away from her eyes, at the straight darkness of her hair, and cowardly, down at her ringless fingers. Her eyes embarrassed him with their beauty, all at once as she showed them.

—Whore! said a voice at their feet, throaty, breathing heavily, as if there were indeed a load of stones on his back. Then in a clear hard voice Anselm called Esme a name which fell from his mouth like a round stone, and seemed to strike the floor and remain. She looked down at him. —Come on. Look out, Otto said, pulling her away. But she stood, for all her delicacy, firm, and smiling. —Anselm, she said, her voice gentle and quenching as she repeated the name. —Anselm.

—Succubus, said Anselm, his voice deep in his throat again. —*Ssucc*ubus, he hissed. —Devil in a woman's body, to lead a man in vile sin, abominable lusts, carnal pleasures, blasphemy, the filthy delights of copulation. Do you think I don't know? Do you think no one knows? Not for your own delectation, you get no pleasure from it, only to corrupt and pollute the soul and body of a mortal man. Succubus to a man, incubus to a woman . . . He reared his acned chin.

—Come on, Esme, said Otto. —Let's get out of here. But she stood, charmed, still gently smiling.

—Go home and read Saint Augustine. *On the Trinity*, said Anselm, turning his thin face up to Otto. —There you'll find that devils do indeed collect human seed. Not for delectation. Succubus to a man, incubus to a woman. Damn you, damn you, damn you. If devils fell from every rank, those who fell from the lowest choir are deputed to perform these abominations, these filthy delights. Not for delectation. Do you know about the monk Helias, and how the angels answered his prayers by castrating him? Do you know about Saint Victor?

Otto had moved Esme toward the door, where the Swede stood sobbing —Behind the locked door, I could hear them laughing . . .

Then Otto turned, feeling something spray on him. Anselm had flung up a hand wet with beer, and was shuddering, —I exorcise thee, unclean spirit, in the name of Jesus Christ; tremble, O Satan, thou enemy of the faith, thou foe of mankind, who hast brought death into the world . . . He gasped; and in that moment Otto heard clearly from across the room, in Max's voice:

—I'd say he was a latent heterosexual, and looked up to find Max's eyes upon him. He stood trapped for an instant in Max's smiling eyes, then sought others, saw Stanley sunk against a chair watching Anselm.

—Thou seducer of mankind, thou root of evil, thou source of avarice, discord, and envy . . .

—Esme, come on. He pulled her arm.

—Hey Stanley, Anselm called suddenly over his shoulder, —who's this coon with your girl? Hey Stanley, I am one, sir, that comes to tell you . . .

—Esme . . .

—Your daughter and the Moor are now making the beast with two backs.

—Damn it . . .

—Now be nice . . . the Swede whispered through his tears.

—For Christ sake Anselm . . .

—Go home and fornicate, came from the floor. —Only know that God for His own glory permits devils to work against His will. For His own glory . . .

And then a crash.

They looked to see Hannah getting up from the floor, and Max went to help her. Herschel stumbled and fell against a chair, where his whole body shook, heaving from its shallow depths. —I can't stand it, I can't stand it any more. She asked me who I was, and I told her and she said How do you know who that is, is it anybody at all and . . . Oh God, *Christ*, I hate hitting somebody I don't like.

On the floor before the fireplace lay the funeral spray, lifted gaily from the door of a bereaved Italian family downstairs, trampled so that its wires stood out naked. Time had been there. The garden which one had thought could not grow, had risen in rank luxuriance, like the plants on that plantation abandoned. For even bananas must be cut and hung to mature properly; left on the stalk, they swell and burst open, attract insects, develop an unpleasant taste, beyond the bounds of cultivation, beyond the plantation, in the jungle, where in the art of evil their near relatives, the orchids, blossom, not questioning the distant Greeks on how they got their name, deriving innocently from the devil's residence in man: that part which the angels cut from the monk Helias. Otto led Esme forth, and at the stairs she drew him down.

VI

> "Father," he asked, "are the rich people stronger than anyone else on earth?" "Yes, Ilusha," I said. "There are no people on earth stronger than the rich." "Father," he said, "I will get rich, I will become an officer and conquer everybody. The Tsar will reward me, I will come back here and then no one will dare . . ." Then he was silent and his lips still kept trembling. "Father," he said, "what a horrid town this is."
>
> —Dostoevski, *The Brothers Karamazov*

"Why has not man a microscopic eye?" writes Alexander Pope; "For this plain reason: man is not a fly." What of Argus, equipped with one hundred eyes to watch over the king's daughter turned into a heifer by a jealous goddess; how many images of the heifer did he see? how many leaves to the bracken where she browsed? And after the death of Argus (his eyes transplanted to the peacock's tail), this wretched heifer, the metamorphosis of Io, was visited by a gadfly sent by the jealous goddess, and driven frenzied across frontiers until she reached the Nile. What did the gadfly see? And Argus, suffering the distraction of one hundred eyes: did he sit steady? or move distracted from distraction by distraction, like the housefly now dashing and retreating in frenzy against the windowpane, drawn to a new destination the instant it halted, from the shade-pull to the floor, from there to the lampshade, back to the baffling window glass. No Argus, this miserable Diptera, despite its marvelous eyes guardian of nothing; for where was the heifer? Below, perhaps. From the high ceiling the housefly careened to the molding across the room, thence to the lampshade, to a green muffler, a pair of socks on the floor, and so to the sleeping face which it attended with custodial devotion, until the blinking unmicroscopic eyes came open, and Otto lay awake.

—O God, what have I *done?* came borne on a girl's voice, sustained by a muted Rhadames singing before his judges from the lungs of a radio. Otto closed his eyes, not yet ready to return to this life. The fly rummaged about his cheek, remarking there the pitted damages of adolescence, an uneven surface affording foothold for claws laden with typhoid bacilli. Still, for a moment, the fly studied the caves of the nostrils leading into the crooked tanned peak of the nose. Otto threw his arm across his face. The fly rose, swirled, returned to walk across the cleft of the chin, and from that eminence sighted the convoluted marvel protruding across the way, and leaped silently to the ear.

—O God, what *have* I done? This was followed by a tearing sob.

Otto's hand moved quickly, to the ear; but by the time it reached there, the fly was trampling his eyebrow, its purpose of devilish torment unchanged since Io reached the Nile, where Egyptian mothers still

hesitate to disturb flies settled on a sleeping child, awed by the fly god, Baal-zebub, evil and insect-breeding power of Baal, the sun himself, lover and quickener of nature.

—O God, *what* have I done . . . oouuuh . . . while in Egyptian background Rhadames was sealed up in the tomb, alive, where he finds Aïda waiting, sunless, and out in the sunshine metamorphosed by a pun Baal-zebub becomes Beelzeboul, the dung god, Prince of Devils.

So Otto, forced awake by three millenniums, a goddess, a princess, and a devil, swung once more at the housefly and sat up on the edge of his bed, his face anxiously distorted, listening. He waited.

—O God! *What* have I *done!* sounded through the thin wall.

He got up and lit an American cigarette.

December's thin sunlight came in at the window, hopefully revisiting this city despaired of the night before. In thousands of rooms, as many men intently removed minuscule stubble from pallid chins, with as much care for office appearance as though each worked under Saint Wulstan, whose holiness was so offended by beards that he carried a knife, and when a man so adorned knelt for his blessing the good Bishop of Wulster cut out a handful of it, threw it in the poor fellow's face, and told him to cut the rest off or go, quite literally, to Hell. Now they buttoned buttons for the thousandth time without question, absorbed in pragmatic interior monologues which anticipated the successes of the day to come fostered by the failures of the day before.

The city throbbed in gray effulgence, radiating motion, while silent pigeons swept the lower air, or walked grunting on the sills and cornices of the buildings, and on the sidewalks of open places. In Union Square, one of them attacked a bird of rare beauty, tropically plumed, which looked lost and unused to spreading its wings beyond the breadth of a cage.

Otto stumped about the small room, picking up his cigarette whenever it had rested for long enough to burn a brown scar on the woodwork, to liven its coal and find a fresh place to leave it. He was dressed in shorts. The linen suit was rumpled, and the morning light showed it less becomingly so than he had believed the night before. He examined a smudge on the elbow (where it had been dropped on Esme's floor), started to brush it out, and then did not. It remained, witness to what, try as he would, he could not clearly remember. Two suits and a jacket hung beside the linen, only the gray flannel carefully unpressed.

—O God! *What have I du-un* . . . huuuuh . . . came through the wall. —Haha. Haha. That's the way to do it . . . He sank back in the chair, still staring at the wall; but only the radio voice reached him: ——Ladies, if you are troubled by excess hair, write for a *free* brochure of our method, guaranteed to remove fifteen hundred hairs in a single hour . . .

Then he got up and dressed slowly. Buttoning his shirt, he looked vacantly at a book and some papers on the table, which had come under the attention of the fly. He took a towel from the bed and snapped it at the fly. The fly moved to the ceiling, and several of the papers to the floor. Picking up the local Spanish newspaper (which he carried in public and appeared to read), he muttered something; then, pulling on his trousers, he looked as absently at a scrap of notepaper on which was written, Gd crs as mch fr mmnt as fr hr—wht mean? The expression on his face started to change as he read that over, scratching his head as he filled in the vowels. But whatever that expression would have been, it failed: he stood looking at his fingernails, turned in upon the palm. Then barely glancing, crumpled the notepaper as he picked it up and threw it in the basket, to turn away buttoning his trousers, and sit down to count his money.

——And now friends, you've probably been hearing so much about this wonderful new protein diet . . . He looked up, having reached one hundred thirty. The dial in the next room was being turned.

——To take the odor out of perspiration. Fifty-two per cent more effective . . .

He gave up counting the money, thumbing over the rest before he put it away, and went to the mirror with a necktie. There he studied his eyes anxiously for a moment, then noticed that his skin appeared pale beneath the surface of color, and the mustache hairs were brought into separate and ragged prominence.

——And so friends, to get your free . . . Christ sent me not to baptize but to . . . That wonderful he-man aroma that girls really go for . . .

Then a pneumatic pavement-breaker started in the street below, some ten yards from where it had been torn up, and repaired, the week before. He considered leaving the sling where it was, empty, on the table, for it was proving more of an impediment than he had anticipated. But fearful of meeting someone who had seen him in it, he hung it round his neck, and went back to the mirror to arrange it.

The pavement-breaker below stopped just long enough for him to hear through the wall,

——You have just heard the oria from Gluck's Orfeoadoiradeechay . . . and he stood in his open door looking at the closed door just to his right. He raised a hand to knock; but glancing back as his own door came closed saw the large manila envelope on the table, returned to pick it up, and took the smaller less familiar one with it.

The morning was exceptionally fine, the streets still comparatively unlittered by those tons of ingeniously

made, colorfully printed, scientifically designed wrappings of things themselves expendable which the natives drop behind them wherever they go, wary as those canny spirits down under cluttering the path to paradise.

As he walked toward the bus stop, he noticed that his watch was fourteen minutes slow. Turning the corner, he started to run; and the bus which had been waiting roared away as he arrived, bearing faces which looked with benign satisfaction on him catching breath in the exhaust fumes. He waited. A cab stopped right before him; and the next bus, unable to approach the curb, roared past. The taxi driver had looked at him questioningly, now disdainfully, and drove after the bus. The downtown bus he boarded a quarter-hour later was driven by a mustached man in a leather jacket, whose swashbuckling motions recalled the devil-may-care bomber pilots of the motion-picture screen. His cap, its wire frame removed, clung rakishly to the back of his oily head, as he guided his huge machine down the runway for another takeoff. Otto rocked back and forth, holding a strap, attempting to appear as vacant as the faces before him while he stared straight forward at

Take someone to church with you
next Sunday
You'll both be richer for it

The phantasies of the passengers were suspended, as they tore through clouds, shuddered at air-pockets, dove low over landmarks. Otto had finally turned round, and was staring at

1,500,000
Americans have
SYPHILIS or GONORRHEA
and don't know it

From their empty faces, none of the passengers resented the driver's incursion into their own phantastical domains: watching his weaving back, they appeared to respect his right to perform in allegory, to redeem, as best his numb imagination would permit him, the absurdity of reality.

•

Anselm said nothing; but smiled without recognition as they passed in Washington Square. Otto caught his breath and lowered his eyes quickly from the thin newly shaven face to the crimson-covered book under Anselm's arm, and went on to the doorway he had left only hours before. The stairs had the familiarity of a staircase descended in a dream. He had seen them last unlit, with other eyes than these of morning: now they interested him, for he could see himself climbing them, often and regularly, up and down. The door he approached was blank, anonymous. He knocked sharply: still it stood, no hint of what was resident behind it.

Knock knock knock. And more silence than before.

—Esme? he called.

—Who is it?

—Otto.

—*Who?*

—Otto.

—Oh. But it's so early.

The instant her voice stopped the door, flat, blank, regained its anonymity, and she was gone, nowhere.

—Otto?

—Hello?

—Will you come back in an hour?

—An *hour?*

—I have to take a bath.

—All right, he called at that resolute door, and went down the stairs.

A small hairy face turned to him from the lap of the blonde whom he sat beside at the drugstore counter. He ordered coffee, and started to tamper with the green ribbon on the dog's crown. The blonde straightened herself, looking the other way, the lhasa turned to stare at the Coca-Cola machine, and she bent forward to blow softly in its hair. On his left, the hairy-armed counterman rested his hands on the counter. —Yeh, I could write a book, he said to the girl sitting there —I bet it'd be banned in Boston, she said. She laughed. —Not oney in Boston, he said. They laughed. The blonde with the dog coughed, and moved down a seat.

Otto blew more cigarette smoke straight before him, and put the packet of Emu on the counter.

Over his third cup of coffee, staring at the two manila envelopes, he suddenly remembered the smaller one which contained a short story written by a navy veteran, handed him at the party the night before after he said he had a friend with a magazine. That friend was the girl who had caused him untold misery three years before, by not marrying him. Having got all of the poetically incumbent recriminations out of his system, Otto remembered her now with condescending fondness. He wrote on a slip of paper, "My dear Edna: I enclose a copy of a story written by a friend of mine, because having read it over I thought it might go well in your magazine. If you can't use it, will you please return it to me, since he has no permanent address . . . ," which note he signed and clipped to the papers in the envelope without even having to bother to take them out.

Stanley said nothing; but hung his head without recognition as they passed in Washington Square. When Otto returned to Esme's door, he was uncertain whether to kiss her uproariously, formally, or not at all. The restraint of not-at-all would be best rewarded, eventually, for then she would believe that she wanted him to kiss her, and arrange an unequivocal opportunity. He adjusted his sling.

She opened the door and smiled at him, as she probably smiled at the janitor when he appeared there. Otto said good morning, and came in. He took off his green muffler and tossed it to a chair, where it fell on the floor behind. —How do you feel this morning? he asked her.

—Like I feel in the morning, Esme answered, smiling, unhesitating as a good child.

—I mean after last night.

—Morning is always after last night.

—No, I mean the party, and . . .

—Oh. I was . . . what did you call it? Plas-tered?

—You were pretty far gone. Otto stared at her face: how she must have scrubbed it, making its hollows more cleanly cut, and then applied the dark lines of the eyebrows and no other make-up. He reached for her waist. She moved away.

—Did you bring me home? she asked.

—Did *I* bring you home? Esme . . . He stared at her eyes, wide in innocent curiosity.

—Is something the matter? she asked.

—Don't you remember?

—What?

—Don't you remember *any*thing?

—The party? she asked, happily. —It was a lovely party. And then poor Anselm was walking around like a dog and saying funny things, and then that poor young man hit that girl . . . She stopped.

—Herschel hit Hannah. And then?

—Yes, she said, —Herschel hit Hannah. She stopped.

—But Hannah, I mean Esme, is that all you remember?

—Yes, it was a lovely party, and you were standing there pretending to read that old book . . . She was reeking of honesty.

—Esme . . .

—And you kept fooling with that funny thing you wear around your neck . . .

—Esme.

—What, Ot-to?

—Don't you remember coming back here with me?

—Then you *did* bring me home. Why didn't you tell me, instead of teasing me like that?

Otto's forehead drew together; the sling quivered. What is a conquest which goes unacknowledged by the conquered? Here was where he had dropped his coat, there the ashtray he had overturned. —Esme . . .

knock knock knock

—But Esme . . .

—What is it? she said, on her way to the door, smiling.

— . . . ?!

—Chaby! Esme said, as though delighted with what came in at that door. —This, she said to Otto, —is Chaby Sin-is-ter-ra, as though she were making up the words syllable by syllable.

—How do you do, said Otto, not wishing to be told. Nor was he.

Chaby was small, sharply boned. His chin was small and sharp, so were his eyes, and his teeth: everything about him, in fact, but his hair, a shiny black pompadour which he wore like a hat and continually adjusted with an unclean pocket comb missing a tooth, which left a ridge on the otherwise smooth metaled surface. His mustache was a thin line of black hairs drawn from his nostrils along his upper lip. Otto ran a fingertip along the straggling fullness of his own, and sat down. —What a friggin night I had,

said Chaby. And his fingernails were black.

Otto lit an Emu and sat apparently absorbed with it, indicating that its complete enjoyment required all of his attention. He blew a ring of smoke one way, another another way, and another to the floor, where it sank and settled upon the carpet. The carpet ended halfway across the room in an indecision of color and design, its surface the flat and slightly ribbed lay of Aubusson because of the uneven texture of the floor. Its intricate design, beginning under the daybed where Otto sat, gave way to abstraction, threatening even worse where it came suddenly to an end, a sense of delirium in the hand of the painter who had painted it there, cross-stroking the warp and the weft with a two-inch brush. Chaby tapped a shiny foot, accompanying an evil rhythm which played endlessly within. Esme sat down on the arm of his chair. He got up and went to the radio, which he turned on with the casual thoughtlessness of long habit. The room was filled with the throbbing hesitations of a tango. In silent disdain, so watered down that it approached charity, Otto contrasted his own attire to the padded, pleated affair swaying across from him, until he realized that Chaby had taken off his coat and drawn Esme's waist closely and somewhat below his own. They were dancing. Otto followed the first intimacies of that tango with painful intentness. He adjusted his sling, as though to indicate that but for this injustice he might dance or do battle. Then he yawned; but the yawn did not succeed, simply left him sitting with his mouth open. With his unharnessed hand he reached for a book.

The first at his hand was new: *In Dreams I Kiss Your Hand Madam*, "An Anthology of Romantic Stories from Seven Centuries, by forty-six authors, gathered from thirty-one countries . . . Edited by Recktall Brown." The first page was blank, the second repeated the title, the fourth the title and the elucidations on the jacket, but Otto studied the third: "To / Esme / whose unerring judgment / is responsible for whatever value / this book may have."

The tango ended in a long unwilling surrender on the radio, and a similar expression in the middle of the floor. Esme recovered. Laughing, she pushed her hair up from perspiring temples. —Chaby teaches dancing, she said to Otto, explaining what had just happened, smiling like the Baganda woman smiles in Central Africa, lain in the thick grass with a plantain flower between her legs, flower dislodged by her husband's rearing member before he takes her to dance in the gardens of friends, to encourage the plantain trees that grow in their gardens.

—Really, Esme said, —it must be illegal to dance like that. Her unruffled partner had opened his shirt to the waist, showing a silver medal swung on a chain from his neck.

—It should be, Otto muttered.

—What Otto? She sat beside him now, and said over his shoulder, —Isn't that awful? when she saw what he was reading.

—Who's Recktall Brown? he asked back.

—He did that because he wanted to go to bed with me, she said cheerfully.

—Who is he?

—A terrible fat man who does things like that.

—How can he give you credit for the merit in a Maupassant story? he said, thumbing the pages to *Bed Number* 29, laying the fault on her.

—Because he just does, she explained. —He's going to publish my poems.

—Same reason?

—Yes. Just because he wants to go to bed with me. Isn't that funny? Isn't that disgusting? she said laughing.

—Yes it is, Otto agreed soberly.

—What's that funny smell? said Chaby. —I always smell it up here.

—What smell? Esme asked.

—Don't you smell nothing? Some funny smell, like oily flowers.

—I noticed it, Otto said to Esme. —It's lavender, he explained, condescending to glance across the room where Chaby sniffed, audibly, formed his lips in a silent obscenity which indicated that he understood, and lit an extra-length cigarette. He had not even looked over at Otto.

—Is it perfume? or is it from your clothes? Otto asked her. —Sachet, I mean. She was looking out the window absently. She turned quickly and said, —Oh, from my clothes I guess. I guess it's from my clothes.

—I saw Anselm in the park, Otto said.

—What did he say, she asked.

—He didn't say anything. I just saw him. He'd shaved, anyhow.

—I know, Esme said, smiling again, —and he cut himself three times because he said the razor blade was dull.

—What do you mean?

—Because I didn't have any new razor blades, and he had to use the same one I shaved my legs with.

—You mean he shaved here?

—Yes. Anselm came in and shaved.

—But . . .

—What is a succubus? Esme asked. —Chaby, do you know what a *suc*-cubus is?

—It sounds like somebody that sucks, said Chaby.

—You're *ter*rible, Esme said, laughing again and as if about to throw a book at him.

—What do you want to know for anyhow?

—Because Anselm says he called me one, and that he's sorry, he didn't mean to call me that, but I still *am* one.

—You're the best one I know, said Chaby, grinning. Esme got up, went over and shook him by the shoulders. —I hate you, you're being so bad this morning, she said, laughing, and her face flushed. —Isn't he being *bad*, Otto?

—Have you had breakfast, Esme? Otto asked her.

—No, have you, she asked, turning, —Mister Sin-is-ter-ra? still holding him by the shoulder with sisterly fondness, and the tone of two who shared all of one another's secrets.

They went down the stairs, all three. Otto (brandishing his sling) forgot his green scarf, left behind on the floor.

Seated at a counter, Chaby ate hungrily, Esme with little attention to what she was eating or how, Otto already floating nauseously on coffee smoldered silently over another cup. At one point he leaned over to Esme who sat between them, and said, —Esme, I want to talk to you about . . . well, alone.

—What is it? she asked, sitting back, offering the busy immediacy of Chaby. —Tell me. She was delighted by confidences, wanted to share them with everyone. Otto grimaced, lit another cigarette. —But you already have one, she said, pointing to the cigarette smoking in his saucer.

—Hullo, Stanley said in a dull voice behind them.

—Stanley! said Esme turning; and she had that tone of having waited for him for weeks.

—You seem happy, said Stanley, accusingly.

—Oh Stanley! I *am*. Has something else happened?

Stanley held out a paper. It was a letter, from an eye bank. Esme read it. —It's scandal-ous, Stanley, she said. She laughed. —Do they want you to deposit your eyes?

—I don't really understand *what* they want, Stanley said. —I think it's that if I die, they want my eyes sent to them immediately. There's a little coupon at the bottom you fill out.

—Well that's all right, isn't it? said Esme. —Then will they come and get your eye while it's still warm?

—Don't talk like that, Esme, it's . . .

—Why not?

—It's frightening, the thought of these complete strangers coming to get my *eyes* . . .

—But you won't *need* them . . .

—But I will. I might . . .

Otto leaned toward Esme. —Look, will you be home this afternoon? he said. —Alone? he added, as Chaby reached for a toothpick.

—Unless someone comes.

—Who?

—I don't know. People.

—They have bone banks too, Stanley said.

—I'll see you this afternoon, Otto said. —Alone. He took out a five-dollar bill, and carefully tore a corner off of it. Chaby watched, frowning. —Whatayadoin? he said.

Otto raised an eyebrow, took a step away, and paid for their breakfasts. —If she'd said I only gave her a dollar, I'd tell her to go through her money there until she found a five with this corner missing, he said, dropping the shred of evidence under the counter, and pocketing his change. Stanley looked troubled.

—Esme, Otto said, —I . . .

—In Russia I read that they even graft on . . . well, you know . . . onto soldiers who get wounded there, . . .

—Stanley!

—Esme . . . Otto rested a delicate hand on the counter for a moment more. Chaby was showing Esme a picture from his wallet, a tattered thing which at a glimpse showed only limbs indecently intertwined. Otto looked, as casually as he could; and as casually, the thing was turned from his gaze. Stanley looked away. —I don't want to see it, he said. Esme was laughing. Otto turned and left like an angry steam engine.

As he reached the door Esme called, —Goodbye, Otto . . . but he did not stop. Chaby did not even look

around. —They spoiled a good whore when they hung a pair of nuts on him, he said. —Maybe they could help him out in Russia . . .

—Chaby Sin-is-ter-ra! Stanley, isn't he being *bad?* She was laughing.

•

Meanwhile, the winter sky had darkened. The blazing eye of the sun was gone, and the sky lowered upon the city with the weight of a featureless being smothering it against the earth. The peaks of its buildings reared against the sky seemed to hold that portentous weight at bay, in the great conspiracy of mother and son, the earth and the city, against the father threatening overhead; for it was Cronus the mother conspired with, to free the children suffocated between the intimately united bodies of their parents, where they could not see light.

Years had passed over the Titanic capital, as it grew to its full stature, and over the continent spread at its feet where a year's relief from love cost eighty-five million dollars in headache remedies; and for faith: 15,670,944,200 aspirin tablets, carried like phylacteries. The state, this Titan's namesake, breathed the smoke of forty billion cigarettes that year. Descending into the lungs of this reinforced concrete incarnation, the smoke circulated through steel lobules cushioned in pleural cavities of granite (though unlike the lungs of a good giant no concave inner surface was necessary for the heart), and from there it was exhaled through chromium-cartileged larynges to diffuse into the spew of grime with which the ungrateful child affronted his father above. Fly-ash, cinders and sand, tar, soot, and sulfuric acid: six tons a day settled on this neighborhood where Otto stepped forth, his faculties so highly civilized that he seemed not to notice the billions of particles swirling round him, seemed not to notice the flashing of lights, the clangor of steel in conflict, the shouts, and the words spoken, timorous, temerarious, eructations of slate-colored lungs, seemed to acknowledge nothing but his own purpose, which led him east.

The sky refused the encounter it threatened. The storm refused to break; but the dark being continued in menacing movement above, content to unnerve its arrogant antagonist, to inspire foreboding, but declining the skirmish which would witness the spilling of its own blood in streaks of lightning. The inhabitants moved agitated, apprehensive, intent on immediacies. For the rest of the morning, Otto behaved impatiently in the streets, ruthlessly in the subway, merciless in revolving doors. Left arm tense, and occasionally combative in the sling, his right arm pressed against the presence of his wallet, he moved between immediate destinations, every address a destination until it was reached, when it offered simply a pause where the next step could be planned, time unbroken by leisure but instead brief spasmodic stretches of emptiness between activities, minutes parceled together by cigarettes. Leaving a glass of beer on the bar, Otto went back to the telephone booth. He dialed Max's number. It was busy. He sat staring through the dirty glass panel, where someone had drawn the letters of an obscene syllable on the glass with a diamond. He dialed again; got only brrk, brrk, brrk. He dialed two other numbers, hoping to find someone free for lunch. No one was. He dialed Max again: brrk, brrk, brrk. Then he thought of a number which came to him almost out of habit, he had dialed it automatically that many times. What would he say? And if a man answered? But by this time he was unsettled enough to call that number without giving himself time to think of consequence. He could ask Esther to meet him now, for lunch. He dialed. The telephone at the other end was picked up. He said, —Hello? There was silence. —Hello? Hello? Silence. —Hello? Is Esther there? —No, said a voice in weak decision, as though relieved. —Hello. Who is this? —Rose. —Rose? Rose, are you the maid? Hello? —Rose, said the voice. —Hello? Then their humming silent contact was dead. Otto shook the hook up and down. —Hello, hello, say . . . The bartender was looking in at him. He hung up. He sat for another moment, staring at the word written on the glass. Then he dialed Max. He could hear the brrr which indicated that Max's telephone was ringing. There was no answer. He hung up. He dialed again, another number, this time found Maude Munk at home sounding as though she did not want to talk, not for a minute stopping. —Did you get it, Maude? —Get what? —I mean did you get to the adoption center? —Oh no, silly, we were both so hung over . . . I don't know which one of us really wants it anyhow . . . We decided it wasn't such a good idea; for today anyhow . . . What about your party, I hear it was quite hideous . . . —Say, do you know someone at Esther's house named Rose? She answered the phone . . . —Oh Rose, Rose, of course, silly, everyone knows about Rose . . . look would you mind calling me later, I've got to do something now . . . —But who's Rose? —Around five? Could you call around five . . . ?

Otto returned to the bar. He remembered that his watch was fourteen minutes slow. He started to pull out the stem to reset it, looked up at the clock over the bar. That clock told the same time his watch did. —Is that the right time? he asked the bartender. —Yuh. Maybe it's a little fast. Another beer? Otto started to decline, then noticed the mirror behind the bar, and watched himself accept.

—It's funny, said a man beside him. Otto turned, to see a striped tie. Unsure what club it represented, he said, —What?

—This sunlight. I was just wondering where this sunlight could be coming from, from the west. Then I noticed it's a reflection from that window across the street.

—Yes, so it is.

—Can I buy you a beer? Let's have two beers here, he called to the bartender.

—I'm always surprised to see sunlight anywhere in New York, Otto said.

—Have you ever crossed on the ferry? Have you ever seen the sun on the Statue of Liberty at seven o'clock in the morning? Here's your beer. Have you?

—Matter of fact, said Otto, resting his helpless arm on the bar, —I passed it on a ship just yesterday morning. Coming in from Central America.

—Central America, have you been down there?

—I just got back.

—You know, when I saw you, or when I heard you talk first, I thought you had some sort of accent. Not a foreign accent, more of a what you might call cosmopolitan.

—Well, I . . .

—Can you speak Spanish?

—Oh yes. Certainly, I picked it up down there.

—You did?

—It's not difficult. When you really live with the people.

—Not if you have a talent for languages. You must have one.

—Well, a bit perhaps. I . . .

—Say, do you know Central America very well?

—Fairly well, I . . .

—Peru and northern Bolivia, have you ever been there?

—I've never spent much time down that far.

—Have you ever done any writing?

—Yes, as a matter of fact that's the sort of work I do.

—Ever done motion picture work?

—Never directly, I . . .

—Here, will you take my card, and get in touch with me?

Otto took the card. It said SUN STYLE FILMS in large letters, and R. L. Jones in one corner. —I'm very glad to know you, Otto said, shaking hands. —My name is Otto . . .

—Just write it down here, the man said. Otto wrote.

—When I saw you first, or rather when I heard you talk. Another beer?

—Let me get it, Otto said, reaching in for his wallet. The man paid from his change on the bar.

—What were you doing down there? In South America?

—Writing. But those revolutions . . .

—You were covering a revolution?

Otto thrust his sling forward. —Things got pretty hot down there, he said.

—Is that where . . . something happened to your arm?

—Yes, I . . .

—I didn't want to ask you. You know, I thought it might hurt your feelings, I mean some people are sensitive about things like that.

—Oh, I don't mind talking about it. As a matter of fact, I . . .

—What time is it? said the man looking at his wrist watch. —Is that clock right? I've got to get going. He pulled his hat down in front.

—Haven't you got time for another beer? It's my turn . . .

—I've got to get to the office. Will you call me there?

—Yes, certainly, I'll be delighted . . .

—Don't forget, now. We may be able to work something out.

They shook hands. The man went out. Otto nodded to the bartender. —Could you give me a whisky and soda? he said, and opened his large manila envelope, to study a few pages of his play with minute appreciation. The bartender put a whisky sour down before him. —But I . . .

—Sixty cents, the bartender said. Otto paid.

The trip to MacDougal Street involved two crowded buses and a seething subway. Otto, in good spirits, planned to spend some time with Max, discussing the finer points of his play. Max was not at home. Otto tried to wedge the manuscript into the mailbox, but it was getting badly bent. Then the thought of it getting lost, or stolen (and produced with great acclaim under someone else's name) drove him to summon the janitor. After establishing the thing's value in that dull head he gave it over for delivery, slightly weakened

at its loss.

Walking west, he stopped in an Italian grocery to buy cigarettes, was disregarded, tapped his foot loudly, and then pocketed a package from the counter and left.

Hannah passed without a word. She was talking with a tall Negro. Otto looked the other way.

Esme was alone. She had just stopped Chaby in her doorway, telling him it was cold, that he must wear a coat, warming his neck with her arms for a moment and then tying round it a green scarf she found on the floor behind the chair. He was gone when Otto appeared.

Otto and Esme sat quietly for a few minutes, for Esme a content quiet demanding nothing, for him a perilous one, the minutes building up upon themselves like a precarious house of cards waiting to be shattered. She walked about the room singing a frail song, whose words found nothing to bind them together but the free sale of her voice, separated, and were lost. She smiled at him, but shy, when she looked up and saw him watching her. Picking up papers, or hanging a skirt, or simply following the fragments of her song about the room, Esme seemed to show how easy it was being happily alive, to be beautiful, not to question.

Otto sat impatient. Finally he said, —I may have to go to South America.

—Really Otto? she said, charmed.

—Bolivia and northern Peru.

—That would be very nice, she said. —What a silly place to go, Otto.

—I don't see anything so silly about it.

—You must do what *you* want to do.

—It's not as silly as staying in New York. Spending time with people like Chaby. And half-wits like Anselm. And Stanley.

—They are very beautiful people, Esme said.

—Chaby? Beautiful?

—Yes, Otto, she said gently.

—He's a kind of a . . . there's something really low, really disgusting . . .

—He's very unhappy.

—That's his own damned business.

—Please don't swear at me, Otto.

—I wasn't swearing at you, Esme. I'm sorry, I didn't mean . . .

—He was hurt in the war, and that's where he got the bad habit.

—What bad habit?

—Of taking drugs, she said, sober and simple, staring at the floor where the rug ended.

—He's a drug addict? I might have known it.

—It wasn't his fault. They gave him morphine in the war when he was hurt, and that's the way he learned about it.

—Well, enough people came out of the war without being dope fiends.

—Chaby didn't, she said. She looked up, to watch Otto find an ant on the back of his hand, and crush it and roll it into a bit of lifeless dirt with his thumb. Then he said, —Is this one of your poems?

—Yes, she answered, seeing he had picked it up from the bookcase.

—Do you publish them?

—Sometimes. If I like.

He read it.

To a Child, beheld in summer raiment

Little girl, one lesser garment
Will suffice to clothe your crotch,
Hide that undiscovered cavern
Where old Time will wind his watch.

—Where did you get a word like crotch? Otto asked, his voice mocking, shocked (for he was shocked, and this dissembling the only way he knew to evade it).

—I got it.

—But don't you think it's sort of . . . vulgar? I mean, why crotch?

—It rhymes with watch, Esme explained. —It's a poem. Then, in the tone of a child conspiring, she said, —I wrote a poem for Recktall Brown. It's about him and me. Would you like to read it?

Otto, ready to sulk again, took it from her. —What does *Effluvium* mean?

—That's the title.

—Yes, I see. But what does it mean?

—Why should it mean anything? It's the title.

He read it through, stared at it, and finally managed to say, —I didn't know you knew words like perspicacious.

—It's just a word, Esme said.

—It's a very nice poem.

—It isn't nice at all.

—I'm afraid I don't understand it.

—Why should you understand it?

—But what does it mean?

—What does it *mean*. It just *is*.

One moment he thought she was laughing at him for finding no meaning; the next, that she took him a fool for looking for one. —It sounds hermaphroditic, he said, defensively.

—Her-maph-ro-dit-ic? What is that?

—Someone with the equipment of both sexes.

—Like a succubus?

—Queer. Queerer.

—Queerer than *queer?*

Even now, it was almost dark; and the daybed where he sat stood mounted on the surface of the painted rug, and she outside it, looking on as one looks at an odalisque. Alone in the chair she thought of this, and started to shiver. —What's the matter? he said, and started to get up.

—Don't, don't, she said quickly as though frightened. —Stay there, please. Please.

—But what's the matter?

—I just get cold sometimes, all of a sudden my feet get very cold.

—Esme, about last night . . .

—What did you want to see me about, alone? she asked, seemed to mock him.

—Well, about last night, I wanted to clear up . . .

She sat still, far out of his reach, one leg folded under her. She had lit a cigarette, and its smoke rose between them. He had no wish to clear up the events of the night before: only to repeat it, in the pall of half-light, but while there was still light, light, so he could see. He got up and came to her chair.

—Please sit down, please, where you were, she said, hiding her face. —If we're going to talk I have to be able to see you. The cigarette burned, a protective brand between them. He turned, silent, and looked around, on the chest, on the table. There he picked up a paper, covered with writing in her large open hand. He read, "Baby and I / Were baked in a pie / The gravy was wonderful hot. / We had nothing to pay / To the baker that day / And so we crept out of the pot." —Is this more of your poetry?

—Oh no, Otto. That's a nursery rhyme I used to know.

—What did you write it here for?

—Sometimes I just write things I know, things I remember, because I like to write lovely things.

—I don't see what's so lovely about being baked in a pie.

—Please sit down, she said. But when she put her cigarette out, he crushed his own quickly and reached her before she had time to do more than throw her elbow up before her eyes. He took her shoulders and turned them back until her face fell open to him. Her eyes were larger than he thought they could be, her lips quivering with fear, he kissed her crushing her down with his whole weight. Then like the pickpocket who calls attention to one's arm by bumping it, while his hand slips in to the billfold, Otto distracted the dress covering her breasts with one hand, while his other sought delicately, lower, until it came to uneasy rest in warmth and darkness.

—But your arm? she whispered.

—What arm? She pointed to that sling, come undone. —It's all right, he said, flushing. —It's all right. Esme's thin face had the look of a small terrified animal never assailed, never before held and forced, and now caught in a snare; but a face that asked no pity, no stopping now, only assault, until every terror was consummated. Then she hid her face. —Otto, that thing scratches.

—What thing?

—This, she said, pointing at his mustache, exposing herself, and they went down in the chair again. Something snapped. Esme reached to her shoulder, embarrassed at this interruption of reality. Then, blithe as a little girl who has a secret game, or hiding place, which she shows to only one (or as candidly, one at a time) she led him back to the daybed.

—Esther . . . Otto whispered, and buried himself more deeply on her, forced his head down over her shoulder, pressing the lips that lied into her neck. —*Esme* . . .

As in Chinese fencing, whose contractual positions eliminate the fetters of time, time passed.

—It's a song from *Tosca*, she said, waking in the dark.

—What is?

—The song you wanted to know the name of.

—Song? Then you were dreaming.

—Then I was, she said. —Was it a dream? He felt her feet, very cold, against him. And he held her close to him, smiling. —I dreamt . . . he said, —Now don't you smell it?

—What?

—Lavender. Don't you smell the lavender? A moment of silence, and she said, —What did you dream?

—I dreamt . . . I had a terrible dream. I was at a film with a woman I knew very well, and I was pretending to be blind, with my eyeballs looking way up under the lids. Then I really was blind, and I was walking with a stick with a retracting point. There was cloth over my eyeballs that scratched and hurt, but I didn't seem to be upset. And the woman with me threatened me if I tried to escape her. Then another woman came along, she was very full-breasted, in a tight sort of bodice. We went to the park, and there was someone else there. Who was it? I can't think who it was. But the woman with me led me down a long street, and we came to a movie palace. Then I realized I'd made myself blind. And then the stick split down the middle, and I was there alone. The woman had left me alone. It was terrible.

—I dreamt about someone.

—Who?

—Someone you don't know, she said. Then she said to herself, —He was in a mirror, caught there.

—Now I remember who it was I saw in the park, Otto said.

—Who?

—Someone I used to know, someone you don't know, he said, and saw that pale thin man standing in the park vividly silent, watching him without recognition as he approached, blind, with the stick and its retracting point. —A friend, I used to . . . it's funny, that I miss him.

—But why aren't you missing me! she cried out in a suffocated voice. —I'm here . . . In the dark he felt her shudder, and traced her brow with his finger.

Esme put her head under his chin. He held her, smiling. And in the darkness, he suddenly realized that she could not see his smile, and he relaxed his face, feeling what a strain the smile had been.

She straightened her clothes, getting up, and turned on a light. —Stop *looking* at me, she said.

—You have a lovely body, he said.

—That isn't true.

—It is, it's so slim, almost like a boy's body. Do you ever model?

—Sometimes I do, Esme admitted.

—For fashion magazines? She hesitated, and turned away, looking for a belt. —Yes, that's it, she said, and Otto pursued her no further, busy as he was tying up his bandage which had come loose, exposing a healthy, though pallid, length of forearm. —I like my body because it's just easy to wash, Esme said, and went out, to the communal bathroom.

His hair was rumpled; looking for a mirror, all he found was a medicine chest, the mirror's place filled by a painting of dark abstraction.

—Do you like the painting? she said, coming in behind him.

—Don't you have a mirror?

—Don't you see? There aren't any, she said.

—But why not?

—Mirrors dominate the people. They tell your face how to grow.

—Now Esme, really. Mirrors are made to look in.

—Made to look in? she said. —They are evil, she said, thinking of her own dream now. —To be trapped in one, and they are evil. If you knew what they know. There are evil mirrors where he works, and they work with him, because they are mirrors with terrible memories, and they know, they *know*, and they tell him these terrible things and then they trap him . . . She was speaking with hysteric speed.

—Esme, he said, holding her. —Now relax Esme, and she reached her arms around him, pulling him down to her as though never to let go.

—Is there a mirror in the bathroom? he asked as he let her go.

—Yes, she whispered.

He tried to take her round the waist again, but she twisted away. —Let me go. I have to hurry, she said.

—Why?

—I have to meet somebody.

—Who?

—Somebody you don't know, she said, suddenly recovered, and as though playing his game with him like a child.

In the communal bathroom, he felt for his wallet in his pocket, then caught his face's image in the mirror: crooked, out of proportion, it looked a stranger to him, because her face in this hour past, searching in it so deeply that his own face was forgotten, all faces other than hers forgotten, her face had become the very image, the definition of a face.

He pulled at the roll of paper on the wall, to wipe away a smudge on his cheek, and that paper rolled out to him with a great creaking, and one small brave passenger, a cockroach, riding like Palinurus piloting the ship of Aeneas, where he went to sleep at the helm and fell overboard, to be murdered by natives ashore.

VII

> And as Jesus Christ, of the house of David, took upon himself human nature in order to free and to redeem mankind who were in the bonds of sin because of Adam's disobedience, so also, in our art, the thing that is unjustly defiled by the one will be absolved, cleansed and delivered from that foulness by another that is contrary to it.
>
> —Raymond Lully, *Codicillus*

That afternoon, Fuller sat on a bench, his back turned to Central Park in December. Women scuttled past him the bulks of furs, bearing gold and precious ornaments which he watched without envy. He'd only to smile, to yawn, or frankly raise his upper lip and he could show more gold than any of them could wear, even in their most offensive aspirations to taste: jewels by the pound-weight, rings so heavy that they looked like weapons. The cold wind made continuous suggestion to his hat, a narrow-brimmed, imperially high-crowned straw, to join the fuzzy commotion that passed. The hat would have none of it. It was as firm on his head as his right hand on the umbrella, or his left hand holding the leash on the black poodle.

His face remained peacefully arranged until that leash tightened, and then the lines in Fuller's forehead and around his mouth tightened too. When they walked, the leash was taut like a bar holding them apart, instead of a binding tie. The black faces viewed one another with mistrust, but a weary mistrust which had by now settled down to resigned loathing. Though now as Fuller looked down at the dog, there was an element of glee in his expression of disgust. It was cold; and though Fuller was cold, the dog was shivering. Fuller too was inclined to shiver, but refused to give the dog that satisfaction. He sat quite tense, restraining himself, but staring directly at the dog, who could not stop shivering. But the disgust in Fuller's face was evident. He wanted to visit a dear friend, whose office was a bare six blocks off, and sat now considering whether he could get there and back to Mr. Brown's before the cocktail hour. Mr. Brown had gone to the doctor. Sometimes he was late, returning from the doctor. Fuller knew that *he* would be punished if *he* were late. On the other hand, he knew that Mr. Brown would hear about the visit, late or not. That was why Fuller looked at the poodle with troubled eyes now, for he was certain that this poodle and their master communicated, that if he went to see his friend, the poodle would tell on him.

Then he smiled. Today must be different, and he tried to evade the habit of fear. He had his ticket, and tomorrow he would be gone. Mr. Brown would shout for him, the poodle would bark, but he would be far away. This ticket which he carried deeply hidden was the most expensive he had ever got. Its destination must be much nearer home than any of the others.

He looked down to see that the poodle was watching him with that look which seemed to enter his mind and rummage in his memory. Was it learning about the ticket? Fuller stood, pulling the poodle to its feet roughly as it lunged toward a bird alighted near. He set off defiantly toward First Avenue, the witness a taut four feet away.

We would believe that Fuller had had a childhood only in helpless empiricism, because we all have. But it was as unreal to him by now as to anyone looking at his face, where time had long since stopped experimenting. That childhood was like a book read, misplaced, forgotten, to be recalled when one sees another copy, the cheap edition in a railway station newsstand, which is bought, thumbed through, and like as not left on the train when the station is called. The slow train of Fuller's life had made one express dash, when Recktall Brown had found him while on a Caribbean cruise, bought him from himself with something he had prized above life, not having it, this set of gold teeth, and a promise of magic unfulfilled: he was delivered at what seemed to be the last stop, Mr. Brown, Mr. Brown's dog, and Mr. Brown's apartment. That promise of magic, which had appealed so to youth, never materialized, though Fuller did not doubt but what Mr. Brown could make his skin white if he wanted to, a possibility which, grown older, he regarded

now more as threat than redemption, and did not speak of it.

The dog hated his singing. Today, in easily understood levity (the ticket), he sang:

> —Littel girl, please leave my bachelor room.
> Littel girl, littel girl please leave my bachelor room,
> You are so brazen, you are so free,
> You must proteck your mo-ral-i-ty:
> Littel girl, please leave my bachelor room,

as they walked toward Third Avenue, and the elevated train which the dog hated too. Fuller knew this, and always waited at the corner until a train was in sight, pretending to the dog that he was looking into a cigar-store window there.

—Hello mahn, how you goin? Fuller greeted his friend after the pleasant walk (there had been two trains, from opposite directions, passing above them in a roar).

The little mortician shook hands with him. —We had a big one, a . . . I mean we had a big one today, a funeral. Why I have more, there, do you see them all, all those at the end, those flowers, I have more flowers for you than you'll be able to carry, Fuller. He motioned at the tall erectly wired bank of lilies, browning a bit at the edges. Fuller looked distressed.

—I cannot go off with them, mahn.

—But why? I mean, why not?

—It's that Mister Brown, mahn, sayin to me Fuller don't you bring any more of your God-damned corpse bouquets in at this house.

—But in your own room, I mean even in your own room you can't have them?

—No mahn, and he find out some way too if I try. Like the birds, I believe he even know about the birds. Somebody inform on me, I know, he added, looking at the poodle.

—What birds?

—I tell you about that another time, when we not under surveillance. But the gloves? You reserved another selection of gloves for me?

—Yes, I mean I have eight pairs. Eight of them, I mean sixteen. Sixteen gloves, eight pall-bearers I mean. He fetched the gloves, and Fuller looked them over carefully.

—These are very choice, Fuller said holding up one pair. —Very clean and immaculate. I suppose he don't carry the coffin, just walk alongside to be respectable.

—But doesn't he mind the gloves? I mean Mister Brown, he doesn't mind you wearing these gloves that were used to carry the, a . . . well I mean there's no harm in it but some people are peculiar, I mean to serve things wearing these?

—He think I purchase them, said Fuller. —That is how I managin to finance my trip mahn. The money I save.

—Your trip?

—Yes, I fear this is sayin farewell to you. Tomorrow I will be a distance away, goin to my home.

—To the Barbados?

—I plan departin tomorrow in the morning.

—But Fuller, I mean not like the other times, I mean you've started out other times . . .

—I plan departin in the morning, Fuller repeated firmly, speaking to the dog. He put the gloves under his coat. —You still have your Armenium?

—Oh yes, I mean always, he'll always be here.

—It remain a great pity his family cannot have him back, down in the Armenium where they reside, put him in the nice groung of his homeland where he belong to be.

—Seven years. He's been there, I mean, here, seven years. He was here when I bought this store, I mean the business. I write letters to his family, but they can't send money out of Armenia to pay the rent, I mean to pay his . . . my keeping him here like this. I'm not even sure there is such a country as Armenia any more.

—I wish some day I could aid him to return to his homeland, Fuller said, as he put out his hand. —Goodbye, he said. —I leavin you to God to watch over and proteck you. And the Armenium.

—Goodbye Fuller, come around Thursday night if you can, there's going to be a big . . . I mean . . . The little man had looked forward to the greatest day in his career when Fuller's master was given over to him for the last shave and costuming, and had no doubt Fuller would see that he got the commission. It had never been discussed between them. Nevertheless it was understood. Fuller had rehearsed the scene in his own impatient imagination many times. —Goodbye Fuller, he said, disappointment in his voice. —Send me a picture postcard, Fuller.

The black companions returned to hear their master's voice echoing the words God damn it down the halls. Fuller was greeted with the phrase when they appeared in the doorway.

—God damn it, Fuller. Do you know what time it is? The poodle ran up to his side, where it stood muzzling his hand. —You're late. Where the hell have you been? That God damn undertaker's? Fuller looked at the poodle, who was betraying him even as he stood there.

—I stop to say somebody hello, sar, he admitted.

—Bring in the glasses, Fuller. Then go to bed.

—But Mister Brown I don't mean to . . .

—Bring in the glasses, Fuller.

A few minutes later, Fuller entered, bearing the tray in white-gloved hands, with three glasses, two clean linen towels, and a bucket of ice. He put them on the bar across the room, behind Recktall Brown and Basil Valentine who were sitting before the fireplace. He stood fussing at the bar. Then Recktall Brown realized that he was still in the room, waiting like a hopeful shadow to be assigned some attachment in the light.

—Before you go to bed you'd better give me that ticket, Fuller.

—Ticket, Mister Brown?

—Give me that ticket you bought for Utica New York.

—Ticket please . . . Mister Brown?

—God damn it Fuller, give me that ticket you bought this morning for Utica.

—But Mister Brown I don't mean to . . . Fuller was shaking.

—Fuller!

Fuller reached down into an inside pocket, and drew the ticket out slowly, handed it over. —Now go to bed. And no lights. Remember, no lights.

Fuller looked, at him and then at the poodle, and turned to trudge up the stairs.

—Crazy old nigger's scared of the dark, Recktall Brown said. —He says he's "visited by the most terrible creatures in the whole of history," he laughed, tearing up the ticket to Utica. He threw the bits into the fireplace. —He thinks anywhere must be on the way to Barbados.

—Your occult powers are rather impressive.

—Occult? Recktall Brown grunted the word, and paused his cigar in the air between them abruptly so that its ash fell to the Aubusson carpet like a gray bird-dropping. He looked through his thick lenses and through the smoke: there were moments when Basil Valentine looked sixteen, days when he looked sixty. In profile, his face was strong and flexible; but, when he turned full face as he did now, the narrowness of his chin seemed to sap the face of that strength so impressive an instant before. Temples faintly graying, distinguished enough to be artificial (though the time was gone when anyone might have said premature, and gone the time when it was necessary to dye them so, instead now to tint them with black occasionally), he looked like an old person who looks very young, hair-ends slightly too long, he wore a perfectly fitted gray pinstripe suit, soft powder-blue Oxford-cloth shirt, and a slender black tie whose pattern, woven in the silk, was barely discernible. He raised a gold cigarette case in long fingers. Gold glittered at his cuff.

—How did you know, that he had a ticket for Utica?

—This morning he asks me very carefully, Mr. Brown, do they use United States of America money in a place called Utica? Recktall Brown laughed, and Basil Valentine smiled, took a cigarette from the case, and laid the case on the low table before him. There was a long inscription, worn nearly smooth, on the surface of the gold, and he ran a fingertip over it before leaving the case on the glass-covered painting, on the slender column separating the tableaux *Avaritia* and *Invidia*. He raised his eyes slightly when he lit his cigarette, to the table's center, and blew a stream of smoke toward the underclothed Figure there with its maimed hand upraised. —You keep it too warm in here, he said finally.

—I like it this way.

—Not for you, not for you. I wasn't thinking of you. The paintings, the furniture. This steam heat will warp everything you have.

—Not before I sell them. And what the hell? Whoever buys them puts them up in steam-heated places. Recktall Brown ground an Aubusson rose under heel, turning to cross the room toward the bar. It was a small hexagonal pulpit, furnished with bottles. The carved oak leaves, and the well-pinioned figure of Christ on its face (which gave him occasion to remark, —He was innocent, and they nailed him) were stained with tricklings of gin. —Gin?

—I'd prefer whisky. Basil Valentine did not look up from the magazine he'd drawn toward him and opened again on the table. He studied the reproduction on the two-page spread of the centerfold, and his lips moved. Then he pushed the open *Collectors Quarterly* away and stood abruptly, to demand: —Is he always this late? accepting the glass from the heavy hand mounting the two diamonds.

—Nervous? Brown laughed, a sound which stopped in his throat, and sank back in a chair. —With

somebody like him you can't expect . . .

—You've been quite successful in your efforts to keep me from meeting him, Basil Valentine interrupted. —One might think . . .

—Just watch your step with him, Recktall Brown muttered from the chair he filled, and Valentine, muttering something himself, turned his back and flung his cigarette into the fireplace, and stood looking at the carved letters beneath the mantel.

The chimney piece was a massive Elizabethan affair, ponderous like the rest of the furniture, the chairs standing out from the carpeting which stretched from wall to wall, and the two refectory tables, giving the place the look of an exclusive gentlemen's club; but only at first glance: for Recktall Brown, owner and host, was implicit everywhere. More than one guest had been provoked to make obvious remarks on the generic likeness between the head of the wart hog, mounted high on one wall, and the portrait of the host hung across the room. And even though he had been rallied often enough over that portrait (when he had been drinking), Recktall Brown would not remove it. Instead he could pause and look at it with fond veneration. They looked, too, over his shoulder, but none could find the youth he reverenced there. Instead they saw an unformed likeness of the face turned from them, ears protruding but erect, only the hands too similar. There were other paintings, especially the Patinir on the other side of the doorway, in whose neighborhood this portrait would at best have been an intrusive presence; but there was something in the thing itself which made it absurd, though it took a moment to realize what had happened. It had been painted from a photograph (the sitter too busy to sit more than that instant of the camera's eye) in which his hands, found in the foreground by the undiscriminating lens, were marvelously enlarged. The portrait painter, directed to copy that photograph faithfully and neither talented, nor paid enough, to do otherwise, had with attentive care copied the hands as they were in the picture. And pausing, passing it hundreds of times in the years since, often catching up one hand in the other before him, his hands came to resemble these in the portrait, filling out large and heavy, so apparently flaccid that they had been referred to once, and repeated by other voices in other rooms, as prehensile udders. And the diamond ring? It appeared; though none but himself knew that its double gleam had been added long after the paint of the portrait was dry.

Year after year, the painting and the wart hog hung, avoiding each other's eyes across the waves of pestilential heat that always filled that room.

—Damn her! Valentine brought out, turning suddenly. —That dog, lying there, licking her . . . self, can't you discourage these disgusting little attentions in public? He stood looking impatiently at the black shape on the roses, as though expecting some sharp defense from her owner, and when there was none, brought his eyes for a moment to the cloud of smoke rising shapeless from the chair, and the dark amorphous pools behind the thick lenses: Recktall Brown just looked at him, and he brought his narrow black-shod feet together and sat down. A moment later he was leaning forward again, studying the reproduction in *Collectors Quarterly*, his hands drawn up under his chin, and he appeared to kiss the gold seal ring he wore on a little finger.

—What time is it? Brown asked abruptly.

—After four, Basil Valentine murmured, then looked up to repeat sharply, —after four. He's probably drunk somewhere.

—He doesn't do that kind of thing, going out on a drunk and getting into trouble, I already told you, he's . . .

—Yes, you've told me, you've told me what a . . . aren't you fortunate! Most artists have a great lunk of a man they trail around with them, they never know what to do with him, he gets drunk, gets into trouble with the law, women, money . . . yes. Aren't you fortunate! having a protégé with no animal self.

Recktall Brown started to speak, but subsided. His own hands embraced in his short wide lap, the diamonds glittering uppermost, he watched Valentine trace a contour in the picture with the tip of a little finger, then reach out to push away the ashtray whose smoldering cigar was sending an even current of smoke over the hand and up the arm: Valentine blew at the smoke pettishly, and asked, —How old is he?

—He's about thirty-three now. He looks more my age.

—He never goes to the showings, does he? When these paintings appear. I imagine I might have known him if he had.

—I don't know why not either. Brown laughed to himself, leaning forward with effort to take the cigar and throw it into the fireplace. —You'd think he'd get a kick out of them, seeing these important old maids blubbering over his pictures, these critics . . .

—Yes . . . Their eyes met for a moment, and Basil Valentine smiled. —It's heartbreaking to watch, isn't it. They are all so fearfully serious. But of course that's just what makes it all possible. The authorities are so deadly serious that it never occurs to them to doubt, they cannot wait to get ahead of one another to point out verifications. The experts . . .

—You said you came here for business. What is it? Brown said, not listening. He took off his glasses and lowered his sharp eyes to Basil Valentine who, as though knowing him to be near sightless this way, looked into Brown's eyes with a penetration which seemed to freeze the blue of his own.

—I'd prefer to wait until he gets here, he said calmly. —Strictly speaking, it's rather more than a matter of business, he went on as Brown rubbed his eyes and put his glasses on again. —It's really quite a challenge, a piece of work that will really challenge his genius.

Brown looked up through the thick lenses. —It damn near is genius.

—Talent often is, if frustrated for long enough. Today, at any rate, most of what we call genius around us is simply warped talent.

—Look, don't waste this kind of clever talk on me. Did you come here for business? or just because you want to meet . . .

—Of course, Valentine cut in, his voice stronger, —I am impatient to meet anyone capable of such work. Not an instant of the anxiety one always comes upon in . . . such work. To be able to move from the painstaking, meticulous strokes of Bouts to the boldness of van der Goes. Incredible! this . . . he motioned at the open reproduction, —slight uncertainty of a tremendous passion, aiming at just a fraction more than he could ever accomplish, poor fellow.

—Who?

—Van der Goes. He died mad, you know. Settled down in a convent, working and drinking. He believed himself eternally damned, finally ran about telling everyone about it. Such exquisite flowers he painted. And such, magnificent hands, Basil Valentine added, looking at his own.

Recktall Brown had taken out a cigar, and he opened his gold-plated penknife. —I don't want any slips, he said, trimming the cigar. —He's already done three by this same one, this van Gogh . . .

—Van Gogh! . . .

—You just said . . .

—Good heavens, Brown! Valentine stood up, with the gold cigarette case. —My dear fellow, he could no more paint van Gogh than he could fly. Valentine laughed, walking out into the room, watching his narrow black shoes on the carpet. —But the minute another van der Goes appears they rush off to compare it with the last one he did. They're never disappointed. You know, he added, turning away abruptly as he approached the black shape of the dog, —his work is so good it has almost been taken for forgery.

—What do you mean by that?

—By the lesser authorities, of course. The ones who look at paintings with twentieth-century eyes. Styles change, he mused, and stood looking up the wall behind the bar at the extensive wool tapestry hung there, originally intended to warm and decorate the bleak stone interior of some northern castle, here concealing well-heated paneling. The figures in this tapestry were engaged in some sort of hunt, or sylvan picnic, it was difficult to tell in this light. Their eyes were apparent, however, all turned in one direction, all staring at the portrait of Recktall Brown, as though arrested by its presence, and the gaze which it did not return: a flock of hard eyes, disdaining those fixed upon them now. And as though aware of their scorn, Valentine turned his back on them. —Taste changes, he went on in an irritating monotone. —Most forgeries last only a few generations, because they're so carefully done in the taste of the period, a forged Rembrandt, for instance, confirms everything that that period sees in Rembrandt. Taste and style change, and the forgery is painfully obvious, dated, because the new period has discovered Rembrandt all over again, and of course discovered him to be quite different. That is the curse that any genuine article must endure. He had walked up behind the chair where Recktall Brown sat with thick calves extended baronially toward the fireplace, and stood looking down at the back of Brown's head and the heavy folds of flesh over the back of the collar. Nothing moved there, but for slight twitches of the cigar as it shifted among uneven teeth. Valentine ground the knuckles of one open hand in the palm of the other, and turned away. The quickness of his movements might have indicated an extreme nervousness, but for his restraint, moving away now with the disciplined motions of a diver, every turn to some purpose, though he simply walked down the room again, and came back saying, —And incidentally, you needn't give another thought to that contretemps with the Dalner Gallery.

—What happened?

—You remember, about three months ago they questioned one of his pictures, the small Bouts, said it was a palpable fake? Though what made them say that I cannot imagine, unless they wanted to discredit it and bring the price down. Dalner has done that before. At any rate, last week they questioned the authenticity of a di Credi belonging to a very important person, who shall be nameless. He sued for slander, and they're settling out of court.

The broken weights of Recktall Brown's laughter ascended in heavy smoke which rose to the silent spaces, and drifted toward the balcony across one end of the two-story room.

—Dalner won't say a word about these van der Goes'. These vulgar attempts at honesty prove too expensive, Valentine went on. —And as for where they come from, Dalner respects secrecy as much as we do. So long as people are afraid of being found out, you have them in the palm of your hand. And everyone is, of course. How touching . . .

—I just got hold of . . .

—How touching it is, when their secrets turn out to be the most pathetic commonplaces, Valentine finished from the middle of the room.

—I just got hold of a Memling. An original.

—Eh? How? Where?

—An original Memling, right from Germany. A guy I know in the army there, this thing has been marked down as lost on the reparations claims.

—You're certain it's genuine?

—Their Pinakothek over there has a stack of papers on it.

—Papers? You know how much papers mean.

—Don't worry, the papers on this are all right.

—Papers are always all right, when they're modern affidavits. Where is it now? If the experts . . .

—The experts! Brown said, and laughed again. He did not move, nor did his unpupiled eyes betray any surprise when Valentine moved from behind him with such sudden irritation that it might have been an assault, though he went no further than to pick up his drink from the table and finish it.

—You don't have to tell me, of course, Valentine said. —It's probably safe in your little private gallery behind that panel, he added, glancing beyond the refectory tables to the far end of the room as he crossed again to the bar.

—It's safe.

—This remarkable room, Valentine murmured, pouring whisky and looking round. —It's a pity, your taste, when you show any, seems to incline to German. He was looking at the polychrome figure of Saint John Baptist in a niche on the stairway, proportioned to stand on a pier of some German cathedral at considerable height, so that the head was unnaturally large and the eyes widened in what, at such closeness, amounted to a leer. The right arm, once extended in gesture of benediction, was broken off, leaving only the close-grained scar of the elbow's wooden marrow.

Recktall Brown shifted his weight; raised his glass, and his eyes to the balcony. —That suit of armor up there, it's Italian, it's not a fake either. That's my favorite thing here. Italian fifteenth century.

—I've looked at it. Pity it isn't all there.

—What do you mean, it's all there.

—But not all Italian. The footpieces. German. Clumsy German bear-paw as can be.

—It's my favorite thing here, Brown repeated, and put down an empty glass. Then he sat tapping his foot silently on the carpeted floor, and the fingers of one hand on the leather arm of the chair. He filled the air before him with smoke, a shapeless cloud of gray exhaled, through which the untasted smoke rising from the end of his cigar cut a clear blue line.

—You shouldn't inhale those things, Basil Valentine said, returning to his chair. —Throat cancer. And Brown laughed again, a single guttural sound which barely reached the surface. A weight seemed to slide back and forth between these two men; and though Basil Valentine will say, sooner or later, —We are, I suppose, basically in agreement . . . , affirming the fact that most argument is no more than agreement reached at different moments, it was these instants of reversal, when the weight was ready to return, that the one who rose to cast it off did so tensely, as though afraid that when it had fallen to him, it had slid for the last time. They talked now in tones which recognized those of the other, and treated with accordingly, desultory tones and cursory remarks which might come close upon but never touch the eventuality which both appeared to await.

—And what news of the publishing empire?

—If you mean that book about art you wrote, I've already sent out advance copies. Brown threw the half-finished cigar into the fireplace. The dog, on the floor beside his chair, started, at the sudden motion of his arm; and Valentine, as though drawn to it, put a hand forth to the open magazine as Brown, settling back, arrested the shiny pages with splayed fingers. —That's a nice reproduction, he said.

—No reproduction is nice. Valentine sat back, and folded his empty hands closely, one seeking the other before him. —Attempts to spread out two square feet of canvas to cover twenty acres of stupidity.

—All these God-damned little details, Brown muttered.

—Much more apparent in the Bouts he did, of course. Exquisite control of brilliant colors, the ascetic restraint in the hands and the feet. Valentine extended his legs, and crossed his ankles.

—They looked like every hair was painted on separately.

—It was, of course.

—This part is nice. Recktall Brown made a curve over the picture with the flat of his thumb. —The expression of her face.

—That . . .

—You . . .

—Please, your . . . thumb is rather like a spatula, isn't it. But here, Valentine went on quickly, before Brown could answer in a way that a shudder of his shoulders suggested, —the flesh tones in this are incredible, even in reproduction. This ashen whiteness, and the other large masses of color, a marvelously subdued canvas. This is the sort of thing he painted late in his life. When his mind was beginning to go.

—Who?

—Who do you think I mean, your protégé?

—I like this face. He ran his thumb over that portion. The diamonds glittered; and Basil Valentine raised a hand toward it, but restrained the hand and returned it empty to the other. Brown repeated the motion with his thumb.

—It's insured?

—For fire and theft.

—For fraud?

That brought Recktall Brown's face up. —Fraud? he repeated. —Fraud? Then he laughed. —They could never prove a thing. Nobody could. After these experts went over it with their magnifying glasses . . .

—I know, I watched them. I even helped them along, you know, Valentine smiled. —Examining a fragment the size of a pinhead with polarized light under a microscope, to determine whether it's isotropic or anisotropic, boring through the layers of paint . . .

—There's no way anybody could prove a God-damned thing wrong here. There's no proof anywhere. But the insurance, the only thing they won't insure against is if something happens to it all by itself. In the paint.

—Inherent vice.

—What?

—They hardly need worry about something this . . . old? The care that goes into these, still . . . the three-legged man of Velasquez? Never mind. As paint ages, it becomes translucent, and work which has been altered occasionally shows through. But of course no one will insure against inherent vice. A lot of our moderns make sudden changes dictated by the total uncertainty of what they're doing, which they call inspiration, and paint over them. The paint breaks up quite soon, of course.

Brown was looking down at the well-manicured fingertips which rested on the corner of the magazine as Valentine, his feet uncrossed and drawn together, twisted to look again at the reproduction. —What did you call it?

—Inherent vice, said Basil Valentine, looking up. His eyes were seized instantly by those which offered no centers to evade. —No one insures against inherent vice, he repeated evenly. *Collectors Quarterly* was abruptly shoved toward him. Recktall Brown sat back; one hand was closed like a fist round an unlit cigar.

—Sorry, Valentine said to him offering, with a gesture, to return the magazine, —if you're not finished? . . .

Recktall Brown looked at him, and asked suddenly, —That ring, what is it? Where'd you get it?

—This? My dear fellow, you've seen it a thousand times. A seal ring. It might be the seal of a very old family.

—Very old family! Brown muttered, looking away.

—With a motto, Valentine persisted, —like the one you're looking at now. Dominus providebit? He glanced at the chimney piece. —Yes . . . , sat back and lit a cigarette. He blew its light smoke out over the table, and extended his left hand on the arm of the chair. Golden hairs glistened faintly on the flesh there. —Gold rings were the peculiar ornament of Roman knights, you know. It was the way they distinguished themselves from the plebs.

Recktall Brown stood up. He was silent until he'd poured himself another drink. Then he demanded, —Why do you have to talk to him about this idea you've got? You didn't even talk to me about it yet.

—It's nothing to excite yourself about, yet. Simply an idea for another piece of work he might try, if he thinks he's up to it. Little good our talking about it until we know how he feels. You and he must be quite thick after all this time, he added as Brown returned across the room.

—I don't think he probably sees anybody but me any more.

—Scintillating social life. Do you talk?

—I can sit with him and not talk. Recktall Brown sat down, and stared at the low table before him. —I never knew anybody like that before. But we talk, he recovered. —When there's business, we talk.

Basil Valentine smoothed the hair-ends at the back of his head with his fingertips. —You must drive him mad, don't you? Insisting on business, business, business.

—Somebody has to nail him down to it. What the hell's wrong with that? When he looks like he forgets what he's doing. What the hell, when you're doing work like he is, you can lose contact with things, finally you don't have a real sense of reality.

—If he ever did, of course. You know, Brown, if by any stretch of imagination I could accuse you of being literary, I might accuse you of sponsoring this illusion that one comes to grips with reality only through the commission of evil. It's all the rage. Basil Valentine sat running his thumb over the worn inscription on his gold cigarette case, and looking at Recktall Brown, who had returned his gaze to his ankles, thick under black silk, with white clocks, before him. —How is it I haven't met him, in all this time? he asked finally.

—A lot of reasons.

—A lot of reasons?

—I don't want you to interfere with him, Recktall Brown said.

—Interfere?

—I just don't want you to get him mixed up, Brown said speaking rapidly. He strained forward to reach his glass.

—You know, Valentine said hunching behind his cigarette, —you speak as though he were a possession of some sort. Like Fuller . . . or this creature. He motioned at the dog, which had raised a leg and commenced to lick herself again. —The one really unbearable thing about females, isn't it. All of them, always so wet.

—I just don't want him upset from his work.

Basil Valentine stood up. —You do have some odd notions about me, don't you.

—I don't have any notions about anybody. This is work.

—You know, Brown, you seem to be under the same misapprehension that most people spend their lives under. That things stay as they are. I'm surprised at you, I am really. He sat back against the arm of his chair. —Tell me, he went on concisely, —just how would you expect me to interfere with him?

—I don't expect you to, so don't. Just don't get him started with your smart remarks, and these smart-aleck sayings in foreign languages the Jesuits taught you, that nobody understands but you, and . . . you know God damn well what I mean now. He has to stick to business. Recktall Brown drank, and sat holding his glass and looking straight ahead.

—You never have music here, do you.

—It makes me nervous.

—Yes. Yes, I think I understand. Tell me . . . Basil Valentine paused. —Do you think . . . Is he happy, do you think, doing this work?

—Happy? Brown asked, looking up for the first time in some minutes. —He has enough money to fly to the moon if he wants to.

Basil Valentine smiled, and nodded. —Carmina vel caelo, he commenced in precise syllables, as the doorbell rang, and Recktall Brown spilled his drink on *Invidia*, putting the glass down on the table of the Seven Deadly Sins.

—Charms can even bring the moon down from heaven. Sometimes, my dear fellow, he went on speaking to Recktall Brown's back as it receded across the room, —I cannot believe that you have ever really studied your Vergil. Then as he sat staring, his eyes again lost their liquid quality of agreeable indifference. He drew his hands up under his chin, so that the gold seal ring on the little finger of his left hand almost touched his lips. He did not move until he heard a voice in the outside hall. —What did you . . . why did you want me to get out, and come all the way up here?

—Business, my boy. Business.

By the time they entered, Basil Valentine had got to a downstairs bathroom, where he washed his hands. He dried them slowly, looking at himself in the mirror as he did so. Then he smoothed the hair at the back of his head with his fingertips, paused to pull downwards at the sides of his trousers (as a woman does before entering a room, straightening her girdle), and came out to them with his well-manicured hand extended in introduction.

For Basil Valentine, who was conscious of the disposition of every lineament of his face, and whose expressions were controlled to betray no more than he wished, a face to which surprise came with cultivated precaution, this face before him was a shock. Though still as his own, it seemed to be in constant movement, neither wonder nor bewilderment but the instant of surprise sustained, surprise perhaps not for the things and occurrences before it, but at its own constant exposure. The hand Valentine clasped was quickly withdrawn, recovered like a creature which its master dared not leave at large. —How do you do, I . . . I thought you were Fuller when I . . . just now. Recktall Brown stood with a hand on his shoulder. —I'm

just . . . used to seeing Fuller here.

—I'm awfully sorry, I fear there's nothing I can do about that. Even Fuller's command of the language is quite beyond me, Basil Valentine said, and then the smile left his face, for he realized that the man had turned his back and was walking toward one of the chairs before the fireplace, where he stood looking down at the table, and placed there the book he carried before he sat down.

—Where is Fuller? he asked. He looked up at them, and Basil Valentine stopped, looking into the sunken green eyes staring from among the lines of the face which turned immediately from him to Recktall Brown, who said, —Fuller's busy.

—What are you . . . are you punishing him again?

—He's working on some crucifixes, Recktall Brown said to both of them. —He's got twenty ivory ones up there, perfect thirteenth century, softened in vinegar to be cut, and hardened up in water. I told him if he wants his prayers to come true all he has to do is rub them with a sweaty hand. I guess a nigger's sweat will yellow them up as good as any.

—You're not concerned about Fuller's . . . trustworthiness? Valentine said.

—He doesn't know what he's doing. I gave him a big frame and told him to rub bird crap into the wormholes and hang it up in this chimney, you should have seen him. Christ only knows where he gets the bird crap. He brings it in in little white packages. Recktall Brown stood, unwrapping a cigar as he spoke.

Basil Valentine offered a cigarette across the table, took one himself and laid the case there between them. Then he held a light, waiting.

—The eggs. He did get me the eggs, did he?

—Your fresh country eggs, laid yesterday. They're in the hall, but why the hell they have to be just laid within a matter of hours . . .

—Yes, yes, they do. They do. They have to be fresh.

—Egg tempera? Basil Valentine asked, holding the light.

—Why . . . why yes, how did you know? He looked at Valentine only long enough to get the light, and then turned to Recktall Brown with an expression which asked the same question. Brown was, for the moment, obscured by smoke himself. Basil Valentine took the opportunity to study the man seated across from him. His hair, closely cut, showed the lines of his skull clearly, a skull of squarish proportions. The dark unpadded jacket hung from shoulders which looked barely able to support it. The fingertips, too, were squared, tapping together in the smoke from the cigarette, the narrow tightly packed Virginia tobacco which Valentine preferred, lying in the ashtray between them.

Brown emerged from the cigar smoke and sat down unsteadily. —You look like hell, he said to him.

Basil Valentine watched him closely. He was staring down at the table, and his lips barely moved, shaping *Soberbia, Ira, Lujuria, Pereza* . . . —That's because I'm . . . I've been working like hell, he said looking at Basil Valentine, a quick anxious look cast up like his words which were separate immediate sounds. When neither of them spoke he said, —You keep it too hot in here, and looked up at Brown as though to provoke him to explain everything which this observation did not include. Brown grinned. —For the art? he demanded.

—It's just too hot. This dead steam heat. He looked down again.

—Now that you finally got here, Brown said, —we can get started.

—Yes, I was late. I was asleep.

—Sleeping now? Brown demanded.

—Yes, I . . . I work at night, you know that, and I . . . You can't imagine how hungry I get for the night to come sometimes, he said suddenly, looking up at them both. —Sometimes it seems like it . . . won't come at all, so I try to sleep. Waiting for it. When I was in school, a schoolboy, he went on rapidly, —we had this written on our report cards, "Here hath been dawning another blue day. Think! Wilt thou let it slip useless away?" Do you understand? That's . . . it's quite upsetting, that "another blue day" . . . Do you understand? he said, looking at Valentine. Then he looked down at the magazine opened in Valentine's lap. —That . . . I didn't know . . . I hadn't seen that reproduction.

—Sit down, my boy, relax, we . . .

—I . . . excuse me just a minute. He left them sitting there, and hurried toward the door where Basil Valentine had gone a few minutes before.

—You know, Valentine murmured, holding the color reproduction up before him, —it's not at all difficult to understand now, why he never comes to these showings.

—What do you mean?

—Look at this. He's stepped right out of the canvas.

—O.K., just don't get him started on it. You see what I mean about this, this "another blue day" stuff? You have to be careful, or he'll end up like this van . . . van . . . Recktall Brown motioned at the opened

pages with the diamond-laden hand.

—It's all right, my dear fellow. You may say van Gogh. Van Gogh went mad too. Quite, quite mad. Valentine leaned forward and laid the magazine on the table.

They both glanced up when he returned, by way of the pulpit across the room where he stopped to get a bottle of brandy and a glass. These he placed on the table beside the book he had brought in, and picked up the *Collectors Quarterly*. He read the caption half aloud, —" . . . that most characteristic expression of the genius of Flemish art, which seems to enliven us with increased powers of eyesight, in this recently discovered painting, *The Descent from the Cross*, by the late fifteenth-century master Hugo van der Goes . . ." That's . . . well you can't really say "most characteristic," whoever . . .

—Valentine here wants to . . .

—But "increased powers of eyesight," I've seen that somewhere. Yes, it gives that sense of projecting illumination, instead of receiving it from outside, do you . . . don't you read it that way?

—Yes. I wrote it, said Basil Valentine, looking him in the eyes.

—You wrote it? he repeated.

—I meant it, too. I congratulate you.

—Then you know it's mine? That this is mine? He flattened his hand against the page on the table.

—My dear fellow, "If the public believes that a picture is by Raphael, and will pay the price of a Raphael," Valentine said, offering a cigarette, —"then it is a Raphael."

The cigarette was accepted heedlessly. —Yes, I . . . but the reproductions, they don't . . . I haven't seen this one, but they're a bad thing all round, they . . . here, you can see, this space right here, it loses almost all its value, because the blue, it doesn't quite . . . it isn't . . .

—Not bad, for a reproduction, Valentine said, watching him pour brandy into his glass. —But I've looked at the thing itself, and it is magnificent. It is, almost perfect. Perfect van der Goes.

—Yes, but I . . . it isn't that simple, you know. I mean, the thing itself, van der Goes, he repeated, his hand covering the sky behind the Cross, —this is . . . mine.

—Yours? Basil Valentine said, smiling, and watching him as he sat down. —You work at night, then, do you?

—Yes, I usually do now.

—This element of secrecy, it becomes rather pervasive, does it?

—No. No, don't start that. That's what they used to say, so don't say that. It isn't so simple. He drank off some of the brandy. —It's the same sense . . . yes, this sense of a blue day in summer, do you understand? It's too much, such a day, it's too fully illuminated. It's defeating that way, it doesn't allow you to project this illumination yourself, this . . . selective illumination that's necessary to paint . . . like this, he added, indicating the picture.

—Seeing you now, you know, it's answered one of the questions I've had on my mind for some time. The first thing I saw, it was a small Dierick Bouts, I wondered then if you used a model when you worked.

—Well I . . .

—But now, it's quite obvious isn't it, Valentine went on, nodding at the picture between them. —Mirrors?

—Yes, yes of course, mirrors. He laughed, a constricted sound, and lit a cigarette.

—You have one, you know, Basil Valentine said, watching him levelly as he started, looked at the cigarette in his hand, and crushed it out for the one he had just accepted. —You're very tired, aren't you.

—Yes. Yes, I am, I . . . I've been tired for a long time.

—Don't you sleep?

—I do, sometimes. During the day sometimes.

—Well, my dear fellow, Valentine said, sitting up straight and smiling, —I don't either. I think Brown here is probably the only one of us who does enjoy the sleep of the just.

—Do you dream? he asked abruptly.

—Dream? Good heavens no, not in years. And you?

—I? Why no. No, no. No, I haven't had a dream in . . . some time.

—You haven't explained all this to me yet, you know, Basil Valentine said, raising his eyes from the picture, which he pushed forward with his right hand, and a glitter of gold at his cuff. —The Virgin.

—The Virgin? he repeated, staring across the table.

—Yes, here for instance. She really dominates this whole composition.

—Yes, she does. She does.

Valentine waited, watching him. —Exquisite repose in her face, he murmured, finally. —Do you find that with mirrors too?

—I . . . she . . . he stammered, picking up his glass.

Recktall Brown stood up, with great alacrity considering his stature and the heavy immobile presence he

had presented, deep in the armchair, an instant before. He was a little unsteady on his feet, but his eyes swimming behind the glasses seemed to jell, and his voice rose sternly when he spoke. He had, all this time, been looking from one to the other of the two men before him, gauging their effect upon one another. —I'll answer that, and then we'll get down to business, he said. —This model he uses is a kid I got for him, she came up trying to sell us a book of crazy poems once. This repose she gets, she just isn't all there. He raised a naked hand. —Sit down, my boy, and be quiet. We've wasted half the God damn afternoon as it is, waiting for you. He turned to Basil Valentine, raising the left hand, with the diamonds, and the cigar which dropped its ash on *Gula*, gluttony, before him. —Valentine here has an idea for the next thing you're going to do, but first I want to know when you're going to finish the one you're fooling around with down there now.

—Fooling around? Fooling around?

—All right, my boy, God damn it, working on. Look, I've bought a farm up in Vermont. The family that built the place came over from England in the seventeenth century, they had plenty of money, they made bricks. They brought over everything they owned. There were about a dozen lousy paintings there when I bought the place, none of them worth more than twenty bucks, Valentine says, and some frames I want you to look at, little oak ones with red and green velvet in them around the inside, maybe you can squeeze something in. I'm going to stock this place and sell it at auction in two weeks, and this last thing of yours can be discovered there if you finish it in time. He paused. —What do you say?

Basil Valentine had started to rise, but let himself down in the chair again without making a sound, his lips open to show his teeth drawn tight together, and turned his eyes down to see the man across from him lower his eyes and seem to wilt, silent, and appearing not to breathe. Valentine waited, and then said gently, —The one you're working on now, another van der Goes?

—Yes, yes it is. He looked up, and drew a deep breath.

—What is it, the subject?

—I . . . I . . . it was going to be an *Annunciation*, that, because they're . . . well have you ever seen a bad one? I mean by any painter? He held his hands in the air before him, the fingertips almost touching. —It's almost as though . . . just the idea of the *Annunciation*, a painter can't . . . no painter could do it badly.

—The *Annunciation?* Valentine looked troubled.

—No, I . . . it isn't. I was going to, I wanted to, but then I got started on this other . . . this other idea took form and . . .

—What is it, then?

—It's a . . . the death of the Virgin.

—But there is one, you know, a splendid one of van der Goes, it's in Brussels I think, isn't it?

—Yes, yes, I know it, I know that one. It is splendid, that one. But this one, this one I've done is later, painted later in his life, when the shapes . . .

—Is it nearly done? Brown demanded, standing over them.

—Yes, it is. It's more than finished, really, he said looking up at Brown.

—More than finished?

—Yes, I . . . you know, it's finished, it has to be . . . damaged now.

—That must be difficult, Basil Valentine said.

—It is, it's the most difficult part. Not the actual damaging it, but damaging it without trying to preserve the parts that cost such . . . well, you know that's where they fail, a good many . . . painters who do this kind of work, they can't resist saving those parts, and anyone can tell, anyone can tell.

—You call me as soon as it's done then, do you hear me? Brown said, sitting down. He finished his drink quickly. —And we'll get started on the next one now. Valentine's here to . . .

—I . . . damn it, you can't just . . . He looked up at Basil Valentine. —He talks to me as though it was like making patent medicine. He . . .

—All right my boy, I . . .

—He heard a Fra Angelico had sold somewhere for a high price once, and he thought I should do a Fra Angelico, toss off a Fra Angelico . . .

—All right now . . .

—Like making patent medicine. He turned to Brown. —Do you know why I could never paint one, paint a Fra Angelico? Do you know why? Do you know how he painted? Fra Angelico painted down on his knees, he was on his knees and his eyes full of tears when he painted Christ on the Cross. And do you think I . . . do you think I . . .

—Control yourself now, for Christ sake. We have work to do.

—Work? Work? Do you think I . . . as though I spend my time down there flying balloons . . .

—"That vice may merit, 'tis the price of toil," Basil Valentine said, stretching his arms and smiling as he

looked at both of them.

—All right, Valentine, what is it now? What is this thing of yours?

—Not mine, my dear Brown. Pope. Alexander Pope. "'But sometimes virtue starves, while vice is fed,' What then? Is . . ."

—Not that, God damn it. This idea . . .

The telephone rang. There was an extension in the hallway, as well as the one near the bar, and Recktall Brown went to the hallway extension.

—He would absolutely have to have Alexander Pope in a box, to enjoy him. He is beyond anything I've ever come upon. Honestly, I never in my life could have imagined that business could live so powerfully independent of every other faculty of the human intelligence. Basil Valentine rested his head back, blowing smoke toward the ceiling, and watching it rise there. —Earlier, you know, he mentioned to me the idea of a novel factory, a sort of assembly line of writers, each one with his own especial little job. Mass production, he said, and tailored to the public taste. But not so absurd, Basil Valentine said sitting forward suddenly.

—Yes, I . . . I know. I know.

—When I laughed . . . but it's not so funny in his hands, you know. Just recently he started this business of submitting novels to a public opinion board, a cross section of readers who give their opinions, and the author makes changes accordingly. Best sellers, of course.

—Yes, good God, imagine if . . . submitting paintings to them, to a cross section? You'd better take out . . . This color . . . These lines, and . . . He drew his hand down over his face, —You can change a line without even touching it. No, he went on after a pause, and Valentine watched him closely, —nothing is funny in his hands. Everything becomes very . . . real.

—Oh, he's given you some of his lectures too? "Business is co-operation with reality," that one? The one on cleaning fluid, a chemical you can buy for three cents a gallon, which he sold at a quarter a six-ounce bottle? His chalk toothpaste? The breakfast cereal he made that gave people spasms of the colon? Has he told you about the old woman who got spastic colitis from taking a laxative he made, a by-product of heaven knows what. They threw her case out of court. A riotous tale, he entertains with it when he's been drinking. He still makes a pretty penny from some simple chemical that women use for their menstrual periods, such a delicate necessity that the shame and secrecy involved make it possible to sell it at some absurd price . . .

—Yes, the secrecy.

—What?

—These paintings, selling these paintings, the secrecy of it.

Valentine chuckled. —Of course, he couldn't do any of it alone. Other people do his work for him, get his ideas for him. Who do you think launched this picture here in this country? He motioned to the open reproduction. —Did you read about it?

—Where?

—In the papers. No, you probably never see the newspaper, at that. He didn't tell you, then? He wouldn't, of course. It might interfere.

—Interfere? with what?

—With your work, of course, he's quite frantic about protecting you. I've gathered you're quite as dedicated as those medieval forgers of classical antiquities. Valentine was speaking rapidly and with asperity. —True to your art, so to say?

—True to . . . yes, that's like saying a man's true to his cancer.

—Don't be upset, don't concern yourself with him, with his explanations of reality.

—But that's what's so strange, it makes so much sense at first, and then if you listen, you . . . Yes, he understands reality.

—He does not understand reality. Basil Valentine stood up, still, grasping his lapels, and looked down to the lowered face across the table. —Recktall Brown is reality, he said, and after a pause where neither of them moved, turned on a toe and idled out into the room. —A very different thing, he added, over his shoulder, and stopped to light a cigarette.

Recktall Brown's voice reached them in the separate phrases of telephone conversation, —Not a dollar more, God damn it . . . , at one point, at another, —God damn it, not a dollar less.

—But let me tell you about discovering this van der Goes. It might amuse you. It was taken to London, secretly of course, and modified with tempera before it was brought back to America, a crude job of overpainting on a glue finish, which would wash right off. It was such an obvious bad job that even customs discovered it. As much as it pained them, poor fellows, since they collect ten per cent on anything they can prove is a copy or an imitation. But there was the genuine, duty-free, original work of art underneath. As a matter of fact, I was called in to help verify it. You see how much we trust your work. And of course

everyone respected the owner's "business secret" about where he'd got it. After that incident people were predisposed to accept it.

—But . . . why? There's no law, is there, against . . .

—Not a question of law, my dear fellow, Valentine said returning to the table. —Publicity. Publicity.

—But, a thing like this, a . . . painting like this . . .

—A painting like this or a tube of toothpaste or a laxative which induces spastic colitis. You can't sell any of them without publicity. The people! Valentine turned away again, and commenced to walk up and down. He was talking more rapidly, in precisions of irritation as though he did not dare stop, for fear of an argument being rejected before he reached its point, or hesitate, and waste a precious instant before Brown's return. Even the Latin came with native sharpness from his tongue when he said, —You recall the maxim, Vulgus vult decipi, ergo decipiatur? Yes, if they want to be deceived, let them be deceived. Have you looked at his hands? he demanded, stopping abruptly at the edge of the table. —At Brown's hands, when he sits with them folded in his lap? And those diamonds? Like a great soft toad, " . . . ugly and venomous, wears yet a precious jewel in his head"?

—But, all this . . .

—Yes, think of the tradition you have behind you, Valentine went on, turning his back. —Lucius Mummius, and that famous story in which he charges the men carrying his plunder from Corinth back to Rome, that any of the art treasures lost or broken would have to be replaced at the expense of the man responsible. No more idea of art than the people who surround us today, not a particle of appreciation, but they brought it back to Rome by the ton. Private collecting started, a thing the Greeks never dreamt of. It started in Rome, and forgery with it. The same poseurs, the same idiots who would buy a vase if they had to pay enough for it, the same people who come to Brown, in gray waistcoats, perhaps, instead of togas, the same people in Rome, the same people, the same hands . . .

—But you, then you, if you feel this way . . .

—Because the people, the people, they're bringing us to the point Rome reached when a court could award a painting to the man who owned the board, not the artist who had painted on it. Valentine stood with his knees against the edge of the low table. —Yes, when the Roman Republic collapsed, art collecting collapsed, art forging disappeared. And then what. Instead of art they had religion, and all the talent went into holy relics. Half the people collected them, the other half manufactured them. A forest of relics of the True Cross? Miraculous multiplication. Then the Renaissance, and they dropped the knucklebones of the saints and came back to art. His eyes, which were hard and blue now, settled on the radiant figure in the center of the table of the Seven Deadly Sins. —Intricate, cunning forgeries like this, he added, sweeping a hand with a glitter of gold over the whole table as he turned his back. —The people! he said, watching Recktall Brown approach. —Of course I loathe him.

—But it's not. This table, it's not a forgery.

—What's the matter? Brown demanded, coming up to them.

—This Bosch, it's not a forgery.

—Who the hell said it was? Look, Valentine . . .

—Listen . . .

—Have you got him all upset like this?

—Listen, this Bosch painting, it's not a forgery.

Basil Valentine sank back in his chair and clasped a knee between his hands. —It's not? he said quietly, with the beginning of a smile on his lips, and shrugged. —Not even a copy?

—You're God damn right it's not.

—It's not. It can't be.

—Why not? Valentine asked them. His eyes had recovered their light watery blue, agreeable indifference. —The story I heard, you know, he went on after a pause, —was that the original came from the di Brescia collection, one of the finest in Europe, most of them Flemish primitives in fact. The old man, the Conte di Brescia, found himself running out of money. He loved the pictures, and none of his family would have dared suggest he sell a single one, even if they'd known the state of their finances. Of course they were simply waiting for him to die so they could sell them all. Meanwhile they went right on living in the manner which centuries of wealth had taught them, watched the pictures go out to be cleaned and come back, none the wiser. When the old grandee died, they fell over themselves to sell the pictures, and found that every one of them was a copy. They hadn't been sent out to be cleaned, the old man had sent them out to be copied and sold, and the copies were brought back.

—That's right, sold, Brown said, —they sold the originals you just said, and I got this one. I got it ten or fifteen years ago.

—Where?

—Where? Never mind. Right here in America. I picked it up for just about nothing.

—The collection of copies was dispersed too, you know, Valentine said. —Soon after the scandal, in the late 'twenties. And this . . .

—But wait, listen . . .

—Don't get yourself upset, my boy, Brown said letting himself down in his chair; and Valentine looked across the table with the faint smile still on his lips.

—Listen, this is the original, it is.

—Don't get yourself so excited, God damn it my boy . . .

—How are you so certain? Valentine asked calmly.

—Because, listen. What happened was, I heard, I heard this somewhere, abroad, yes somewhere abroad I heard that what happened was, a boy, a boy whose father owned the original, he'd bought it himself, he bought it from the Conte di . . . Brescia, and the boy . . . the boy copied it and stole the original and left his copy in its place, and sold the original, he sold it in secret for . . . for just about nothing.

—How very interesting, Basil Valentine said quietly. The smile was gone from his lips, and he watched the quivering figure across the table from him without moving, without expression on his face.

—All right, that's enough of that. Didn't the two of you get started on this new thing he's going to work on while I wasn't here?

—Of course, Valentine said, his tone returned to its agreeable level, with an ingratiating edge to it as he turned to Brown and went on, —We decided to write a novel about you, since you don't exist.

Recktall Brown did look startled at that. But he recovered immediately to take off his glasses and turn his sharp eyes on Basil Valentine. —We're going to get down to business right now, he said.

—Brown doesn't exist, you must admit, Valentine went on. —He's a figment of a Welsh rarebit taken before retiring. A projection of my unconscious. Though a rather abiding one, I must confess.

—By God, Brown said, —if you don't settle down and be serious . . .

—But my dear man, I am being serious. I am the only person in this room who exists. You are both projections of my unconscious, and so I shall write a novel about you both. But I don't know what I can do with you, he said, turning to the other chair.

—With me? He almost smiled at Basil Valentine. —Why not?

—Because, my dear fellow, no one knows what you're thinking. And that is why people read novels, to identify projections of their own unconscious. The hero has to be fearfully real, to convince them of their own reality, which they rather doubt. A novel without a hero would be distracting in the extreme. They have to know what you think, or good heavens, how can they know that you're going through some wild conflict, which is after all the duty of a hero.

—I think about my work.

—But my dear fellow . . .

—God damn it Valentine, Brown broke in, —I'm as real as hell, and in just a minute . . .

—All right, to work, to work. Wait, there's something I've meant to ask. Your own paintings, you have done work yourself, certainly. Are there any of them lying about anywhere?

—Why no, I . . . the only ones I had were destroyed in a fire.

—Good, good. If someone picked them up . . . you can't suppress all of yourself, you know. Valentine watched the brandy bottle raised and tipped over the empty glass.

—I know, he said, watching it himself. His hand quivered somewhat, and the bottle rattled against the edge of the glass.

—Now be careful, my boy, Recktall Brown said, watching him drink it down.

—Before we go any further with this, Valentine said, —I would like to know more about your work, because what I have in mind . . . The hard surface, for instance. Oil takes years to dry.

—Yes, that . . . getting the hard surface, it was one of the worst problems. He leaned toward them, his elbows on the table, clutching one hand in the other, and spoke rapidly but with effort. —I've tried everything, every different . . . I tried mixing my colors on blotting paper, to absorb the oil, and then mixing them with varnish but it dried too quickly, you see? It dried too quickly and it was unalterable. I tried a mixture of stand oil and formaldehyde, but it wasn't right, it wasn't what I wanted. I tried oil of lavender and formaldehyde and I like it better, the oil with an egg tempera, and a varnish glaze. In those two Bouts pictures, in those when I prepared the canvas I laid linen threads on the gesso when it was still wet, you see? in the pattern I wanted for the crackle. Then I baked it, and when it came out of the oven the threads came off and left the pattern. But the best thing, here, I used it here, he said, motioning at the van der Goes reproduction which still lay open on the table, —a thin layer of gesso, over and over on the canvas, and it cracks of its own volition, because of the atmosphere, the changes, you see? This painting is whole egg and oil of lavender, and then glue, dilute glue and the varnish. This one, this is amber varnish,

the undercoat of dilute glue shrank faster than the varnish when they dried and cracked it, you see? And a little India ink in the cracks and when that dried there were only particles, like dirt, when the experts came . . .

—Now take it easy, my boy, sit down, sit down.

—And then the experts came, you see? he said, standing, and rubbed his hand over his eyes, and his chin, leaving a broad smile quivering there when he reached down for the bottle again. —There isn't one test they don't know, and not one that can't be beaten. Not one. That . . . that's why I couldn't use that varnish medium, it dried so fast that I had to paint too fast, and you can't do that, you can't paint that fast and control these . . . these things that have to be controlled, do you understand? And an X-ray would have shown up those abrupt strokes, he added. He lifted the glass, and threw back his head to drink it down. —You see, this . . . controlling this damned world of shapes and smells . . .

—Sit down, my boy, Recktall Brown said as he started to walk away from them.

—But I haven't told you, after all this work, this . . . fooling around. Do you know what the best medium is? It's so simple I never dared try it, it's that simple. Glair, the liquid that settles to the bottom when the whites of egg are beaten, with dry powdered pigments, and a layer of clean white of egg over it and the varnish, it's so simple it doesn't need anything, it doesn't need to be baked, it crackles by itself beautifully, as though years, hundreds of years had passed over it. And that, it's . . . and then the experts come, with their little bottles of alcohol, to see if they can dissolve the fresh paint, but the glue . . . You never have music here, do you. Never, in all this time . . .

—Come back here and sit down. We can't talk to you way the hell out in the middle of the room.

—This glair, Basil Valentine said to him. —You sound as though you consider it practically foolproof.

—Yes, that's the word, foolproof. Foolproof, he said, coming back to them.

—That is what we need, Basil Valentine said, his hands drawn up beneath his chin. —The fools are the ones we must be most careful of. Most secrets are discovered by their accidents, very few by design. Very few, he repeated, looking up. —Foolproof enough, would you say, for a van Eyck?

Brown seemed to be awaiting some violent reaction to this, if it were, as he believed from Valentine's casual tone, the challenge. But he looked up to see it greeted with no more than a shrug.

—Easily, the perfect medium for him, for Jan van Eyck, but he's been done so often . . .

—Yes, yes, Basil Valentine interrupted impatiently, —there are probably more badly faked Jan van Eycks then any of the others. Hubert, on the other hand . . .

—Hubert van Eyck?

—It might be the art discovery of the century, if it were absolutely perfect, signed and documented . . .

—Yes, yes it might, it probably would be.

—If you could do it . . .

—If I could do it? If I could do it? he said, raising his head.

—How much? Recktall Brown demanded.

—It depends entirely on the picture. Perhaps as much as you got for all the rest put together.

—That much! What the hell have we been doing fooling around with these . . .

—If he could do it.

—If I could do it! Of course I can do it, he said more calmly, looking down at the van der Goes reproduction. —But listen, they have no right to do this, he went on, crumpling the reproduction into his hand as it tore from the magazine. —You have no right to do this, he said, as Valentine put a hand on Recktall Brown's arm.

—To do what, my dear fellow?

—This . . . these reproductions, they have no right to try to spread one painting out like this. There's only one of them, you know, only one. This . . . my painting . . . there's only one, and these reproductions, these cheap fakes is what they are, being scattered everywhere, and they have no right to do that. It cheapens the whole . . . it's a calumny, that's what it is, on my work, he said, standing with the thing wadded up in his hand.

Basil Valentine took the thin cigarette from his lips and spoke coldly. —Forgery is calumny, he said. —Every piece you do is calumny on the artist you forge.

—It's not. It's not, damn it, I . . . when I'm working, I . . . Do you think I do these the way all other forging has been done? Pulling the fragments of ten paintings together and making one, or taking a . . . a Dürer and reversing the composition so that the man looks to the right instead of left, putting a beard on him from another portrait, and a hat, a different hat from another, so that they look at it and recognize Dürer there? No, it's . . . the recognitions go much deeper, much further back, and I . . . this . . . the X-ray tests, and ultra-violet and infra-red, the experts with their photomicrography and . . . macrophotography, do you think that's all there is to it? Some of them aren't fools, they don't just look for a hat or a beard, or a

style they can recognize, they look with memories that . . . go beyond themselves, that go back to . . . where mine goes.

—Sit down, my boy.

—And . . . any knock at the door may be the gold inspectors, come to see if I'm using bad materials down there, I . . . I'm a master painter in the Guild, in Flanders, do you see? And if they come in and find that I'm not using the . . . gold, they destroy the bad materials I'm using and fine me, and I . . . they demand that . . . and this exquisite color of ultramarine, Venice ultramarine I have to take to them for approval, and the red pigment, this brick-red Flanders pigment . . . because I've taken the Guild oath, not for the critics, the experts, the . . . you, you have no more to do with me than if you are my descendants, nothing to do with me, and you . . . the Guild oath, to use pure materials, to work in the sight of God . . .

—You've had enough of this stuff now, my boy, Recktall Brown said, reaching, too late, for the brandy bottle. —You need to keep a steady hand for what you're doing, all these God damn tiny little details . . .

Basil Valentine sat, watching him.

—A steady hand! he said, and drank down the brandy. —Do you think that's all it is, a steady hand? He opened the rumpled reproduction. —This . . . these . . . the art historians and the critics talking about every object and . . . everything having its own form and density and . . . its own character in Flemish paintings, but is that all there is to it? Do you know why everything does? Because they found God everywhere. There was nothing God did not watch over, nothing, and so this . . . and so in the painting every detail reflects . . . God's concern with the most insignificant objects in life, with everything, because God did not relax for an instant then, and neither could the painter then. Do you get the perspective in this? he demanded, thrusting the rumpled reproduction before them. —There isn't any. There isn't any single perspective, like the camera eye, the one we all look through now and call it realism, there . . . I take five or six or ten . . . the Flemish painter took twenty perspectives if he wished, and even in a small painting you can't include it all in your single vision, your one miserable pair of eyes, like you can a photograph, like you can painting when it . . . when it degenerates, and becomes conscious of being looked at.

Recktall Brown stood up, and came toward him.

—Like everything today is conscious of being looked at, looked at by something else but not by God, and that's the only way anything can have its own form and its own character, and . . . and shape and smell, being looked at by God.

Recktall Brown stood beside him, the heavy naked hand on his shoulder.

—And so when you're working, it's your own work, Basil Valentine said. —And when you attach the signature?

—Leave him alone, God damn it Valentine, he . . .

—Yes, when I attach the signature, he said dropping his head again, —that changes everything, when I attach the signature and . . . lose it.

—Then corruption enters, is that it, my dear fellow? Basil Valentine stood up smiling. He lit a cigarette. —That's the only thing they can prosecute you for in court, you know, if you're caught. Forging the signature. The law doesn't care a damn for the painting. God isn't watching them. He put a hand on the other shoulder, the hand with the gold seal ring, and his eyes met those of Recktall Brown. The liquid blue of them seemed to freeze and penetrate the uncentered pools behind the thick lenses, and to submerge there as Recktall Brown said, —Let go of him.

They stood that way for a number of seconds, any one of which might have contained the instant that one would pull him from the other; until he stepped back himself and said, —I know. I know.

Then Basil Valentine shrugged, and sauntered the few steps back to his chair. —You are mightily concerned with your own originality, aren't you, he said, standing behind the chair, turned toward them.

—Originality! No, I'm not, I . . .

—Come now, my dear fellow, you are. But you really ought to forget it, or give in to it and enjoy it. Everyone else does today. Brown is busy with suits of plagiarism all the time, aren't you Brown? You see? He takes it as a matter of course. He's surrounded by untalented people, as we all are. Originality is a device that untalented people use to impress other untalented people, and protect themselves from talented people . . .

—Valentine, this is the last time . . .

—Most original people are forced to devote all their time to plagiarizing. Their only difficulty is that if they have a spark of wit or wisdom themselves, they're given no credit. The curse of cleverness. Now wait, Brown. Stop. Stop there where you are and relax for a moment. We still have some business to straighten out. He needs to talk or he'll come to pieces, isn't that what you told me before he got here? Well let him talk, he's said some very interesting things. But don't let him talk to himself, that's all he's been doing, that's all he does when he talks to you and you don't listen, he knows you don't. Let him talk, then, but

listen to him. He may not say anything clever, but that's just as well. Most people are clever because they don't know how to be honest. He paused. —Come, my dear fellow. If you don't say anything I shan't be able to use you in this novel, the one in which Brown figures so monumentally since everyone thinks he's honest because he doesn't know how to be clever.

Recktall Brown had started toward him; but as Basil Valentine's voice rose, Brown stopped beside the pitcher of martini cocktails and watched him carefully. A vein stood out on Valentine's temple, and he raised his hand to ascertain it there with his fingertips, an impulsive gesture as though he had once done it to suppress. He touched the place, and continued his hand round to the back of his head where he smoothed the over-long ends of his hair. —Yes, he will figure monumentally, Valentine went on. —That portrait there, he said, flinging a hand toward it, —do you know why he keeps it? To humanize him, as evidence of youth always does, no matter how monstrous.

Basil Valentine watched them. When neither of them spoke he straightened up and walked across the room, watching his feet, to the low pulpit, where he turned and sat against it, drumming his long fingers against the oak leaves carved there.

—"Another blue day," eh? he said, looking beyond Brown, at the fever-stricken eyes fixed upon him. —"Another blue day," he repeated. And then, —Brown tells me you have another self. Oh, don't be upset, it's not uncommon you know, not at all uncommon. Why, even Brown has one. That's why he drinks to excess occasionally, trying to slip up on it and grab it. Mark me, he's going to get too close one day, and it's going to turn around and break his neck for him. He picked up the whisky bottle. —Have you heard Brown talk about the portraits he sells? Nineteenth-century portraits of blond men with strong chins that he sells for ten times their price, he tells me, to precarious Jews who want nice ancestors, he said, pouring the whisky into a glass. He sat against the pulpit again, drew a foot up, and it swayed slightly, with the sound of bottles ringing together like the sound of bells in the distance. —To the same purpose, you know. And they believe it, when the portraits have hung about long enough, common ancestor to their vulgar selves that everyone else knows, and this other . . . more beautiful self who . . . can do more than they can, he finished, swirling the whisky in the bottom of the tumbler.

In the middle of the Aubusson carpet, the dog licked itself. That was the only sound. Then Basil Valentine put the glass of whisky down and left it there. —Where do you keep him, Brown? he demanded, looking at them, around the walls, up to the balcony.

Recktall Brown turned back to his chair. He looked up at the man whom his bulk no longer separated from Basil Valentine. —Sit down, my boy, he said, and then abruptly to Valentine, —Where are you going?

—I'm simply going in to wash my hands, if no one objects.

Recktall Brown took out a cigar. He unwrapped it, trimmed the end with his penknife, thrust it among uneven teeth, and lit it. He shook the match out in the air, and tossed it toward the ashtray. It fell to the carpet, and lay smoking on a rose. —When most people ask where the washroom is, they really mean they want to go to the toilet. He just goes in there to wash his hands. Sit down, my boy. We'll be done in a few minutes. Recktall Brown filled the air before him with smoke. —What's the matter? he asked, as the smoke rose, and the figure before him remained unmoved and unchanged.

—Oh, I . . . I don't know, he said, looking down at Brown and seeming to recover. —I suppose I was surprised, when you let him go on like that.

—Never interrupt people when they're telling you more than they know they are, no matter how mad they make you.

—Telling you?

—About themselves, my boy. Recktall Brown drew heavily on the cigar, and the smoke broke around the discolored teeth as he spoke. —I never do business with anyone until I've had them investigated, I never sign a thing until I've been through a report by a good private detective agency. I know a lot about Basil Valentine. I know about him with the Jesuits, I know what happened there, and I know what happens now, I know what his private life is. Be careful of him . . .

—He . . . studied for the priesthood?

—He's not out of it yet.

—But then me? Even me? You had them . . . you had detectives . . . finding out about me?

—Of course I did, my boy. It's all right, it's all right. You're all right, but just keep on the way you are, Brown said, laying a heavy hand on the wrist before him, —don't let anybody interfere with you, and be careful, be God damn careful of that pansy.

—That's funny, then you . . . we both studied . . .

—What have you two accomplished? they heard behind them. —Dear, just sitting here and holding hands. I thought we had fearfully pressing business. Basil Valentine approached rubbing his hands together. He kicked the crumpled reproduction on the floor, and paused over it to smooth it out with the narrow toe

of his black shoe. —Oil of lavender, eh? he said, looking down at it. —Mansit odor, posses scire fuisse deam, he said kicking it aside. —You must remember your Ovid, my dear Brown? He touched his smooth temple and smiled as he sat down. —"An odor remained, you could tell that a goddess had appeared." He took his eyes from Brown, and looked across the table. —But what are you looking at me that way for? Come, we have work to do. Hubert van Eyck . . .

—Why should he rate a quarter of a million? Brown interrupted.

—I was about to tell you: because he never existed.

—But he did, he did, came sharply across the table.

—All right, my dear fellow . . .

—He did, he did, of course he did, who . . . why, the Ghent altarpiece, the Steenken *Madonna* . . . ?

—Who the hell, what is this? Who? He never existed but he painted the what? . . . sting . . .

—All right, have it your way, Valentine went on, speaking across the table, paying Brown no attention. —After all, we will have to have it your way, won't we. If one of his paintings is to appear?

—But he did.

—All right, he did, Brown broke in again, sitting forward. —Now that's settled.

—It's not settled, yet. But it will be.

—But to say he didn't exist, to say Hubert van Eyck didn't exist?

—God damn it, stop. Stop arguing with him, Valentine. You're just trying to upset him.

—Don't you understand? But don't either of you understand? Basil Valentine brought both hands up before him. —There are authorities who still insist that Hubert van Eyck is a legend, that he never lived at all, that Jan van Eyck never had an older brother. As a matter of fact, I'm one of them myself, but, wait. He held up an arresting palm. —Now don't you understand? If a painting appears, a signed, fully documented painting by Hubert van Eyck, they'll be proved wrong. The others, the . . . experts and art historians who have been insisting that there was a Hubert van Eyck will pounce on this new picture. They won't question it for a moment, because it will prove their point, and that's all they care about. It will prove that they've been right all this time, and that's all they care about. The painting itself doesn't matter to them, their authority is all that's important. And the dissenters? He dropped his hands, sank back in the chair and smiled across the table. —Even I may be brought around, you see.

Recktall Brown grunted an assent, and Valentine took out a cigarette and passed his case open across the table. It was snapped closed, and the worn inscription caught the light. —This? what's this? may I read it?

—If you can, Valentine said.

—Yes, it's difficult . . . Varé tava soskei me puchelas . . . cai soskei avillara catári . . . Gypsy?

—Why yes, a Hungarian dialect. Valentine's face almost showed surprise, as he took the thing back and slipped it into an inside pocket. —But you don't understand it? "Much I ponder why you ask me questions, and why you should come hither." A gift, he added, cleared his throat, shifted in his chair, and went on speaking as though to find recovery in his own words. —Van Eyck? and what did you think I was going to suggest? another Jan van Eyck?

—But, no but . . .

—Yes, another *Virgin and Child and Donor?* You could do that. Paint Brown in the place of Chancellor Rolin. Lovely! on his knees at a prie-dieu, before the Virgin and Child. A pious monument to his Christian virtue as a patron of art. We'd have to take off his glasses, and get him a haircut. You wouldn't mind running around in a tonsure for a while, Brown? But that ring . . . His eye caught the double gleam of the diamonds. —We could hardly have such vanity flaunting . . .

—What are you talking about? Brown demanded. —We decided he exists, this Herbert . . .

Valentine shrugged wearily, and went on in his irritating monotone, —Yes, we are, I suppose, basically in agreement. Now here is the point. Some time ago the will of a man named Jean de Visch was found. It is in the public domain, available as substantiation of this . . . project. The will mentions a picture by Hubert van Eyck, which goes to prove, supposedly, that such a picture was painted. Another Virgin of some sort. Proves it well enough for your purpose, at any rate. Now when they tore down that house in Ghent they hoped to find some of Hubert's work, hidden somewhere. They didn't. But there was a scrap of paper. It was regarded as a curiosity, and then it disappeared and was forgotten. It was a letter signed by Jodoc Vyt, the man who commissioned the Ghent altarpiece, commissioning a work by Hubert van Eyck. I can get hold of it for two thousand dollars.

—You can get it for less, Brown muttered.

—Perhaps I shall. Basil Valentine smiled at him. —You never begrudged me a commission?

—How do I know it isn't faked?

—You haven't made a habit of doubting my word either. But look at it this way. If it is not genuine, why should it exist at all?

—If it exists, why should I buy it?

—You are inclined to oversimplify, aren't you Brown? To insist on carrying us back to Rome, where for all their ingenious vulgarity they never managed to evolve blackmail, at least there's no word for it in Roman jurisdiction. They depended so heavily on the Greeks, and the Greeks apparently had no word for it either. No, it's taken our precocious modern minds to devise this delicate relationship between human beings. You might call this blackmail in reverse. You see, if you don't buy this slip of paper it will be destroyed.

—And he can't paint the picture without this scrap of paper?

—He can. Of course he can. But with this attached to it, it will be irreproachable. He paused. —This isn't a thing to scrimp on, and you know it.

—All right.

—Well?

They both looked across the table. —It isn't the first time I've thought of it, he said, watching the brandy he swirled in the bottom of his glass. —A *Virgin* by Hubert van Eyck.

—An *Annunciation*.

—Yes, he said, holding the glass up. —Isn't that an exquisite color? The color of the sixth heaven, jacinth. I remember a story my father told me, about the celestial sea. Instead of bedtime stories he used to read to me. The same things he was reading.

—Now this Herbert picture, Recktall Brown said, interrupting.

—When I was sick in bed, he read to me from *Otia Imperialia*. The twelfth century, Gervase of Tilbury, when people could believe that our atmosphere was a celestial sea, a sea to the people who lived above it. This story was about some people coming out of church, and they saw an anchor dangling by a rope from the sky. The anchor caught in the tombstones, and then they watched and saw a man coming down the rope, to unhook it. But when he reached the earth they went over to him and he was dead . . . He looked up at both of them from the glass. —Dead as though he'd been drowned.

—All right, my boy, is there anything else? Anything you need to go ahead with this? I had to buy him a God damn expensive egg-beater a couple of months ago, Brown said, turning to Basil Valentine, who stood up saying, —I have a number of photographs, blown-up details of the brushwork, you know. The foreground figures in the Ghent altarpiece, the Steenken *Madonna* . . .

—Or imagine heaven and earth joined by a tree, he went on, as Valentine reached over and picked up the book he had laid before him, some time before. —The sky is a roof, with windows in it for rain to fall through. People live up there, you see. And if you climb up high enough you can visit them. They're just like you are, he said, turning to Recktall Brown.

—The hell they are, Brown said, getting to his feet. —Do you want to talk any more about this Herbert picture you're going to do, or . . .

—But I am, he said. —I am. He looked from one of them to the other, from Recktall Brown to Basil Valentine, who stood over him. He looked bewildered. —Someone, who was it? said maybe we're fished for?

—Come along, my dear fellow. I'm going downtown, I'll drop you off.

—Or the seven heavens of the Arabs, he said decisively, making a hemisphere with one hand, which trembled as he held it forth. —Emerald, white silver, white pearls, then ruby, then gold, red gold, and then yellow jacinth, and the seventh of shining light . . .

Recktall Brown looked at his cigar. It had burned on the bias. —Look at this God-damned thing, he muttered. —This is the way they make cigars today. It's the way they do everything today, he said, and threw it into the fireplace. —Everybody but him, he added, and, walking over, put a hand on his shoulder as he got up.

—That vase, he said, motioning toward a glass-enclosed bookcase.

—That's not a fake, it's real. Early Netherlands ceramic.

—Can I take it? For a week or two.

—What do you need it for, it's damn valuable, Brown said.

—Lilies . . .

—Lilies, they're expensive here too, Brown went on, leading him toward the door slowly. —Fuller used to bring them in here by the armload, all held up by wires. I don't like them, they make me sick to my stomach. I told him to quit it. Nobody likes lilies much, why don't you use some other kind of a flower?

—In an *Annunciation* . . .

The dog followed them on one side, Basil Valentine on the other.

—Those little oak frames I got, I'll show them to you the next time, the ones with velvet inside them.

Basil Valentine held out the book he had picked up from the table before the fireplace. —Your Thoreau?

—Why . . . why yes, I . . .

—Hardly fifteenth-century reading. Though I'm as far in the other direction, I'm afraid. Valentine picked up the book which lay with his coat. —Dear Tertullian, he muttered. —And I suppose you're going to have your usual vulgar gathering this Christmas eve, Brown?

—I get more business done at those than a month in an office. This picture you've got now, he went on, turning, —as soon as you're done with it call me, I'll send down for it. And be careful with that vase. It's going to be a damn good auction, he said to Valentine. —You remember that Queen Anne sofa upstairs? There was enough perfect inlay in that to make two sofas and two chairs, part of the original in each one. Some smart guy says it's a fake, and you show him the original piece.

—Rather like Osiris, Basil Valentine said, pulling on his coat.

—What's that?

—They cut Osiris up in fourteen pieces, and later Isis modeled his body fourteen times, with an original piece in each one.

—Like a saint?

Basil Valentine smiled, lifting his coat by the lapels as he straightened it. —Precisely, my dear fellow.

Recktall Brown had taken a pigskin pad from his pocket. —Glassware, he mumbled, —for this auction. I've got some beautyful glassware, it's been in a manure pile out in the country, gives it that nice glittery effect, colors like you see in bubbles, that old glass has. Some wop taught me that trick.

—Italia irredenta. Basil Valentine reached down his hat. —That fine Italian hand, he said wearily, —which has taught us to make antiques by inflicting every possible indignity and abuse upon beautiful objects. He walked on toward the outside door.

Brown put the pad back into his pocket. —Be careful of that vase now, he muttered. —And don't forget what I told you. He nodded ahead of them. —Be careful of him.

—I . . . I wish you hadn't said what you did, he said, as Brown put the diamond-laden hand on his shoulder. —About her.

—About who?

—Her. Esme.

—Come on, my boy. Is she a good model for you?

—Yes, yes, she . . . why she can sit for three hours without moving.

—No needle marks on your Annunciation's arm, now.

—But you . . .

—She's a nice little piece, my boy, I know that too. But don't let that get in the way of your work. Don't let nothing get in the way of it. Here, don't forget your eggs.

—She says it's because she hasn't got any stomach, he said, smiling.

—Who?

—Esme. She says that's why she's a good model, because she hasn't got any stomach.

Recktall Brown stood in the hall, tapping his foot, until the outside door closed. Then he turned and went back to the vast room they had just left. The dog watched him approach, and got up when he came near, moving her stump of a tail slowly; but he stopped before he reached her, and she sat down. In the middle of the room, Recktall Brown took out a cigar and looked around him. He looked at the extensive wool tapestry on the wall to his right; but all their eyes were looking past him, in the other direction. He looked at the refectory table, where books and publications lay accounted for, and nothing moved. Then he turned abruptly, as though someone in the room with him had gone the instant his broad back was turned; but his youthful portrait was there, hanging silent as everything else. He raised his head, and looked up at the balcony where he saw the back of a rosewood chest, and the suit of armor standing patiently before the deed it had waited centuries to commit.

—Fuller! he shouted.

Then he turned toward the fireplace, and raised his cigar to the array of uneven teeth that had framed his cry. He looked at the Latin inscription over the fireplace, and bit off the end of the cigar. At his feet lay the crumpled reproduction from *Collectors Quarterly*. He noticed it, as he did anything which broke the pattern of the Aubusson roses, and with some effort he stooped over and picked it up. In four steps, he reached one of the leather chairs, where he sat down on the arm and raised his leg far enough to lay the crumpled paper against it. The unlighted cigar made erratic motions as it moved in his teeth, and he stared through the thick lenses, smoothing the picture out against his broad knee and its ample trouser with a wide thumb, which he exchanged, abruptly, for the edge of his hand.

His cry had risen to the balcony and beyond, into other rooms and withered, finding them empty, down a corridor then, to break against the wall and rebound, fractured, into the last crevice where it found asylum, embraced, however unwillingly, by Fuller's consciousness. Having written REKTIL BROWN on a piece of

paper and put it into his drawer some time earlier, Fuller sat on the edge of his bed in the windowless room, in sagging white underclothes, rubbing a yellow figure (drawn against the prospect of a cross) with his moist palm in the darkness.

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—Don't tell me you've come out without a coat?

—Yes, I . . . I must have left it behind.

—Or don't own one, is that it?

They walked toward the corner. It was almost dark. Basil Valentine talked. —There was an eighteenth-century Spanish bishop named Borja, who said "I don't speak French," when he was addressed in Latin. I think of him whenever I meet our remarkable benefactor. That portrait, you know. Did you notice the ears? How erect and sharp they are, sticking right out. He tried to have them corrected, brought closer to his head, years ago. A cheap operation, and he goes to the plastic surgeon every week now, sitting under a green lamp there for hours. The cartilage is gone. It's quite useless.

He silenced as two young men passed. One of them was saying, —tsa great sperchul achievement . . .

—You see what I mean. Valentine hailed a cab. —It seems to follow quite consistently, he went on as they got in, —people so bound to reality usually have something physically out of order about them.

Black-shod feet together on the shifting floor of the cab, he moved closer and took the vase. —It's a fake, you know, he said holding it up in both hands. —Are you surprised?

—In a way, it . . . but it is beautiful.

—Beautiful? Valentine lowered it to his lap. —It suggests beauty, perhaps. At the sudden draft on him, he looked up. —Yes, do roll your window down. You don't look well at all.

—I just . . . had to have some air.

—Are you free for dinner?

—Well, I don't usually . . . don't you have anything else?

—My dear fellow, there's only one engagement that cannot be broken, and I don't plan it for some little time. Come along up to my place for dinner then, and you can pick up these photographic details.

The cab halted, started off as though to accomplish a mile in a minute, and halted abruptly twenty yards on, where the driver exchanged twilight expletives with a bus driver. The sea of noise poured in, striking the leather seats, penetrating the occupants with thrusts of chaos, sounds of the world battling with night, primordial ages before music was discovered on earth. —I know your name. I've tried to think where.

—The *Collectors Quarterly*? Basil Valentine suggested easily; but his eyes turned, incisive, searching.

—No. Longer ago. Further away than that. But I've lost it now.

—You don't mean the ninth century Pope? Valentine sat back, relaxed, his tone cordial. —There was one by that name, but alas! he said, turning, to smile, —he reigned for barely forty days. He took out the cigarette case, and it opened in his hand. —Well?

—Brown told me, you see, he mentioned that you were . . . that you had studied with the Jesuits.

—Dear heaven! Basil Valentine almost laughed aloud. —For Brown, that probably has the most weird connotations, the most frightening implications. My dear fellow . . .

—But you did . . . for awhile you did train for the priesthood?

—In a manner of speaking. You have something of the priest in you yourself, you know.

—Damned little.

—Far more of that than the renegade painter.

—Are they so . . . separate then?

—My dear fellow, the priest is the guardian of mysteries. The artist is driven to expose them.

—A fatal likeness, then.

—A fatal dissension, and a fatal attraction. Tell me, does Brown pay you well?

—Pay me? I suppose. The money piles up there.

—Why?

—The money? It . . . binds the contract. It's the only thing he understands.

The clear eyes of drained blue no longer darted with assumed pleasure but glittered steadily, like water frozen so quickly. Valentine clutched Tertullian in his narrow lap. —You don't dislike him, do you.

—No.

—No. In fact you rather like him. And this contract?

—Contract? Yes, a debt . . . a debt which the person to whom you owe it refuses to acknowledge, is impossible to bear.

—And the money? . . . Valentine was studying every line in the face beside him, details suddenly broken with a constricted sound like laughter,

—The money? you . . . can't spend love.

The cab had stopped at a light and people were passing around it: the voice of a girl penetrated in clear Boston accents, —Somerset Maugham? Haha, hahahahaha, Somerset Maugham my ahss . . .

—Money buys privacy, my dear fellow, said Basil Valentine, leaning across his lap to roll up the window. —It frees one from the turmoil of those circumstances which the vulgar confuse with necessity. And necessity after all . . . what are you laughing at?

—Something earlier, something I thought of earlier but I didn't laugh then, when I thought of, when you were talking about, a novel? Writing a novel, We don't know what you're thinking, you said. I thought of Momus and Vulcan, I thought of my wife then. You remember the homunculus that Vulcan made? and Momus said, You should have put a little window in him, so we could see his innermost thoughts. And I remembered . . . listen,

—You're married?

—What happens? In this novel?

—What happens? Basil Valentine turned his full face.

—To me. The cab jolted to a start.

—Why, to you? Good heavens, I haven't the faintest notion. Valentine laughed shortly, looking ahead again. —I was about to say earlier, of necessity . . . but tell me, when you were a child . . .

—Necessity, yes. Yes, a hero? John Huss . . .

—Huss? Hardly, today, eh? John Huss? Someone's said, you know, anyone who accepts a martyr's part today is a coward. And you? what happens to you? he went on hurriedly. —I suppose you . . . well, let's say you eat your father, canonize your mother, and . . . what happens to people in novels? I don't read them. You drown, I suppose.

—That's too romantic.

—Novels are romantic.

—As though, death could end it?

—Have it your way, there is a step after death then. Valentine sat back and clasped his knee with folded hands. —After all, my dear fellow, you are an artist, and nothing can happen to you. An artist does not exist, except as a vehicle for his work. If you live simply in a world of shapes and smells? You're bound to become just that. Why your life, the way you live . . .

—Yes, I don't live, I'm . . . I am lived, he whispered.

Valentine turned to see him gripping his face in the breadth of a hand, whose finger-ends had gone white at the temple. —But, do you know how I feel sometimes? The hand dropped to clutch Valentine's arm, and Valentine looked up into the feverish eyes. —Like . . . as though I were reading a novel, yes. And then, reading it, but the hero fails to appear, fails to be working out some plan of comedy or, disaster? All the materials are there, yes. The sounds, the images, telephones and telephone numbers? The ships and subways, the . . . the . . .

—The half-known people, Valentine interrupted easily, —who miss the subways and lose each other's telephone numbers? Cavorting about dressed in the absurd costumes of the author's chaotic imagination, talking about each other . . .

—Yes, while I wait. I wait. Where is he? Listen, he's there all the time. None of them moves, but it reflects him, none of them . . . reacts, but to react with him, none of them hates but to hate with him, to hate him, and loving . . . none of them loves, but, loving . . .

—Loving?

The cab swerved suddenly. Basil Valentine was thrown against the window beside him, where he caught himself on his elbow. The man they had almost hit had seemed to hang in the air before them, the empty face a terrible exposure of nakedness.

—*Idiot!*

Basil Valentine's face in profile showed the vein standing out beneath the hat-brim, a face strong, unsympathetic, bearing all of the force which sympathy lacks, in lineaments (shaded now under the black brim of this Homburg) which belied childhood and youth.

—Idiot, he repeated, sitting back, unaware of the feverish stare fixed upon him.

Then the driver burst out over his shoulder, —You just try drivin a cab, Mac, if you think it's such a fuckin easy job.

Basil Valentine leaned forward. He was livid; but his voice was controlled. —I have no faint intention of wasting an instant considering such an absurd pastime. Now turn around and keep your obscenities to yourself, before you do run down someone as stupid as yourself.

—Listen Mac, don't give me any of that, who the hell are you, this is a fuckin free country . . .

—Pull up over here, driver.

The cab came to a precipitous stop. Basil Valentine looked at the vase, the eggs, the books, and chose the books to be seen with, carrying in the street. He read the meter as they got out, and was reaching deep into his change pocket when the cab roared away.

—But you . . . you really hate people, don't you, came the voice beside him.

—You see? Valentine said, not listening. He took out his cigarette case. —When I exclaimed, "idiot," of course I meant the . . . idiot whom we almost ran down. You see? They're the same, the ones who construct their own disasters so skillfully, in accord with the deepest parts of their ignorant nature, and then call it accident. He stood looking after the cab, a light poised before his cigarette.

—But . . . you really hate other people.

—My dear fellow, remember Emerson's advice, Basil Valentine said, and paused. There was a crash at the corner. From where they stood they could see that the cab had hit a bus. —We are advised to treat other people as though they were real, he said then, lighting his cigarette, —because, perhaps they are.

—I . . . I have to go.

—We're not dining, then?

—No, I . . . I have to get to work, I . . . it's late.

—But my dear fellow, of course I understand. And the van Eyck details, I'll drop them off at your place some time, shall I?

—Oh no, no don't, don't come down there, don't bother, I . . . goodbye, goodbye . . .

—Not goodbye, Basil Valentine said, extending his hand. —People don't say goodbye any more. You look up and they're gone, missing. You hear of them, in a country with exotic postage stamps, or dead at sea. I'll see you very soon. He smiled, and held the hand in his as though it were a creature he would suffocate.

In another cab a minute later, Basil Valentine found two books in his lap instead of one. He picked up the copy of Thoreau, and looked out of the rear window; but there, almost a block behind, people merged from all directions, and all that he could see at the point where they had separated were the tops of some lilies on a flower cart, stopped in the neon glow of a bar.

He faced forward again, thumbing the pages of the book, gold glittering at his cuff as he paused to glance at occasional sentences. The cab had turned east. As it stopped at a corner, the smile of a great and private pleasure drew out his lips, and he looked out the closed window. People who passed, passed quickly and silently, leaving behind a figure barely taller than the barrel organ mounted on a stick, whose handle he turned, his only motion, the hand, clockwise, barely more enduring than the sounds he released on the night air, sounds without the vanity of music, sounds unattached, squeaks and drawn wheezes, pathos in the minor key and then the shrill of loneliness related to nothing but itself, like the wind round the fireplace left standing after the house burned to the ground.

When the cab started again, he returned his eyes to the words underlined on the page before him: *What you seek in vain for, half your life, one day you come full upon, all the family at dinner. You seek it like a dream, and as soon as you find it, you become its prey*. And he was still looking at this line, and he was still smiling, when the cab stopped before his door.

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—Seven lilies?

Seven celestial fabrics, seven spheres, the colors of the seven planetary bodies: all these revolved above the flower cart. But above seventh heaven, we are told, there are seven seas of light, and then the veils, separating the Substances seven of each kind, and then, Paradise: seven stages, one above the other, canopied by the Throne of the Compassionate, discreetly remote from the tumult going on here in the middle distance. The lights changed, traffic moved, and waves of figures crested with faces dumbly unbroken, or spotted with the foam of confusion, or shattering their surfaces with speech, ebbed and flowed on a sea of noise, disdaining the music of the spheres.

The moment of evening loss is suggested in restricted portions of the sky which only suggest infinity, and that such an intimacy is possible when something rises from inside, to be skewered on the peaks or continue to rise untrammeled: a desperate moment for those with nowhere to go, the ones who lose their balance when they look up, passing on all sides here, invited nowhere, enjoying neither drink nor those they drank with but suddenly desolated, glancing up, stepping down from the curb alone, to seek anywhere (having forgot to make a date for "cocktails," asylum of glass, brittle words, olives from across the sea, and chromium) a place to escape this transition from day to night: a grotesque time of loneliness, for what has been sought is almost visible, and requires, perhaps, no more than a priest to bring it forth. Restricted above the seven lilies, the sky lay in just such a portion as the Etruscan priest might have traced with his wand when, building the temple, he outlined on the sky the foundation at his feet, delivering the residence of deity to earth.

Seven days, seven seals, seven bullocks in burnt offering; seven times Jacob bowed before Esau; seven stars the angels of the seven churches, seven lamps which are the seven spirits, seven stars in his right hand; seven years in Eden; and seven times seven years to the jubilee trumpet; seven years of plenty, seven years of famine; so Nebuchadnezzar heated the furnace seven times more than it was wont to be heated, to purge the three who refused to bow down before the golden image sixty forearms (counting to the end of the middle finger) high, and six wide; and when they came through unscathed and unscorched, the king exclaimed, —Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and quite sensibly joined them in their fearful subscription to a Hostility Who could afford no other gods before Him, and would seem to have triumphed in this fracas which took place not too far distant from India, where things remained quiet enough that many heard a serene voice saying, *Even those who worship other gods worship me although they know it not.*

—A priest?

—You remember me.

—Look out, chum. Look out of the way, said the flower-cart man.

—Don't you remember me?

—Here wait, I . . . could you sell me these lilies?

—Hurry up then, there's a cop coming. I'll leave you have all seven for a dollar, said the flower-cart man.

—Your face, yes, your face, but . . .

—Come on, chum. Talk to your friend here or give me a buck. There's a cop coming, the flower-cart man interrupted.

—I knew your face, but the round collar . . .

—And I knew you half a block away. But up close you don't look like yourself at all. It must be two years . . . ?

—Two years?

—Since I saw you, that night, New Year's Eve, with your wife in the street. John picked up his suitcase again. It was a large, and apparently heavy Gladstone bag, which he'd put down to shake hands, stood with his palm open, extended, and withdrawn it when the confusion his gesture had caused threatened upset among the driving currents of people, the threat of smashed eggs, fallen lilies, and a broken vase, which he stood over now protecting with his large black-coated frame, ballasted by the heavy bag. —But I have to make a train, he said. He took half a step back. Then his face streamed crimson: for a full second his large features were at once exposed stilled by surprise and swimming in the harsh brilliance of the three neon letters above. He recovered his half-step, dropped the bag with another step forward and brought up a supporting arm. —What's the matter? Are you all right? His eyes fell under the shadow of the soft black hat-brim, and were gone as the lower part of his face, the moving lips, shone livid under the letters BAR blazing green. —Are you all right?

—Yes, good night. Good night.

—But I can't just leave you . . .

—Your train, your train.

—But what is it? You're shaking. John's features showed no shape now, his whole face shaded under the soft black hat-brim as his shoulders and both extended arms were caught again in the blazing letters, and an empty hand, then two, as the laden figure turned from his support. —But here . . .

—Good night. Your train. And you can't come in here. It's a bar.

—Bar? Certainly I can, I'll help you. John caught up his bag with one hand, and caught an elbow with the other. A lily dropped.

—Wait!

—What?

—The lily?

—I'll get it. Now, here . . . be careful of the door.

In the dim-lit end of the bar, shadows were contorted in the effervescent illumination of the juke-box; which also played *Let's Do It.* John cleared his throat and spoke in an attempted convivial tone, —What are you doing with lilies and, eggs is it?

—Yes, a little brandy.

—Overwork? Here. Do you feel better? Take a lesson from the lilies. John smiled, and extended a hand. —They toil not . . . The wrist on the bar was jerked away from him. —Are you all right? he asked again, seeking for some sign in the profile of the face turned from him, and he found none, and faced forward himself. There his eyes rose to the mirror behind the bar, where a fevered stare pinioned them for an instant.

—Did either of you guys . . . excuse me, father, did either of you gentlemen put in a call to Miami? the

bartender intruded between them and the mirror. John shook his head; and when the bulk of the bartender moved on, he saw the reflection of his own face overcome with youth in such proximity to one who looked twice his age. —When I mentioned to your father . . . he commenced.

—My father!

—Yes. I mentioned I'd seen you, I didn't say . . .

—You saw my father?

—Why yes, traveling. On church business, I happened to stop in your town, and saw him.

—What did he say?

—What did he say? Why . . . John repeated. —He didn't say . . . we talked church business, that's about all. He smiled again, but drew back.

—But my father?

—Church business, John faltered, and cleared his throat again. —You see, I do a good deal of traveling, among out-of-the-way parishes where enrollment has fallen down, it's part of the revival in religious . . . interest going on all over the country, a lot of it is inter-denominational . . .

—But my father? What did he say?

—Well to tell you the truth, John commenced, and looked down again, catching a cuff against his coat to draw it back and look at his wrist watch, —to tell the truth . . . he's quite old, isn't he. And he wasn't . . . very co-operative. The pressing necessities of the times . . .

—But what did he say?

Looking up, John's face startled more at finding itself uncomposed in the glass. —It was strange, he said, and paused at the apparently unfamiliar resonance in his own voice, going on, —I got there on Sunday, Sunday morning. I thought, Why not go in and hear his sermon? That's always a good way to get a picture of the problems a congregation . . . a minister may be up against, but . . . It was strange. When I went into church, there was almost the feeling the sunlight had stopped. He's a big man, but it was his voice. He towered over the pulpit, he was holding onto it with both hands when I came in, and afterward I looked around at the faces . . . the sermon, his sermon was on some primitive Australian religion, but you see, to tell the truth . . .

—What?

John looked up. The lilies on the bar were browning at the edges. He shifted his eyes only far enough to reach the image beside his own in the mirror, but found only a stare of feverish continence which was lost below the mirror's edge. —I remember every word of that Australian . . . legend, the parallel he was drawing with . . . Christianity, I can't get it out of my mind. John had clutched the edge of the bar, lowering his voice and slowing his words, —*Boyma big man; very budgery man. Him sit on big glass stone. Him son Grogoragally can see everything and go everywhere. See budgery man, like him; see bad man, plenty too much devil devil. Likes budgery man; no likes bad man: he growl too much. Budgery man die, Grogoragally tell Boyma; Boyma say, "Take him Ballima way, plenty budgery place." Bad man die; Boyma say, "Take him Oorooma way, plenty too hot, him growl there." Grogoragally plenty strong, him not so strong as Boyma* . . .

Several people in the bar were looking in their direction. One detached himself and set out toward them, slowly, with the care of a navigator. Before him, his hands composed a shivering binnacle for what served, on this voyage, as a compass, a glass of whisky, perilously plumb between the gimbals of his fingers.

—It was strange, it was as though he could lead every good Protestant there . . . Oorooma way, if he wanted to. And then, when I walked home with him he would hardly talk about it, he would hardly talk about any of the things that a . . . man with the pressing responsibilities . . .

—Say, gentlemen, said a voice behind them. —I enjoyed your sermon. It was the figure from down the bar, a dilapidated bark indeed, heaving in toward shore now and seeking anchorage.

—But . . . me? He didn't ask about me?

—Well, to tell the truth I . . . scarcely mentioned . . . I said I'd seen you, and he asked in an absent way . . . it's an absent way he seems to have about everything, everything except when I saw him in the church. When I was talking to him, I'd turn to see he'd stopped, standing staring straight up at the sun . . .

—Gentlemen, I have a religion too, said the voice. —I'm a drunkard. Would you like to join my church?

—But you, John said, bringing a hand up, and the wrist beside the lilies on the bar did not draw away from his touch, —you need a rest, don't you. As his arm had come up, the sleeve drew back to expose the face of his wrist watch. —I have to hurry, but I wish . . . to tell the truth, when I saw you out there on the street I thought I recognized you and then I thought No, it can't be, it's an old man.

—Gentlemen . . .

—I have to hurry now, I have to make that train. Will you be all right?

—Gentlemen, I have a religion too . . .

—If you could come up to visit us, you and your wife? We could talk like we did when we were . . .

because I've wondered about you, I've thought about you, I've wished you hadn't changed your mind about . . .

—Gentlemen . . .

—Here, don't forget your eggs. Will you be all right now?

—Would you like to join my church?

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Down from the surface of earth led the steps of the subway, one creation beneath another: the earth upon water; the water upon rock; the rock on the back of the bull; the bull on the bed of sand; the sand on the fish; the fish upon a still suffocating wind; the wind on a vale of darkness; the darkness on a mist.

And there beneath the mist? Jahennem, which consists of seven stages, one beneath another.

—The story about the lady saint, do you remember. You told me about her. So precious little you have told me, Esme said, —so precious little . . . running her fingers down the edge of a drawn shade, her back turned on the basement room. The bare electric bulb in the center of the low ceiling cast her shadow before her on the shade; she moved her hand to follow the outline of that dark shape laid there upon the light. —The lady saint they followed in the convent, for she left behind her a sweet odor clinging to the flags. The odor of sanc-tity. That is what you told me, she said turning to where her profile became almost apparent in the shadow. —What are you doing? What are you doing now?

Air never came through the room; but now, behind her a fresh new smell penetrated the weight of the others which had filled the air so long, resting there on the heavy smell of boiled stand oil risen from what looked like a pot of honey, to support the scent of lavender which was even now being driven away by something more fresh and pungent. —This color, he murmured.

—What color? She came across the room quickly to look into the pan where Venice turpentine was being heated with verdigris.

—The green, the green forming here.

—It is beautiful green. Beautiful green from a long time ago, before us. And before my mother, but it is not the blue. How quiet it is for now, she went on. —What was her name? She watched him take the pan from the hot coil to the table beside the empty easel, off near another wall where canvases were stacked, some unprepared, and some begun; behind them, two panels of thin aging oak; and then the mirrors. —And everything she touched held the delicious odor of sanctity days after she had touched it. What was her name? Esme sat on a stool in front of the fireplace, her chin in her hand, watching him. He seldom talked to her; she sat now where she had sat silent times she could not number while he studied her in the strong artificial light, not (he once explained) to find what was there, but to find what he could put there, and take away: for at first, wanting to hide her face, fearing close scrutiny, she had behaved as though someone from outside might discover something in her she did not know about herself, so unprepared was she to conceal or defend it. But the paintings done of her not to be of her at all, she found; and sat now, watching his lips move silently, and hers moved silently. Not to be of her at all, —but my bones and my shadows those of someone so long since dead, dead if she ever lived at all. Esme abandoned this exhibit of herself entirely, permitting what she showed to be indeed a counterfeit creature: the things she wore were nothing Esme would ever have worn: here half in profile, the blue cloth of velvet broken over her shoulder and across her breasts, and her hair drawn straightly down, she was safe away, her uninhabited face left in austere perfection, for him to search with clinical coldness, —but not to discover me here; rather academic disinterest, technical intensity, —not the eyes of a lover.

—Saint Catherine de Ricci, he said aloud, speaking the words of the pattern his lips had rehearsed. —A Dominicaness. She was a stigmatist, he added in a murmur.

—A stig-ma-tist? Saint Catherine de Ricci, a stig-matist.

Littered about the room were details of paintings, magnified reproductions of details from Bouts, van der Weyden, van der Goes; and some photographs of such high magnification that few experts could have told whose work they represented, details of brushwork.

—You did not tell me where those old flowers came from. You cannot paint them. They are almost dead. But I like the vase you brought. It is a very lovely vase.

—You . . . you may have it, he said quickly. —Yes, when I'm done with it, you may have it if you like. He stood beside the end-table whose top served as a palette.

—And the flowers too. Yes, and the flowers, too?

—Then they will be dead.

—Yes, they will. Where did you find them? How?

—A man sold them. A man in a hurry to be given a dollar. A policeman's coming, he says to me. A cop's coming.

—Is it against the law, then, to sell lilies? She waited. She looked up from them to him. He had only murmured, answering, busy over the table. She looked back down at them. —They are the flower of pur-i-ty, she said.

He stopped and looked up. —Lilies in India, he said clearly. —Great heart-shaped leaves on a fourteen-foot stem, and a dozen white flowers stained with purple . . . He broke off, and returned to what he was doing.

—Why did you go to In-dia?

—No. No, I didn't.

—And the lilies there?

—I remember them, he said, not looking up.

—I know, like I remember Baby and I were baked in a pie. And sometimes I try to write a poem and I cannot; and so I write down something I remember. It is the same feeling. I wrote down the poem about Baby and I were baked in a pie and some silly boy thought it was my po-em! Then she said, —I dreamt about you. She paused. —I dreamt you came to visit me. But when you knocked on the door, I opened the door and there was no one there. No one was there.

He was grinding something in a mortar. He did not stop.

—But I dreamt about you again. That was a terrible dream and I will tell you about it now because the mirrors are put away. Do not put them up again.

—Why not? He glanced up, because even across the room her shudder came, and the braying pestle stopped.

—Because they have terrible memories. There you were, as you are when you paint. With a long piece of rough brown cloth draped round your shoulders like you were, holding a stick that was the long handle of a spade, and unshaved too on your face, leaping from one mirror to another which held you whenever you stopped to fix it in the paint, flesh drawn over the hard bones, fixing only something lost and curious to be found again, staring out four times from the paint, reflecting itself in age and emptiness, so curious to be rescued each time you stopped. That big mirror was almost behind you, you kept looking over your shoulder like you do, pursuing yourself there, and then it caught you, you were caught in the mirror. And I could not help you out. Could that happen? Could that happen? I could not help you out.

He put down the mortar, and the pestle into it, and raised his hand to his eye, and rubbed his eye with the heel of his hand.

—Could that happen? she whispered.

The easel, erect between them, was empty. He looked beyond it to her and said, —Why have you put that . . . that blue thing on you now?

—So you may work, she said. —So that I am the lady in the picture.

—But I . . . I'm not working now, not on that. No, isn't it finished? Isn't it finished? he said suddenly, loudly. He went to the wall, and moved two books on the floor with his foot, to turn the large surface of the painting out. —Yes, yes. Yes it is, I thought it was. Good God, I thought it was. He brought it out and leaned it on the floor against the easel. —Now I . . . I have to work on it now. But it's finished. He looked up to her. —I . . . I didn't notice that you'd . . . that you thought you were going to sit tonight. Yes, yes, that's why I was surprised when you came. When you came I thought, maybe it wasn't finished.

—Then I am not to be the lady in the painting any more? The blue cloth slipped from her shoulder, taking the strap of her slip with it. She drew it back slowly. —And then I must . . . dress like they are now.

—You . . . you . . . what you like, he said turning away, to look for a knife on the table.

—To play you the lute, she said, getting down all of a sudden, —like you said they did for him. In the convent where he came, they tried to soothe and comfort him, playing the lute, she said gently, standing near to him. He looked up. —You told me, she said, gently, as though defending herself against the eyes he turned upon her.

—And did it help, their damned lute? And did it help?

—You told me, it did not, she said. She took three steps past him. —You don't need me then?

—I don't need you.

—Shall I go away?

He did not answer.

—Shall I go away?

Then he said, —Is there someone there, waiting?

—If there is no one there, and there is no one here?

He said nothing; but stood before the painting with a sketch of it in one hand, a sketch on which large blemishes were indicated.

She picked a book up from the floor. —I could read to you, she said. His lips parted, but he did not speak.

He tapped his thumb on the knife blade. She sat on the edge of the low bed, running her fingertips over the print on the page. Then she commenced, —In den alten Zeiten, wo das Wünschen noch geholfen hat, lebte ein König, dessen Töchter waren alle schön, aber die jüngste war so schön, dass die Sonne selber, die doch so vieles gesehen hat, sich verwunderte, so oft sie ihr ins Gesicht schien. She looked up, smiling.

—But you read it beautifully. I . . . I didn't know you could.

—Nor did I, she said.

—Where did you learn it, to read German?

—Just now, she answered.

—You don't understand it?

—Not the words, she answered. —It is very beautiful.

—I learned in this book, he said, taking it from her, and he stared at the cover. —Die Brüder Grimm . . . He handed it back. —Shall I tell you what they mean, the words?

She smiled to him, in answer.

—"In olden times, when wishes still availed, there lived a king, whose daughters all were fair, but the youngest was so fair . . ."

Her lips followed his voice from the page, —aber die jüngste war so schön, dass die Sonne selber . . .

—"That the sun itself . . ." He stood over her, looking down at her shoulder, and he stopped. —Wait, he said. —Have you . . . have you got . . . you don't have to go now?

—No, she said looking up, her eyes widely open. —I'm here.

—Will you sit up there for a minute? He gestured to the far stool, and went to the wall where he pulled one canvas after another aside.

She sat, her head half turned; and her face emptied of the curiosity and life of an instant before. If anything of life was left, it was a vague look of yearning, but that without expectation. All that moved in the room were his eyes, and his arm, touching with a pencil at the monochrome on the soiled surface of the gesso, pausing, rubbing the lines away with his thumb.

Suddenly she turned. —What's that?

—Be quiet. What?

—That. You were working on a piece of wood, and here is a piece of canvas.

—Linen, he said. —Be quiet. Turn your head back. Where it was. Where it was, damn it.

—When?

—There. Yes, yes, he said in a hoarse whisper. She was silent, beyond the outlines which she fitted perfectly enough to have cast them there in a quick reflection done without intent, without knowing. Some time passed. With each motion of his hand the form under it assumed a reality to exclude them both, to empty their words of content if they spoke, or, breathing, their breath of that transitory detail of living measured to one end; but left them, his motions only affirmations of this presence which projected her there in a form it imposed, in lines it dictated and colors it assumed, and the accidents of flesh which it disdained.

—Draw the cloth up, he said. —There, draw it up there. Just that part.

She turned, as quickly as a thing is dropped, and broken. His eyes were fixed part closed as though looking into a strong light. —A part every day, she cried, laughing, for his arm had stopped moving. —That's the way you wash when you have no tub, you wash a part every day, Monday is for the feet, Tuesday is knees day, Wednesday is thighs day . . . She stopped speaking, and hid her face away from him in embarrassment. He had not been looking at her arm or shoulder, or the line of the bone around her eye, not just a part but at her.

—Thursday? he asked, smiling, from the stool where he sat.

She got up, shedding the length of blue cloth to the dirty floor between them. She came and stood over him. She stood with a hand on his shoulder, gripping him there, bending over him, and her small breast spilled toward him, breaking its shape easily.

—It's my picture! You're making a picture of me!

—Do you think so? he asked quietly.

—Why does it look so old? A picture of me that looks so old.

—It's a study. The next picture, the next . . . painting I'm going to do, this . . . little . . .

—You . . .

—I . . .

She had both arms around his shoulders; and the breath denied by the form before them came the more quickly. He straightened up and stood, straightened her to her feet and turned away from her. —That's all, he said. —We'll stop for today, very much the way he always said it. He took the soiled thing down from the easel. —I have to work on this, he said, approaching the large finished painting which stood on the

floor almost between them. —Can you help me lift it up.

She stood staring at him, as though to stop his motions with the seizure of her eyes.

—Esme?

She lifted the other end of the thing, and they raised it. He picked up the knife again.

Kinder- und Hausmärchen lay at her feet, one of half a dozen books in the place. —How beautiful she is, no longer me, Esme said, looking at the prolonged figure in the painting, —for she is dead.

Over the emphatic drawing and the underpainting, translucent colors were fixed in intimate detail upon the established forms, colors added separately, unmixed on the palette, layer upon layer, constructed from within as necessity disposed these faces emptied in this perfect moment of the transient violence of life.

Round the closed eyes of the Virgin, where she looked now, the highlights were not opaque colors on the surface, but from the light underpainting tinted with ultramarine.

—Dead before death was defamed, she said, —as it is by those who die around us now, dying absurdly, for no reason, in embarrassment that the secret, the dirty secret kept so long, is being exposed, and they cannot help it, cannot hide it longer, nor pretend as they have spent their life in doing, that it does not exist. Yes, the blue, the beautiful blue of Her mantle there. How abashed they are to leave us, making up excuses and apologies with every last breath, so ashamed are we to die alone. How shocking it will be to see the day come again, out where they are, where the law does not permit him to sell lilies.

She moved away, to pull on a dress, and a coat, and treading on the length of blue cloth she approached him again from behind, where he stood in the strong light with the knife, and raised it to the face laid with closed eyes near the top of the composition.

—Before death was dishonored, she said, watching his hand move, —as you are dishonoring it now.

He continued to work. For some minutes there was no sound but the scratching of his blade. Then he turned round, raising his eyebrows in a mild surprise at the empty room, drawing his nostrils at the delicate scent which had returned and remained (for the brief pungence of the Venice turpentine had penetrated and was gone), as affirmative of recognition as the sight of blood, as the blood gushing on every Friday from the stigmata of Francesca de Serrone, blood with the odor of violets.

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On the door, locked and bolted, she pinned a sign: *Do Not Disturb Me I Am Working Esme*. What worse thing could have happened, than had happened that morning. She had hidden the needle, the good silver (No. 22) needle with the glass syringe, in the black metal box on the wall over the sink. Who would think of looking there? Who, but a man in uniform. He entered carrying a flashlight, to walk past her and open the black box there on the wall over the sink without hesitating. He turned his light into the box, wrote something on a pad, then took the needle out and handed it to her. —You shouldn't put things in here, ma'am. It's liable to interfere with the meter. He saluted her hand-to-cap and went away.

She sat with a piece of white paper before her, the penholder's end in her mouth like a child told to write a letter home, being watched writing it, the letter to be read by her familiar jailer before it is mailed home. Over the paper she followed the course of an ant, pursuing its frantic flight with the scrupulously cruel point of the pen, leaving behind a trail of black crossing and recrossing until the ant escaped to the rust-colored arm of her chair.

How were they all so certain? calling her "Esme": they knew she was *Esme* when she did not know, who she was or who Esme, if both were the same, every moment, when they were there, or when she was alone, both she. But she could not deny that they were right, for who would be making that denial? and if *who* could not be *no one*, it must be Esme. She thought now of undressing; and the thought was too much to bear, to undress alone, and stand there naked alone; with nothing, even shadows in this bare room, to cover her.

Across the bottom of the page where the terror of the ant was drawn she wrote, *An ant going home who does not live anywhere*.

Worse had been two nights before: asked her age, earlier, she had told it: twenty-nine. (That was the way she did, adding a year to this slow number when May appeared, and passed, taking another year with it.) Then alone at night, she had thought of the indelible year of her birth, subtracted it from this year whose number she shared with everyone, and come out with thirty. A year missing? She turned on the light, and covered three pages with numbers: the year, and her age opposite; and then the year and the month and her age; then the year, the month, her age, and where she had been and what doing. Still a year lacked, unaccounted for. And when she put down the year of her daughter's birth and worked toward it from the past and the present, *it* was the year missing. Was her daughter unborn? Whence was the year missing? from her life? or from time? Unsolved, it became a part in that world where she lay alone, unasleep at night, her limbs cold and her feet almost blue (though the room was not cold) she saw before she turned

out the light: moving none of her body (thinking about other things) and then with abrupt horror remembered her body which she could not feel, all awareness gone from her legs. Was one resting against the other? or alone? The slightest move would tell, were they there? would have told immediately, if she had moved immediately this doubt came. But not having turned a foot, nor thrown back a hand in that instant of doubt the doubt grew, deepened and she in it engulfed in paralytic terror, unable to see in that darkness whether those limbs had melted into an amorphous mass, or into nothing; unable to turn on the light, without moving, then she would try to think of something else, and move unconsciously; but she was unable to deceive herself so, unable to move until some extreme of her moved itself in exhaustion.

Esme stared at a fresh page of paper. Her face, more and more forgotten as effort worked through her, took a sulking look: one of fear, remembering now a sculpture of her head and bust made once by a student who did not know that, when the plaster dried, it would shrink one-tenth the size he had modeled it, so that he made the cord tight which supported the neck, and when it dried they found death's excellent likeness of her head pendent, swinging gently with the door they had opened upon it. She hated herself for the fear which rose and choked her at that instant: the same terror that came at other times when, almost asleep, she woke suddenly with a deep breath of life, and the certainty that she had not been breathing, had recovered herself with her breath at the last instant of living possible: and then hating herself for her direct thankfulness at recovery, she who never wanted to recover.

She wrote slowly, with no effort apparent but as from memory, in confident trust as poetry is written,

> Who, if I cried, would hear me among the angelic
> orders? And even if one of them suddenly
> pressed me against his heart, I should fade in the strength of his
> stronger existence. For Beauty's nothing
> but beginning of Terror we're still just able to bear,
> and why we adore it so is because it serenely
> disdains to destroy us. Each single angel . . .

Then a knock sounded on her door, and drew her cold limbs abruptly in to her, startled and afraid.

PART II

I

> A thousand accidents may and will interpose a veil between our present consciousness and the secret inscriptions of the mind; accidents of the same sort will also rend away this veil; but whether veiled or unveiled, the inscription remains forever; just as the stars seem to withdraw before the common light of day; whereas in fact we all know that it is the light which is drawn over them as a veil, and that they are waiting to be revealed when the obscuring daylight shall have withdrawn.
>
> —Thomas De Quincey

Mr. pivner stepped out of his office building, to the street. He moved warily, for not long before he had almost been knocked down by a cab. The December sky was gray, and the air dissolved in rain. To the south, however, lay a small portion almost rectangular in shape and extravagantly blue. It was banded by an arrogant streak of purple. He walked into the street without disturbing himself to verify the color of the sky, exposing his face and the pinched knot in his necktie to the rain which he could hear drumming on the brim of his hat. At three o'clock in the afternoon Eddie Zefnic, the office boy who daily during summer observed Mr. Pivner's wilting collar with the greeting, —Hot enough for you Mister Pivner? stopped to brood beside one of the long office windows. He stared out on the city until Mr. Pivner reached that critical point in his signature, the capital "P," which he liked to make a figure of dashing individuality even on order forms. As the pen touched paper, —It's a real winter day out all right Mister Pivner, interrupted. He looked up, startled, botching the initial miserably. In other parts of the world, as unreal as New York was inevitable, the sky may have been sporting snow, sleet, cumulus clouds and thunderheads, the consoling pattern of a mackerel sky, or only itself, tenanted by a sun in the vastness of even blue so immense that it would seem darkness had never existed. But when Mr. Pivner returned to his signature, the sky was settled for him. It was a lowering but safely remote, dull and unconscious gray.

Consequently there was no reason for him to stand idly in the wet, looking about and questioning the sky, when he came out of that office building. Little good would it have done him had he bothered. Tons of concrete and other opaque building materials stood between him and that impudent portion of blue.

In the fragment of sky which the buildings permitted above him flags were being lowered. For the full day they had floated, as much as the rain would allow, heraldic devices of marvelous power, far more impressive than a fiery cross, or the six balls of the Medici. A great bell signaled a telephone company which was omnipotent. Three strokes of white lightning on a blue ground hailed an electric company which controlled the allegiances of an office force equal to the medieval duchy of Mantua. The whole scene was lit by electricity, escaping statically in incandescent bulbs and, in splendidly colored fluidity adding a note of metaphysical (Bergsonian) hilarity to the air of well-curbed excitement, in tubes of glass cleverly contorted to spell out cacophonous syllables of words from a coined language, and names spawned in the estaminets of Antwerp. Any natural light which fell in from the sky, pale in impotence, was charitably neglected; but that sky, as has been noted, was a safe distance away.

Beneath these failing banners, these crippled ensigns depressing earthward under their own sodden weight, Mr. Pivner walked through the streets, head covered but bowed. Marvelous constructions passed him: a blackened truck with blackened men and pails hanging from every projection, dragging a cart bellied with open fire under a tub of molten asphalt, came almost over his feet. He barely glanced at it. The names AJAX and HERCULES borne in gold thundered by at an arm's reach, but Mr. Pivner did not appear to read. He stepped back, respectful as all ages of the expedition of heroes.

He had made this trip, a distance never measured in miles but in minutes, hundreds of times. Fortunately he had formed it as habit, for he accomplished it without thinking for a moment of where he was going, leaving his mind emptily cordial to the reflections of vacancy in the faces which stared with the same incurious anxiety at his own. If he had not rehearsed the trip many times, he might more easily have found himself among the flaming piles of rubble on a nearby city dump, which was a comparable distance away, far easier to reach, and whose central incineration plant had won a prize in functional architecture only ten years before.

Over and under the ground he hurried toward the place where he lived. No fragment of time nor space anywhere was wasted, every instant and every cubic centimeter crowded crushing outward upon the next with the concentrated activity of a continent spending itself upon a rock island, made a world to itself where no present existed. Each minute and each cubic inch was hurled against that which would follow, measured in terms of it, dictating a future as inevitable as the past, coined upon eight million counterfeits who moved with the plumbing weight of lead coated with the frenzied hope of quicksilver, protecting at every pass the cherished falsity of their milled edges against the threat of hardness in their neighbors as they were rung together, fallen from the Hand they feared but could no longer name, upon the pitiless table stretching all about them, tumbling there in all the desperate variety of which counterfeit is capable, from the perfect alloy recast under weight to the thudding heaviness of lead, and the thinly coated brittle terror of glass.

The subway stopped under a river. It stayed there for minutes, while the occupants looked at one another, surreptitiously, appraising the company with whom they were trapped to meet disaster. One or two, not alone, started explanations for the delay, —Lines wet . . . —Somebody probly jumped . . . and stopped speaking, embarrassed at the sounds of their own voices. It stayed there for minutes, as though to iterate to their consciousness that they were unprotected, unknown, that they did not exist singly but only in aggregate, material for headlines. Mr. Pivner stared at an advertisement which, like 90 per cent of the advertisements he read, had no possible application in his life. He had no sewer; but with glazed attention he read, "Look, darling, he found my necklace," spoken by a lady, of the Roto-Rooter Service man, who offered to come "to Razor Kleen that clogged sewer . . . No charge if we fail . . ." The subway stayed there for long enough to send one woman (who looked foreign, they said later at dinner tables) into hysterics, moaning that her head was swelling, tugging the tight hatband away from it and running down the car to thrust her head into people's faces, couldn't they see it was swelling? And they withdrew, abashed at this articulation of their own terror. Then the subway started and flashed its way into rock.

Mr. Pivner came out upon the street, to see a crowd gathering at the far corner. He turned his coat collar up again and pulled his hat down. When he reached the crowd, he looked where they were looking, up: at a man poised on a ledge eight stories above. Lights shone on him. Figures leaned from nearby windows. The crowd shifted impatiently. —Don't he know it's raining? I wish he'd get it done, if he's going to do it, a man said to Mr. Pivner. Mr. Pivner only stared. As he did, the rhythm of the crowd's voice took shape. They chanted, —Jump . . . jump . . . jump . . . and the figure above drew back. —JUMP . . . JUMP . . . JUMP . . . they chanted. A priest appeared at the window nearest him. —J U M P . . . J U M P . . . J U M P . . . The figure drew back, further, toward the priest. A young man leaning from the door of a car with a *Press* card in the

windshield said to his companion, —The son of a bitch isn't going to jump . . .

Two blocks further on, Mr. Pivner stopped to buy a newspaper. There a man was arguing with the newsvendor, hatless, weaving slightly. He had started to leave, but turned saying, —Now don't start to get obnoxious . . .

—Hello, Jerry, Mr. Pivner said, taking a paper. Jerry said, —Wet enough for you? Mr. Pivner said, —What's the matter with that fellow?

—Him? Aw, drunks get lonely sometimes. You know, he don't care what he says, he oney wants to talk to somebody.

—You're quite a philosopher Jerry, said Mr. Pivner, and went on, stopping in anxious habit at curbs, turning corners, glancing at passing shoe-tops, stockinged legs and trouser legs. Then with the city's suddenness someone was walking beside him. Their steps matched in a precise off-beat, ordained syncopation of doom on the wet pavement. Mr. Pivner walked faster, from fear was it? or revulsion? and still the man came on, beside and just behind him. Could he stop to light a cigarette? or for an untied shoelace? But the rain beat down around him and he walked on, again quickening his footsteps as they were echoed close upon him. When he turned down his street he looked back. The other continued straight, hat pulled down against the rain.

That street was quiet. There were no leaves dead and blowing in the gutters, because there were no trees within hope of the most boisterous wind. But there were forlorn bits of paper, candy wrappers, newspaper, paper bags, as satisfactorily dead and unmercied as winter's brown leaves in any village side street.

Like the others, Mr. Pivner spent little time at ground level. He was usually moving rapidly beneath it, or taking his spurious ease some ells above. Up he rose in the elevator, out into the passage, and he opened his door with one of a number of keys he carried, a satisfaction no one can know who does not keep a secret and private self locked away from eight million others. He stood for a moment in his open doorway, as he always did, lighting the rooms with the button at his hand and looking through the rooms in that instant of anxiety which waited always to be expanded into full terror at finding the place burgled, finding under the hand of the careless burglar the intimate slaughter of his secret self. But everything was in order, silently waiting to affirm him, holding there the sense of the half-known waiting for eventual discovery in a final recognition of himself. He took off his hat and shook it (having hurried home as though his own coronation were waiting), and moved now with the slow deliberation of lonely people who have time for every meager requirement of their lives. He took off his coat, shook it, and looked at the spots he had made on the wallpaper.

The small apartment was as inoffensive as himself. Like the defiantly patternless botch of colors he wore upon his necktie, signal of his individuality to the neckties that he met screaming the same claim of independence from the innominate morass of their wearers, the apartment's claims to distinction were mass-produced flower- and hunting-prints, filling a need they had manufactured themselves, heavy furniture with neither the seductive ugliness of functional pieces nor the isolate dumb beauty of something chosen for itself: in matching, they fulfilled their first requirement, as did the hopeless style of his brown pleated trousers which matched his brown coat, double-breasted over a chest resigned to be forever hidden like a thing of shame, whitening to yellowness with the years so that to show it now would be indeed offensive. It was a part of the body which he had never learned to use, never having been so poor that he was forced to feel the strain and growth of its muscles in the expansion of labor; nor rich enough to feel it liberated in those games (requiring courts, eighteen-hole courses, bridle-paths) which rich people played. Totally unconscious of itself except when something went wrong, that body served only to keep his identity intact, and was kept covered, like this room, to offend no one.

He turned the radio on, and adjusted his hearing, so that he heard only a comforting confusion of sound. An electric reading lamp, capable at a turn of a finger of three degrees of intensity, stood (just out of reach) beside a large chair. Behind was a veneered secretary of anonymous century and unavowed design, holding protected behind glass an assortment of books published by the hundred-thousand, treatises on the cultivation of the individual *self*, prescriptions of superficial alterations in vulgarity read with excruciating eagerness by men alone in big chairs, the three-way lamp turned to its wildest brilliance as they fingered those desperate blazons of individuality tied in mean knots at their throats, fastened monogrammed tie-clasps the more firmly, swung keys on gold-plated monogram-bearing ("Individualized") key-chains, tightened their arms against wallets in inside pockets which held the papers proving their identity beyond doubt to others and in moments of Doubt to themselves, papers in such variety that the bearer himself became their appurtenance, each one contemplating over words in a book (which had sold four million copies: How to Speak Effectively; Conquer Fear; Increase Your Income; Develop Self-Confidence; "Sell" Yourself and Your Ideas; Improve Your Memory; Increase Your Ability to Handle People; Win More Friends; Improve Your Personality; Prepare for Leadership) the Self which had ceased to exist the day they stopped

seeking it alone.

——I knew it couldn't work out. I knew he was too good. I should have known . . . said a girl's voice on the radio, ——O God, what have I *du-un* . . .

On the end-table stood a ship model, a square-rigged man-o'-war set with so much sail (it was all metal) that it would have tumbled stern-over-prow in the idlest wind, furnished with so many guns that one of its own broadsides would have sent it heeling over to the bottom. The telephone was here too, and it was here that Mr. Pivner suddenly appeared from the bathroom, to pick up the receiver. —Hello? Hello? There was nothing. He dialed. —What number were you calling, ple-as? —I thought I heard the telephone ring, operator. Did you ring my telephone? —Excuse it, ple-as. —Hello? Hello?

——then and only then do you decide. The decision, my friends, rests with *you*. First come, first served. Don't wait, don't delay, don't hesitate. And remember, you are under absolutely no obligation . . . said the radio.

Mr. Pivner returned from the bathroom with a bottle and a hypodermic needle, which he put down beside a photograph album. No one had opened the album for months. Shut in it were mean-sized prints, snapshots taken on vacations, of himself and other refugees. Some enclosed views of water, shreds of mountains, corners of sky, taken to remind him at moments like this of an outdoors whose wonders he was permitted to see some fifteen days in four hundred. But he had forgotten, not that sunsets did occur, but what a sunset was; or the flight of a bird; the movement of water against a shore; the freshness of air consciously breathed; distances seen over land; the sound of wind in a green tree; or the silent, incredible progress of a snail.

And his camera photographs, having cast these phenomena into static patternless configurations of gray, recalled nothing. They served, waiting locked up in undimensional darkness here, as witnesses: that he had had more hair twelve years ago; that he had started to wear (rimless) glasses nine years before; that his brown suit was seven, not five, years old.

——Ladies, now is the time to save and save. Women are flocking to . . .

He sat down, and before filling the needle took a letter from his pocket which he put on the chair arm and did not read. He had read this brief letter enough times, at his desk and in the office lavatory, over coffee and over meals. He would read it again after supper, study his own name in counterfeit signature at the bottom. Otto wrote to say that he would call to arrange a meeting place; but gave no number where he might be reached. Therefore there was nothing to do but wait. Some months before there had been a call, a drunken boy's voice shouting for Otto, asking him who the hell *he* was anyhow. Mr. Pivner took up the bottle and read the directions. Diabetes is a serious disease. No one can afford to take chances; there is no reason to take them, when the marvels of medical science are worked out to the most minute point, making the notion of hazard contemptible, if only one follows the directions on the bottle. True, he had had four attacks in these past seven years, suddenly rendered helpless in public, going down with the reeling fall of a drunkard: but those had been moments of excitement. One had only to be careful, keep hold of one's self. That poor woman in the subway tonight, for instance . . . (he had for the moment forgot the man on the ledge). One had only one's self to blame for catastrophe, with Science concentrating its huge forces on bettering the human lot. (Had he not read, only the week before in a newspaper, of a new medicine which would prolong human life? Men might live to be two hundred years old, unclothed perhaps and unfed since there would be so many, but Science took care of details when they arose (had he not read only this week that very palatable foods were being made from seaweed, coal, and cotton? and clothing: the same article said that very durable cloth could be made from soy beans, meat extracts, and vegetable products). Two hundred years old! and, as he understood it, alive.)

After the injection, he picked up his newspaper. The Sunday edition, still in the rack beside him, required fifty acres of timber for its magic transformation of nature into progress, benefits of modern strides in transportation, communication, and freedom of the press: public information. (True, as he got into the paper, the average page was made up of a half-column of news, and four-and-one-half columns of advertising.) A train wreck in India, 27 killed, he read; a bus gone down a ravine in Chile, 1 American and 11 natives; avalanche in Switzerland, death toll mounts . . . This evening edition required only a few acres of natural grandeur to accomplish its mission (for it carried less advertising). Mr. Pivner read carefully. Kills father with meat-ax. Sentenced for slaying of three. Christ died of asphyxiation, doctor believes. Woman dead two days, invalid daughter unable to summon help. Nothing escaped Mr. Pivner's eye, nor penetrated to his mind; nothing evaded his attention, as nothing reached his heart. The headless corpse. Love kills penguin. Pig got rheumatism. Nagged Bible reader slays wife. Man makes own death chair, 25,000 volts. "Ashamed of world," kills self. Fearful of missing anything, he read on, filled with this anticipation which was half terror, of coming upon something which would touch him, not simply touch him but lift him and carry him away.

Every instant of this sense of waiting which he had known all of his life, this waiting for something to *happen* (uncertain quite what, and the Second Advent intruded) he brought to his newspaper reading, spellbound and ravenous. Man fights lion in zoo, barefisted. Cow kills woman. Rooster kills woman. Dogs eat Eskimo. As he turned the pages, folding them smartly back over the bulk of the newspaper, he relaxed a little at his comparative safety away from the news, drew comfort from the train wreck (he was not in it), the bus accident in Chile (nor in that), the meat-ax slaying (he had not done it), the headless corpse (not his), and so the newspaper served him, externalizing in the agony of others the terrors and temptations inadmissible in himself. Even though the evening paper repeated the news of the morning paper, he read attentively again, reworded, of the hunt for the unknown person who was releasing birds from an uptown zoo, of the discovery of two priceless art treasures, original paintings of Dierick Bouts, in a pawnshop in Hell's Kitchen, of the murder trial in Mouth, Mississippi, where just that morning the husband's heart had been exhibited in court. All of these civilized wonders were brought together, he was made to feel, expressly for him, by the newspaper. True, they kept him in such a state that he often bought late editions of the same newspaper, seeing different headlines than those tucked under his arm, only to read the story from column six suddenly elevated to a banner across columns one to four. True, often the only way he could know whether he had read a newspaper was to turn to the comic strips, where life flowed in continuum; and recognizing them, he knew that he must have read everything else closely and avidly, that nothing had evaded his eye, nor penetrated to his heart round which he had built that wall called objectivity without which he might have gone mad. As the tales of violence seemed daily to increase it hardly occurred to him that he was living in such unnatural density of population that it daily supported disasters sufficient for a continent. Added to this came the blood of the world, piped in on wires, and wireless, teletype, undersea cables, and splashed without a drop lost in transit upon Mr. Pivner, who sat, hard, patient, unbending, wiped it from his eyes, and waited for more.

Mr. Pivner elevated himself slightly upon one narrow ham and broke wind, a soft interrogative sound which went unanswered. Then he sagged and stared at the newspaper, untroubled by the notion that this might have been a demon leaving its residence inside him. Not only would he, albeit embarrassed, scoff at this medieval reality; but he could, in all reason, believe that even had he lived then, he would have scoffed. Incubae and succubae, the shriek of the mandrake root pulled from the ground which drove a man mad if he heard it, chloroform a decoy of Satan, smallpox a visitation of God: all those, and many more, he could believe that he would not have believed, but would have stood forth, as he was submerged now, in Reason. It was true, there were things he did not understand, realms where Science advanced upon the provinces of God, where he felt rather uncomfortable, looking forward, secretly, to the day when Science would explain all, and vindicate the Doubt which he kept hidden in case it should not.

His thumb over the headline, Campanile at Venice Periled, his eyes blinked closed behind the glasses which were steadily weakening them, until one day they might be as little good in light as they were now in darkness: his trouble had been diagnosed as nyctalopia, caused, he was told, by a vitamin deficiency (and not, "like people used to think," from sleeping in the moonlight). He had a shelf-full of bottles (labeled Afaxin, Pancebrin, Natola, Multi-Vi Drops, Vi-Dom-A Pillettes, and others) to help correct this condition; but he had got the glasses "just to make sure." Nonetheless, he still stumbled in the dark.

Now, the headlines had commenced to run together before his eyes. He had read the letters written to the editors (written by the editors), and the columns of the columnists, an assortment of aggressive ulcerated men, self-appointed authorities who wrote intimately of people they had never seen and places they had never been, or colyumists with the "common touch," who simulated and encouraged the average reader's lack of intelligence, talent, and sensitivity. But now, Holy See Bans Psychoanalysis . . . , Giant Robot Runs Amok . . . , Lobotomy to Cure Man of Writing Dud Checks . . . , the black letters swam before his eyes, and he started to doze over the news that the bell tower of Saint Mark's was in danger of falling, cracked in the cool nights of summer after the scorching sun of the days.

——The Rootsicola Company now brings you the correct time. The time is six P.M. Have you tried Rootsicola? Rootsicola tastes better *and* is better for you, and remember, friends, Rootsicola keeps its flavor twice as long, and you get twice as much Rootsicola in the familiar big bottle . . .

(Better than what? he wondered faintly. Twice as long as what? Twice as much as what?)

——Rootsicola. That's right, friends. Remember the *root*. Rootsicola, for the smile of happiness . . . the uprooted voice went on, bursting with aggressive vitality, leveling Mr. Pivner's weariness to chronic decrepitude. True, he it was to whom they all appealed; and he did try, with all the attention his consciousness could muster under the attrition of the sameness of their words, to maintain his responsibility as a citizen. He listened to the radio during periods of political heat, the speech in which one senator told the truth about another (this was known as a "smear campaign"); and then the raucous gathering where people were paid in five-dollar bills to shout, clap, parade, and otherwise indicate the totally irrational

quality of their enthusiasm for a man they had never met to take office and govern them. Occasionally, it is true, Mr. Pivner slipped into listening to these conventions in much the same spirit as benighted members of certain Latin cultures listen to the drawing of the National Lottery; but even when this expression disappeared he had as much difficulty reconciling his sense of public duty and responsibility with his feeling of total helplessness as a Central American Indian might, upon being told that he shared the responsibility for the number drawn in Panama on Sunday afternoon; and as far as that goes, the Indian could call in powers which Mr. Pivner knew nothing about, dreams and spells, magic numbers and meretricious deities, a seedy band to call in where Reason reigned, however staunch they might prove as allies there where the Indian sat silent with his radio on a peak in Darien.

Science assures us that "If man were wiped out, it is extremely improbable that anything very similar would ever again evolve." Threat and comfort: we need only turn the particle of the earth's crust read with such eager pride to make one of the other. Here in the foremost shambles of time Mr. Pivner stood, heir to that colossus of self-justification, Reason, one of whose first accomplishments was to effectively sever itself from the absurd, irrational, contaminating chaos of the past. Obtruding over centuries of gestation appeared this triumphal abortion: Reason supplied means, and eliminated ends.

What followed was entirely reasonable: the means, so abruptly brought within reach, became ends in themselves. And to substitute the growth of one's bank account for the growth of one's self worked out very well. It had worked out almost until it reached Mr. Pivner, for so long as the means had remained possible of endless expansion, those ends of other ages (which had never shown themselves very stable) were shelved as abstractions to justify the means, and the confidently rational notion that peace, harmony, virtue, and other tattered constituents of the Golden Rule would come along of themselves was taken, quite reasonably, for granted.

Retirement? the word shook him hollow, left him in a void where nothing remained to be done. With survival a triumph, the means themselves had become an end constantly unfulfilled; and now the specter of retirement formed its expression, leering within sight. He found himself surrounded by the rights of others who had ceased to grow more recently than himself, having earned that right the instant they mastered some fundamental technique of making a living, which they called education. Assured that they were under no obligation, and would do very well as they were, they advanced to take his place and relive his dilemma.

——and do you feel run down at the end of the day? that dull logy tired feeling that just seems to creep through you? Well friends, modern science has developed . . .

It was to him that these voices appealed, siding with him in this conspiracy against himself, citing him splendidly satisfactory just as he was, heralding his privileges, valuing the mass of his concurring opinion with guarantee of his protection against dissenters, justifying his limitations, and thus proving, by their own successful existence, that he was obliged to seek no further than himself for the authority which justified them both, pledged at last to secure and defend him in all these things, which they called his rights.

The newspaper now lay open to a feature story (*exclusive*) on the imminent canonization of a Spanish child, a feature not because the little girl was soon to be a saint, but because she had been raped and murdered. He stared, started, and felt suddenly for the keys in his pocket, always terrified that, losing them, the finder would know to whom they belonged, what they guarded. The newspaper tipped in his hand, and lay quiet on his lap, as the tic which came in his lip when he was tired pulled his mouth out of line. His half-opened eyes met those of the two faces before him, both pictures indistinct because they had been sent by radio, not that there was any hurry, but to show that this newspaper afforded its readers the most modern news service possible. He summoned his attention to read the article, for it was in such "features" that he found the satisfaction which life never suggested, that of a beginning, a middle, and an end. (Though occasionally one beginning got confused with other middles and other ends, he knew that these events were really taking place; and he even had the sense that he was slightly ahead of them, with evening papers out in the morning, and next morning's papers out that night.)

His eyes met the penetrating eyes of the murderer, fixed in a round face whose limp flabby quality was belied by a exquisite mustache and a sharp cleft in the widow's peak of black hair. He read the man's name, and that of his victim, confusions of foreign syllables which he did not try to align, and then details of the crime so rewardingly grisly and sharp that it might have happened the day before, instead of four decades. "Very soon after her death, the village of San Zwingli, its façades splashed blue with vine-spray, where the peasants live a mixed life with their goats, chickens, and burros, became the scene of a series of miracles. There were miraculous cures among sick peasants who insisted on attributing them to the little girl who appeared to them in visions, in a mist, carrying lilies of purity . . ." Even the criminal testified, "'I see her against the light, coming to me with lilies in her hands. But when she offers them to me they become flames. It is in these flames that I find remorse and penitence, and peace! . . . '" Through his drooping eyes, Mr. Pivner stumbled on to an interview with the priest who had promoted recognition of the child's

sanctity, “A candle gave an extra flicker and lit up his face, the color and texture of antique parchment, surmounted by the black satin biretta . . .” With a gesture of “his pale El Grecoesque hands . . .” he went on, “‘The Devil’s Advocate took the information and after two years’ study passed it to the Preparatory Congregation, which was held in the presence of the Cardinals. The following year, the Pope was present at the General Congregation, with his Cardinals, Prelates, and consultative Padres. They all cast votes in favor of the Martyrdom . . . We started without a single lira, and it takes a great deal of money to promote a saint. Apart from the expenses of bringing witnesses to Rome and making out the documents, it costs 3,000,000 lire to hire Saint Peter’s for a canonization . . . ’”

There the little girl stood before Mr. Pivner in long white stockings, and stared out at his dozing face wistfully, for the harsh newspaper reproduction, sent by radio, made her look cross-eyed.

——Friends, don’t take our word for it. You owe it to your own health . . .

The newspaper slipped to the floor, and Mr. Pivner sat up as though called. A half-pound of ground beef waited in the kitchen, for his supper. (—Is it all beef? he had asked insistently; and assured that it was, did not ask how old it was, and so was not told that it had got its succulent redness from sodium sulphite rubbed into it when it had turned toxic gray the day before.)

——Exhaustive scientific tests have proved . . .

He breathed, a sigh, and sat back, his senses glazed, insulted and injured, a brave man, assailed on all sides, supporting with his last penny those things which tore from him the last sacred corner of his privacy, and with it the dignity which churchmen called his soul.

——Prominent medical specialists agree . . .

He looked at that letter again, on the chair arm, and his eyes widened as the stain of perfect metal in his alloy cried out for perfection.

——tastes better, looks better, smells better, and is better for you . . .

And that perfect particle was submerged, again satisfied with any counterfeit of itself which would represent its worth amongst others. As his eyes closed again, the letter slipped from the chair arm to the floor, and with it the precious metal of youth which it had suggested, alloyed in age with weariness, doubt and dread, circumstances constantly unpropitious to any approach to perfection. Gold was never seen, never passed from one hand to another, no longer currency, not only unexpected but against the law: only the compromises worn smooth which Exchangers do not even bother to ring but pass on, giving and receiving or losing and taking reciprocally their leaden counterparts.

Worth his weight in gold, Mr. Pivner would have brought seventy-four thousand and four dollars (at the official rate; $105,720 on the black market). But somewhere in the shadowy past, in that penumbra of Science called chemistry, lay the assurance that his body was worth ninety-seven cents: a faint sigh led him nearer sleep, a sound of anticipation, as though awaiting the strategic moment to sell out.

Even in sleep, he was waiting, a little tense like everyone waiting within reach of a telephone, for it to ring. And still, even in sleep, he knew there would be time. Adam, after all, lived for nine hundred thirty years.

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Beside the empty cradle of the white telephone, a vase held erect against green six bird-of-paradise flowers, *Strelitzia reginae*, also called wild banana in South Africa where they grow naturally profuse, blue-tongued exotic orange protrusions from the deep purple-green bill, silently mating there among the native white pear, the red ivory, black stinkwood, and umzimbiti.

Mickey Mouse pointed to four o’clock.

—Am *I* in a state of Grace? But darling . . . Agnes Deigh paused, to reach beyond the oval-framed miniature of a young man in uniform, for the cigarettes on her desk. She got one and put it into her mouth at an extreme angle and, lighting it, listening, looked for that moment like a billboard picture into whose lips someone has stuck a cigarette. —Yes I know, that’s sweet but I can’t pray for you, she went on, the cigarette bobbing. —I know, darling, another time. But thank you for the divine flowers just the same.

When she’d hung up she sat staring for a moment at the news clipping one of the girls had sent in as a joke: Offer Husband’s Heart in Evidence. A woman named Agnes Day of Mouth, Mississippi, was on trial for stabbing her husband to death. It was not funny. She crumpled it to throw in the basket, and rummaged in her bag, took out a French enameled thimble case, set it aside, and looked until she found another pill box. Then as she poured water from the carafe, she stared at the miniature in the oval frame. It was her brother, whom she’d known only in the intent intimacy of childhood, before he ran away, before she was sent away to school; and she found herself again counting the months since he’d been listed missing in a war which no one spoke of but as a political blunder. She turned her chair away from the desk to take her pill.

Across the court from Agnes Deigh’s office there were two windows she could look directly into. One, she

was certain, was a psychoanalyst. The Venetian blinds were usually drawn, but she had seen the couch, and the sight of its familiar length upset her. Her own analysis had taken three years, under one of the best analysts (he had made a name for himself with a paper he had published on one of his patients, a nun, who became a bear trainer when he had done with her). But there were still moments, when she thought of her husband, or when she looked at the picture in the oval frame, when Agnes Deigh was unsure whether she had correctly reassembled the parts he had spread out before her, as when a novice dismantles a machine, and putting it back together finds a number of parts left over, each curiously shaped to some definite purpose.

The other window was a dentist. Late every afternoon he appeared there in an undershirt, to shave before the mirror hung in the window frame. For some reason she always thought of her husband, Harry, when she looked across at him. But he never noticed her, he never glanced across the court, never anywhere but the mirror, not even when, one day, exasperated at his sloven obduracy, she had stood at her window with her blouse undone, pretending, as a breast slipped into conspicuous sight while she watched him from her eye's corner, to be adjusting an undergarment. He'd neither looked over nor seemed consciously to keep from doing so, but went on to shave, the flesh of his arms hanging loosely, suspenders dangling to his knees. Every time she looked up he was there, absorbed in some activity of the body, his own or someone else's, now washing his hands, now drying them, talking to someone unseen.

She returned to her desk to put down the glass of water, took a macadamia nut from the jar there, and sat exposing a face where time weighed out unconscious of exposure, a face even she herself had never seen in her mirror. Then her telephone rang.

—Yes? she whispered, and then, getting her voice, —Send him in.

Otto had left a copy of his play for her to look at (one of four made at alarming expense by a public stenographer, which he carried in a proportionately expensive pigskin dispatch case). When he arrived late that afternoon, he could hear her voice from an office or two away, ringing from the dark green walls, ricocheting off the white plaster approximations to tropical plants which were the indirect lighting fixtures, glancing from one unsympathetic modern surface to another, skipping across the edges of other sounds to attempt escape through the jalousies of the Venetian blinds, caroming off the absurd angles of the hats on other women who infested the place and who, themselves, rebounded among telephones. The whole scene, on the long-piled dark green carpet bore grotesque parody to those earlier caricatures of Nature sponsored by shades of the Sun King, where women of exhausted French sophistication dressed as shepherdesses to toil weary sins in new silks across carpets of false grass.

—Simpotico, came that voice, —I say they're so simpótico . . . what? Harry? Oh God no, not for months, he's still in Hollywood where they're filming his novel . . . yes, it was changed a little. What? . . . yes, the homosexual boy to a Negro and the Jew to a cripple. Sensitive minorities . . . Of course I'm interested in politics . . . Don't be tiresome, I couldn't care less about Harry using me in his ghastly book, but giving me a name like Seraphina . . . No, of course I don't need the money, I'm just suing him because money is the only language he understands . . .

—She's frightfully busy, said one of the hats to Otto. —She's on the phone, and she has someone in there now. Have you an appointment?

Some minutes later, during which Otto almost set fire to his sling trying to light a cigarette, Agnes Deigh appeared with an immaculate boy before her, saying to him, —But you will hurry with it? Buster Brown's third book will be out in the spring, and he's only twenty-three.

—Buster twenty-three! Agnes, he's twenty-eight if he's a day. And really, how can he pretend to write about depravity, why I told him myself about Leda and the swan, do you know what he said? Human beins cain't copulate wif bihds, silly . . . Really, he's a very wicked boy. You're coming to the party tonight? I'll tell you who I'm going to be or you'll never know me, Cleopatra! . . .

Otto followed her into her office, after her incurious smile and a glance, not at him but his fading suntan. Hers glistened richly. —Now . . . she paused behind her desk, —what was it? You are . . .

—*The Vanity of Time*, my play, my name . . .

—Oh yes. Sit down? She found it, under things, and sat a long silence staring at it. When he cleared his throat to speak, she said, —Well *I* liked it a great deal, you know . . . as though to indicate that no one else had. —But we've talked about it . . . Apparently no one else had. —It's not really that it isn't a good play, you do have an admirable eye for dramatic situation, and some very sensitive perceptions. But . . . possibly the theme is a little ambitious for someone your age? When you've really lived these things . . . as they happen . . . it isn't really topical, you see. If you look carefully at the plays and novels that are successful now . . . The white telephone rang. —Yes, Monday? sixish? Just drinks, yes, I want to talk to you about it. He left a moment ago, he said he'd have a copy for you in two or three weeks, and frankly I think it's worth ten thousand simply in pre-publication advertising, after all he is just the sort of thing we've made popular.

I? . . . no, I haven't had a chance to read it yet myself.

As she spoke she twisted forward, looking past him, lips distorted to accept the cigarette he offered round the Strelitzia ambush. But before he could manage to light it, she'd hung up and held a flaming silver machine across to him. —There is something else I should mention, she went on as he sank back. —All of us had the feeling that parts of it were familiar, I hardly know how to say . . . She coughed, looked at the cigarette, and put it out. —No, I didn't mean to say you'd stolen it, not at all, but there was the feeling . . . some of the lines were familiar . . . The telephone rang. —Thank you for letting us look at it, she said lifting the telephone, and then lowering her eyes to vacancy as he stood. —Of course I have your key darling, the one to your box? . . . but you told me I wasn't to let you have it . . . She smiled down at space. —Oh, for the party tonight? . . . She looked up, and spoke around the telephone mouthpiece, —But you'll show us anything else you do, won't you . . . ? her voice followed him, out the gate, across the greensward among those shepherdesses gesticulating their telephone crooks, up the garden path.

One of them passed him, carrying a letter to the office he'd just left, a letter which quivered, open, in Agnes Deigh's hand a few moments later. It was from the War Department, to inform her that the body of her brother had been recovered and identified. Did she want it? Please check *yes* or *no*.

—Darling, is something the matter?

—Please . . . just . . .

—What . . . ?

—Leave me alone . . . for a minute. Then the slight sound of the letter quivering in her hand roused her from the numbness which had diffused itself through every sensible part of her body. —Not so cruel, she murmured, —but . . . how can they be so stupid? . . . Then she let go the paper and swung her chair away abruptly to face the window, to deny the familiar room, and the picture on her desk, seeing her wipe her eyes. She did that; and sat staring through the glass.

Check yes or no

Although she could not hear across the court, it was evident that the dentist was shouting. She could make out a girl of about twenty. Then Agnes Deigh leaned forward. She got up and went to the window and stared. He had hit her. He had hit the girl and he hit her again. He had the razor strop in his hand, and he brought it down against the arms protecting her bosom. Agnes Deigh's hand shook with excitement as she turned and lifted the white telephone, opening the directory with her other hand, to say, —Get me Spring seven three one hundred . . . Hello? Yes, I want to report a case of malicious cruelty. Or sadism. Yes, sadism. What? Of course, my name is Agnes Deigh . . .

As she spoke she stared at the Strelitzia; and as she spoke the words of an earlier conversation rehearsed in her mind. —Your flowers are lovely, are they for Christmas?

(—Yes Agnes but I sent them because I knew they'd amuse you, aren't they sweet, they're so ob*scene*, but Agnes darling you know I'm mercenary, really quite venial, and I want someone to pray for something for me, darling *are* you in a state of Grace . . . ?)

Immediately she had hung up she stood, put on her hat slowly, her coat quickly, and went through the door. *Check yes or no* In how many years? she thought, no one has sent me flowers for love.

She'd gone direct to the bank of elevators, but turned suddenly to the figure behind a near desk, and brought out, breathless, confused, not the words she expected, not, Are you Catholic? but, —Do you believe in God?

—Why yes, darling . . . in a way . . .

—Will you go to Saint Vincent Ferrer? . . . and have them say . . . you, you can go tomorrow, yes, go on your lunch hour? . . . The elevator doors opened behind her, and she said more clearly over her shoulder as she turned, —And put it on your expense account.

In the street she walked briskly, not a stitch or line out of place, her make-up set in a mask. An unshaven cripple, who'd come forth with an open hand, to be charitably avoided by a turn of her hips, retired saying to a passer-by, —You couldn't take her out in the rain.

She went into a bar, and ordered a martini.

—With pumpkin seeds in it?

She just stared at him. The girl next to her had one beside her book. She was reading *The Compleat Angler*.

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"What is mine, then, and what am I? If not a curve in this poor body of mine (which you love, and for the sake of which you dotingly dream that you love me), not a gesture that I can frame, not a tone of my voice, not any look from my eyes, no, not even now when I speak to him I love, but has belonged to others? Others, ages dead, have wooed other men with my eyes; other men have heard the pleading of the same

voice that now sounds in your ears. The hands of the dead are in my bosom; they move me, they pluck me, they guide me; I am a puppet at their command; and I but reinform features and attributes that have long been laid aside from evil in the quiet of the grave . . .”

The dead lilies stood beside her in a fruit jar, where she read, slowly as though bringing these words into concert for the first time herself.

The sign pinned to her door said, *Do Not Disturb Me I Am Working Esme*: and she had closed that door and bolted it, delighted to be alone. But as the afternoon passed, she moved less excitedly and less often. For a few minutes she sewed at a dress she was making, singing one of her own songs. Then she got up, with a cigarette, and walked about the double room, replacing things. Then she sewed again, sitting like a child of five sewing, and like a five-year-old girl singing unheard. But before that sewing was done she was up, rearranging her books with no concern but for size. There was, really, little else their small ranks held in common (except color of the bindings, and so they had been arranged, and so too the reason often enough she’d bought them). Their compass was as casual as books left behind in a rooming house; and this book of stories by Stevenson, with no idea where she’d got it, she hadn’t looked into it for years, now could not put it down, and to her now it was the only book she owned. Even so she had never read for the reasons that most people give themselves for reading. Facts mattered little, ideas propounded, exploited, shattered, even less, and narrative nothing. Only occasional groupings of words held her, and she entered to inhabit them a little while, until they became submerged, finding sanctuary in that part of herself which she looked upon distal and afraid, a residence as separate and alien, real or unreal, as those which shocked her with such deep remorse when the features of others betrayed them. An infinite regret, simply that she had seen, might rise in her then, having seen too much unseen; and it brought her eyes down quick. It was Otto’s expression, when his cigarette had burnt a cleft on her table, and he recovered it and looked up sharply to see if she’d noticed. It was Max’s expression, when he’d taken a paper with her writing on it, whatever it was, she didn’t know, but taken it from the table and slipped it into a pocket away from her, looking up with his smile to see if she’d seen him, his smile fixed and barely breaking as he started to talk hurriedly, looking at her with eyes which sent hers to the floor lest she weep for the lie in his.

The sole way, it seemed to her often enough when she was working at writing a poem, to use words with meaning, would be to choose words for themselves, and invest them with her own meaning: not her own, perhaps, but meaning which was implicit in their shape, too frequently nothing to do with dictionary definition. The words which the tradition of her art offered her were by now in chaos, coerced through the contexts of a million inanities, the printed page everywhere opiate, row upon row of compelling idiocies disposed to induce stupor, coma, necrotic convulsion; and when they reached her hands they were brittle, straining and cracking, sometimes they broke under the burden which her tense will imposed, and she found herself clutching their fragments, attempting again with this shabby equipment her raid on the inarticulate.

So for instance she stole *comatulid*, and her larceny went unnoticed by science which chose it to mean “a free-swimming stalkless crinoid . . .” and *crinoid:* lily-shaped (though this word belonged to the scientists too, Crinoidea, a large class of echinoderms). And the phylum Echinodermata she left far behind, left the starfishes, the sea urchins, and their allies to grope in peace in the dark water of the sea. *Comatulid* lay on the paper under her pen; while she struggled to reach it through the rubble amassed by her memory.

It was through this imposed accumulation of chaos that she struggled to move now: beyond it lay simplicity, unmeasurable, residence of perfection, where nothing was created, where originality did not exist: because it was origin; where once she was there work and thought in causal and stumbling sequence did not exist, but only transcription: where the poem she knew but could not write existed, ready-formed, awaiting recovery in that moment when the writing down of it was impossible: because she was the poem. Her hand tipped toward the paper, black stroke the pen made there, but only that stroke, line of uncertainty. She called her memory, screamed for it, trying to scream through it and beyond it, damned accumulation that bound her in time: *my* memory, *my* bed, *my* stomach, *my* terror, *my* hope, *my* poem, *my* God: the meanness of *my*. Must the flames of hell be ninety-story blazes? or simply these small sharp tongues of fire that nibble and fall to, savoring the edges and then consume, swept by the wind of terror at exposing one’s self, losing the aggregate of meannesses which compose identity, in flames never reaching full roaring crescendo but scorch through a life like fire in grass, in the world of time the clock tells. Every tick, synchronized, tears off a fragment of the lives run by them, the circling hands reflected in those eyes watching their repetition in an anxiety which draws the whole face toward pupiled voids and finally, leaves lines there, uncertain strokes woven into the flesh, the fabric of anxiety, double-webbed round dark-centered jellies which reflect nothing. Only that fabric remains, pleached in the pattern of the bondage which has a beginning and an end, with scientific meanness in attention to details, of a thousand things which should not have happened, and did; of myriad mean events which should have happened, and did

not: waited for, denied, until life is lived in fragments, unrelated until death, and the wrist watch stops.

The pen quivered over the paper, added *inae* to *comatulid*, and then carefully crossed out that free suffix; and then brought *comatulid* into the tangle of black ink, as she moved toward that world not world where the needle took her. It was the uncircumscribed, unbearable, infinitely extended, indefinitely divisible void where she swam in orgasm, soaring into a vastness away from the heaving indignity of the posture she shared; the world of music so intensely known that nothing exists but the music; it was the world of ecstasy they all approximated by different paths, one world in which temporary residence is prohibited, as the agonies of recall attest: "Love's dart" that wounds but does not kill; the ill complained of, but prized above every joy and earthly good; "sweet cautery," the "stolen heart," the "ravished understanding," the "rape of love": in Provençal, *conoscenza*. Thus Saint Teresa, quadrupedis, "dying of not being able to die."

What did the devil teach Gerbert, Archbishop of Ravenna, in exchange for his soul which Gerbert bartered to learn all, and become Pope? The devil taught him algebra and clock-making, for a world where there is no space, only distances; no time, only minutes and hours; where things are numbered, and even Christ bowed with finite care when he gave SS Elizabeth Matilda Bridget a written account of the kicks, blows, and wounds he had received, numbered the skull fractures 100, the drops of blood 38,430 (though another girl was later to receive a letter through her guardian angel numbering those drops of blood 3,000,800). The world in which the Virgin's titles number 305; and Sir Arthur Eddington decides that the electron is not subject to scientific law. The cosmos of Sir James Jeans, reigned over by a deity whose symbol is the square root of minus one, where in closed rooms they argue the weight of the crucified man sufficient to cause strangulation, and the Irish mathematician Sir William Rowan Hamilton calculates that Jesus in assumption, being drawn up through space at a moderate rate, would not yet have reached the nearest of the fixed stars.

When the devil appeared to Gerbert, to claim his soul, Gerbert resisted; and disappeared in a fork of flame.

The tracking point of the pen moved on the paper, and it was gone, Esme had lost it, and lay in the agonized exhaustion of this recovery of her temporal self. Still, on the edge of the chasm into which she could not fall, Esme quivered with anticipation of a sound which would interrupt, waiting fearfully for the signal to recall her from that edge. In the silence of waiting, she recovered herself; slow, she stepped back; silence, she began to talk with herself; stillness, she moved with exaggeration as though she were being watched, needed to be watched suddenly, to have another consciousness present, aware of her, containing her, to assure her of her own existence. There was no one. Even her voice sounded with a disembodied quality which frightened her. She sat there quiet again with the pen over paper, reduced in despair, her face expressing nothing but empty misunderstanding at being alone.

Across the air shaft from her closed window a woman ironed on a board. A man in underclothes appeared to stand beside her for a moment, talk silently and disappear. Then with no change in her expression Esme was crying and she turned her face from the window where she had been watching unbeknown. On the paper she wrote,

> In a nicely calcimined
> Apartment is a left-behind
> Opera chair against the wall
> Masquerading for a ball,

an exercise as significant as those ceremonies carried out at the insistence of the people during papal interdicts in the medieval Church, when saying the Mass was forbidden, but "the brethren had only to ring their bells, and play their organ in the choir; and the citizens in the nave were quite happy in the belief that Mass was being said behind the screen."

Esme wrote regretfully, pouting,

> Your name is said in a far-off place
> By someone alone in a room
> You do not hear it

but it was spent. And the miracle of transubstantiation? only a glimpse; and only the fragrance of its death remained, the heavenly fragrance, as of lilies, which rose from the body of Saint Nicolas of Tolentino, after he had reproved his sorrowing brethren who brought him a dish of doves on his sweltering deathbed, and with a pass of his hand restored their plumage and sent them flying out of the window of his cell; only the scent of lilies, rotting in the fruit jar beside her.

She lit a spirit lamp, and sat beside it for a moment before finding a teaspoon in which to liquefy an

injection of heroin, staring into the flame, and the lilies beyond it. —If I am not real to him, she said aloud, staring at the dead lilies, —then where am I real? And the book of Stevenson, which she had laid open on a pile of books beside the lamp, threatened to catch fire. She took it down, and read there, again, "You are a man and wise; and I am but a child. Forgive me, if I seem to teach, who am as ignorant as the trees of the mountain; but those who learn much do but skim the face of knowledge; they seize the laws, they conceive the dignity of the design—the horror of the living fact fades from their memory. It is we who sit at home with evil who remember . . . and are warned and pity . . ."

knock knock knock sounded on her door, in ruthless precision of recall to time in its aseptic succession of importunate instants. Her lips tightened. —Who is it? she called.

—Chaby.

—Jesis Christ why don't you put some lights on? he said when she let him in. He walked past her to the light cord.

—Because I'm alone, Esme said. Her weight hung on him, and without a word he bore her down.

•

As the afternoon ended, Otto was walking alone, south, on Madison Avenue, his own face expressing an extreme of the concentration of vacancy passing all around him, the faces of office messengers, typists turned out into the night air, dismally successful young men, obnoxious success in middle age, women straining at chic and accomplishing mediocrity who had spent the afternoon spending the money that their weary husbands had spent the afternoon making, the same husbands who would arrive home minutes after they did, mix a drink, and sit staring in the opposite direction. With his dispatch case, and an unkind thought for everyone he knew, Otto carried his head high. Affecting to despise loneliness, still he looked at the unholy assortment streaming past him as though hopefully to identify one, rescue some face from the anonymity of the crowd with instantly regretted recognition, and so rescue himself. He even strongly considered conversation with strangers; and with this erupted the thought of his father whom he had arranged to telephone, and appoint a place for their first meeting. With this, Otto took sudden new interest in every very successful middle-aged man who passed, coveting diamond stick-pins, a bowler hat, an ascot tie, and even (though he would have been shocked enough if this were "Dad") a pair of pearl-gray spats. It was a problem until now more easily left unsolved; and be damned to Oedipus and all the rest of them. For now, the father might be anyone the son chose. The instant their eyes met in forced recognition, it would be over.

—I must call the Sun Style Film man, he thought suddenly. —Peru, and northern Bolivia . . . Someone beside him was asking him how to get to Vesey Street. Otto held the impatient man with long and intricate explanation, two sets of alternate routes and was commencing a third when the poor fellow retreated down wind, thanking him, retiring to a policeman to ask directions for Vesey Street.

On the corner a tall black man with an umbrella towered in a hat of unseasonal straw, though on him no more out of season than the permanent attire of a statue. He stood as far as possible from the black poodle dog as their leash would allow, atolls of a formidable reef casting the white-caps to one side and the other. —He's very handsome, Otto said of the strangely familiar animal.

—I takin her to the veterinary, said Fuller, not looking at this young man whom he did not know but at the dog. —Seem like she sufferin with the worms, he added with relish, looking at the dog which ignored him.

—That's a shame, said Otto. —Beautiful dog.

—Yes, mahn, said Fuller, looking up and back at the poodle, —seem like she sufferin from the worms, he repeated, watching her face as though hoping to see discomfort and embarrassment cloud it.

The light changed, and the sea moved reuniting its currents, bore the reef away north and Otto south toward Esme. He had left her late the night before after what might have been an argument, except that he found no way to argue with Esme. He had worked for so long to develop his weak capacity for dialectic into equipment for a sophistical game that he was useless now against her blank simplicity. When she had asked him not to spend the night with her there, —because it's so Greenwich Village . . . he realized that none of his cleverness would change her mind. Still he was jealous enough of her: she had a way of bending one shoulder down almost upon the table and looking up across at him, laughing, which rose into his mind now, and he hurried toward the pit of the subway.

—Wait a minute, Esme called, after he had climbed her stairs wearily. Chaby was still fastening his clothes when he knocked.

Otto and Chaby did not exchange any greeting. They had come to behave together like two animals of different zoological classes in a private zoo, each wondering at their owner for keeping the other. Otto made it evident that he was waiting. Esme treated the three of them together as though they were well-met

friends, or as happily, thorough strangers, while Otto smoked industriously. Chaby left, after keeping Esme at the door in a conversation audible enough to drive Otto to turning on the radio, which he did with an air of long habit. After Chaby had gone, Esme sat down beside the truculent smoker on the daybed. He suggested that they go to dinner, making the invitation in a tone tired but duty-bound, as a gentleman, a concept which labored mightily in his mind as it does in many, who find it the last refuge for insipience.

She agreed readily; at which he sulked more oppressively still. When she drew off her dress to change it, he tried to put his arms around her. —You don't do that to ladies who are dressing themselves, she said to him. —Besides your funny bandage gets in the way.

—I may have to go to Bolivia and northern Peru, Otto said soberly, and as though in direct answer. —Soon enough, he added, somewhat menacing. While she sought another dress, he opened his dispatch case and took out the play with business-like aversion. He separated the pages quickly to Act II scene iii, and immediately found the line. Enough times he had found it with a fond smile. Now he took his pen and drew it blackly through

PRISCILLA (*with tragic brightness*): But don't you understand, Gordon? These are the moments which set the soul yearning to be taken suddenly, snatched out of the heart of some fearful joy and set down before its Maker, hatless, disheveled and gay, with its spirit unbroken.

He wrote in:

Don't you understand the sudden liberation that's come over me?

and sat pouring smoke down on the wet ink.

Out on the street, Otto said, —How does it feel to be with a gentleman for a change?

—Ot-to.

—But he is such a ratty little creature, Chaby. How can you stand him.

—Isn't he bad? she said laughing, on Otto's arm. —Do you know what he did when I first knew him? He had something in his hands, and he told me to reach into his pants pocket and get some matches, and I reached in and he'd cut the bottom of the pocket off, my hand just went in and in. Wasn't that bad?

—Yes. What did you do then?

—I didn't do anything.

—Well what did he do?

—I don't remember.

—Where do you want to have dinner?

—At the Viareggio?

—Esme, that place is always so full of . . . well, I don't know, all the rags and relics below Fourteenth Street. It's like Jehovah's Witnesses when you sit down at a table there, everybody comes over. Why do you go there anyhow?

—I don't go there.

—Esme!

—People take me there, she said. And by now they were at the door of the Viareggio, a small Italian bar of nepotistic honesty before it was discovered by exotics. Neighborhood folk still came, in small vanquished numbers and mostly in the afternoon, before the two small dining rooms and the bar were taken over by the educated classes, an ill-dressed, underfed, overdrunken group of squatters with minds so highly developed that they were excused from good manners, tastes so refined in one direction that they were excused for having none in any other, emotions so cultivated that the only aberration was normality, all afloat here on sodden pools of depravity calculated only to manifest the pricelessness of what they were throwing away, the three sexes in two colors, a group of people all mentally and physically the wrong size.

Smoke and the human voice made one texture, knitting together these people for whom Dante had rejuvenated Hell six centuries before. The conversation was of an intellectual intensity forgotten since Laberius recommended to a character in one of his plays to get a foretaste of philosophy in the public latrine. There were poets here who painted; painters who criticized music; composers who reviewed novels; unpublished novelists who wrote poetry: but a *poet* entering might recall Petrarch finding the papal court at Avignon a "sewer of every vice, where virtue is regarded as proof of stupidity, and prostitution leads to fame." Petrarch, though, had reason to be irritated, his sister seduced by a pope: none here made such a claim, though many would have dared had they thought of it, even, and the more happily, those with younger brothers.

—Is that really Ernest Hemingway over there? someone said as they entered. —Where? —Over there at the bar, that big guy, he needs a shave, see? he's thanking that man for a drink, see him?

—I suppose you'd call me a positive negativist, said someone else.

—Max seems to have a good sense of spatial values, said a youth on their right, weaving aside to allow Esme to pass, —but his solids can't compare, say, with the solids in Uccello. And where is abstract without solids, I ask you?

While Otto looked dartingly for Max, Esme entered with flowing ease, and pleasure lighting her thin face as she smiled to one person after another with gracious familiarity. —There he is, Otto said, as they sat down. The juke-box was playing *Return to Sorrento*. Otto adjusted his sling, and smoothed his mustache. Esme sat, looking out over this spectral tide with the serenity of a woman in a painting; and often enough, like gallery-goers, the faces turned to look at her stared with vacuity until, unrecognized, self-consciousness returned, and they looked away, one to say, —I know *her*, but God knows who *he* is; another to say, —She was locked up for months, a couple of years ago; and another to listen to the joke about Carruthers and his horse.

At Max's table, among his and six other elbows, a number of wet beer glasses, a book titled *Twit Twit Twit* and a copy of Mother Goose, lay *The Vanity of Time*. Max rose, and came over with it.

—What did you think of it? Otto asked, pleasantly, not getting up. He rescued the pages, and wiped off a couple of spots which were still wet.

—Well Otto, it's good, Max said doubtfully.

—But what? What did you think?

—Well, I'll tell you the truth. It was funny sometimes, reading it. Like I'd read it before. There were lines in it . . .

—You mean *you* think it's plagiarized? Otto named the word.

—Well, Max said, laughing like a friend.

—Look, you had it out, I mean, at the table. Did they . . . I mean, did all those other people see it?

—They were looking at it. I didn't think you'd mind, and you see, I did want to ask them what they thought, about . . . recognizing it.

—Well? Otto opened his dispatch case, turning it away from view so that it was not apparent that the play went in to join its duplicates.

—What did they think? Pretty much the same thing, I think, Max admitted. —George said he felt like he could almost go right on with one of the . . . one of the lines. And Agnes . . .

—Agnes Deigh? You mean you talked to *her* about it?

—Well, it came up in conversation. I was up at her office this morning, talking with her about my novel. It's coming out in the spring. She's trying to arrange the French rights now.

—But what did you think it was plagiarized *from*, if you're all so sure I stole it.

—Nobody said you'd stolen it, Otto. It was just that some of the lines were a little . . . familiar.

—Yes but from *what?*

—That's the funny thing, nobody could figure it out, one of us would be just about to say, and then we couldn't put our finger on it. But don't worry about it, Otto. It's a good play. Then he straightened up, taking his hands from the table where he'd rested them, and said, —I'm showing some pictures this week, can you come to the opening?

—Yes, but . . .

—Thanks for letting me read it, Otto . . .

—There was one line I borrowed, I mean I put it in just to try it out . . . Otto called after him, but Max was gone to his table, where he talked to the people seated with him. They looked up at Otto.

Esme ate quietly, across from Otto's silent fury, weighted now to sullenness with four glasses of whisky, before his veal and peppers had appeared.

—Hello Charles, Esme said looking up, kindly. —You look very well tonight. Charles smiled wanly. Silver glittered in his hair. His wrists were bandaged, his glass empty. —Do you want my glass of beer, Charles? Because I can't drink it. She handed it to him, and murmuring something, without a look at Otto, he left.

—Really, Esme.

—What is it, Otto? she said brightly.

—Well I mean, I can't buy beer for everybody in the place.

She smiled to him. —That's because you don't want to, she said.

—You're damned right I don't, he said, looking round, and back at his plate.

—Of course I know it's near Christmas, said someone behind him. —For Christ's sake, what do you want me to do about it, light up?

There was a yelp from the end of the bar; and a few, who suspected it of being inhuman, turned to see a dachshund on a tight leash recover its hind end from a cuspidor. The Big Unshaven Man stepped aside. —I'm God-damned sorry, he said. —Oh, said the boy on the other end of the leash, —Mister Hemingway, could I buy you a drink? You are Ernest Hemingway aren't you?

—My friends call me Ernie, said the Big Unshaven Man, and turning to the bar, —a double martini, boy.

Though the place appeared crowded beyond capacity, more entered from the street outside, crying greetings, trampling, excusing themselves with grunts, struggling toward the bar.

—Elixir of terpin hydrate with codein in a little grapefruit juice, it tastes just like orange Curaçao. What do you think I was a pharmacist's mate for.

—When I was in the Navy we drank Aqua Velva, that shaving stuff. You could buy all you wanted on shipboard.

—Yeah? Well did you ever drink panther piss? the liquid fuel out of torpedoes?

The juke-box was playing *Return to Sorrento*. A boy with a sharp black beard sat down beside Esme. —Have you got any tea? he asked her. She shook her head, and looked up at Otto, who had not heard, had not in fact even noticed the person sitting half behind him. —Sometimes I really hate Max, he said, then noticed the beard. —I mean, I mistrust him. There were no introductions. —That poor bastard, said the beard. —He's really had it, man. So has she.

—Who? Otto asked incuriously.

—His girl, she's getting a real screwing. She wanted to marry him last year but she wanted him to be analyzed first. Max didn't have any money so she paid for it. Now his analyst says he's in love with her for all the neurotic reasons in the book. It don't jive, man. He's through with her but he can't leave her because he can't stop his analysis.

—Does she know it?

—Who, Edna? She . . .

—Edna who?

—Edna Mims, she's a blonde from uptown. He used to bring her down here to shock her, and then take her home and ball her . . .

—*Edna?* said Otto, unable to swallow. —With *him?*

Everyone silenced for a moment at a scream of brakes outside, anticipating the satisfaction of a resounding crash. They were disappointed. Instead, as their conglomerate conversation rose again, Ed Feasley rode in upon its swell. Behind him a blonde adjusting a garter followed with choppy steps like a dory pulled in the wake of a yawl on a rough sea. —Get a drink, was all Ed Feasley could say, as he sat down at Otto's table.

Mr. Feddle was there. He stood with difficulty, his hand on the hip of a tall light-haired girl, her delicately modeled face and New England accent manifest of good breeding. —His mother is the sweetest little Boston woman, she said, —*awf*ully interested in dogs, *awf*ully anti-vivisection. They were looking at Anselm, who looked about to drop to his knees. Behind her, Don Bildow said, —He is an excellent poet, when he tries. He's been taking care of my daughter when we're out, my wife and I. I haven't looked at another woman since we were married. Then with his hand on the man's-shirted shoulder of the light-haired girl, —Do you find me attractive?

The beard at Otto's table said, —Is that Hemingway? Ed Feasley looked over at the Big Unshaven Man, who had just said, —No queer in history ever produced great art. Feasley looked vague, but said, —There's something familiar about him.

—That's the damnedest thing I ever heard, Otto said, looking at Max, partially recovered. He motioned for another drink. When he had finished it he said, —I've got to make a phone call. I may have to go to Peru and northern Bolivia.

—Tonight? said Feasley. —You going to fly down? I'd like to go with you, but . . . say, if you can wait until tomorrow afternoon . . . I've got to go to a wedding tomorrow, but . . .

—No, I mean I've just got to call my father now, Otto said casually as though he had known that man all his life.

—Say hello to the old bastard for me, Ed Feasley called after him.

Otto called, made a rendezvous for a week later with the anxious voice at the other end of the line. They would meet in the lobby of a midtown hotel, at eight (—If you'll wear that green scarf I sent you for Christmas two years ago, Otto, I have one just like it. We'll know each other that way. And I wear glasses . . . said the voice, murmuring, after the telephone at the other end of the line was hung up, —Should I have said *rimless* glasses?). Otto had agreed quickly, he didn't know where his green muffler was but to push the thing further would have been too much, bad enough to need recourse to such a device to know your own father.

There were seven people at the table when he returned to it. The painters could be identified by dirty fingernails; the writers by conversation in labored monosyllables and aggressive vulgarities which disguised their minds. —Yeh, I'm doing a psychoanalysis of it, said one of them, tapping Mother Goose on the table.

—I tell you, there's a queer conspiracy to dominate everything. Just look around, the boy with the red

hunting cap said. —Queers dominate writing, they dominate the theater, they dominate art. Just try to find a gallery where you can show your pictures if you're not a queer, he added, raising a cigarette between paint-encrusted fingers. —What do you think women look so damned foolish for today? It's because queers design their clothes, queers dictate women's fashions, queers do their hair, queers do all the photography in the fashion magazines. They're purposely making women look more and more idiotic until nobody will want to go to bed with one. It's a conspiracy.

Near their table, the tall dark girl who had been talking with Anselm said to someone she knew, —Do you know that girl? I want to meet her.

With his hand on Esme's shoulder, Otto leaned down to say, —Let's get out of here. Ed Feasley looked up to say, —You want to go to a party? A big ball a bunch of queers are giving up in Harlem.

—Drag? someone asked.

—What's drag?

—Where they all dress like women.

—This ball is drag, someone else said. —High drag.

There was a loud yelp. Anselm, on all fours, had met the dachshund, and had one of its ears in his mouth. The tall dark girl looked up at the doorway to see a timid Italian boy with no chin start to enter, and get pushed aside. —God, she said, —there's my stupid cousin. I'm going next door. —I've got a doctor for her, a young man was saying. —He'll do it for two hundred and fifty, but I can't get hold of her. Every time I call all I get on the phone is Rose, her crazy sister Rose.

Otto and Ed Feasley, with Esme between them, moved toward the door. The Big Unshaven Man turned away when Feasley passed. —Of course I know him. A damn fine painter, Mr. Memling, he was saying, as he took a quart flask out of his pocket. —Would you mind filling this up with martinis? Yes, what you read about me is true, I like to have some with me. Sure, I'll look at your novel any time, he finished, as the boy handed a ten-dollar bill across the bar.

—I sure as Chrahst know him from somewhere, Feasley said.

—That's because he's Ernest Hemingway, said a voice nearby.

—Paris? said the light-haired girl. —I wouldn't reach up my ahss for the whole city.

Mr. Feddle was being pushed out the door ahead of them. There they met Hannah. —Is Stanley in there? she asked. —Haven't seen him. —He had to go to the hospital to see his mother, said Hannah. —She just won't die. Then Hannah melted into the stew, where the juke-box was playing *Return to Sorrento*.

—Where's Adeline? Otto asked.

—I don't know. The hell with her, Feasley said.

They found Adeline asleep in the car. Fortunately it was a new model, with a low chassis and a low center of gravity, which saved it from overturning at the corners. They had some difficulty getting in to the party, when Ed Feasley offered to fight anyone who kept them out. They were saved when a crapulous Cleopatra appeared, waving a rubber asp at Esme and Adeline, thought it knew them, squealing in rapturous welcome that their costumes were *divine*.

It was quite a party. There must have been four hundred.

They arrived as a beautiful thing in a strapless white evening gown finished a song called *I'm a Little Piece of Leather*, followed on the stage by a strip-tease in two parts. The first performer was all too obviously a woman, gone to fat. This tumbled about in the spotlights, wallowed a great unmuscled expanse of rump and bounced a mammoth front at the audience, jeering with laughter, railed off the stage in grisly flounces of flesh. Then towering loveliness appeared, bowed to thunderous applause, and moving with perfect timing slipped off one after another garment to reveal exquisite limbs (hairless but a trifle muscular) with long gathering motions of blond hair to the waist, serpentine caresses rising over the spangled brassière. Ed Feasley, who had muttered with virile disgust at the first, watched this exhibition with wondering pleasure, until, in finale, the brassière was waved aloft leaving a chest uninhabited, leaving Feasley sitting forward in astonished indignation, leaving the stage through a curtain of wild applause.

—Are you *really* a girl? a young Bronzino in velvet asked Esme, punching in disbelief at her small bosom. She laughed, and Otto turned to brandish his sling; like Infessura, perhaps, writing of the papal court of Sixtus IV, "puerorum amator et sodomita fuit," he ordered a drink.

There was, in fact, a religious aura about this festival, religious that is in the sense of devotion, adoration, celebration of deity, before religion became confused with systems of ethics and morality, to become a sore affliction upon the very things it had once exalted. Quite as festive, these halls, as the Dionysian processions in which Greek boys dressed as women carried the ithyphalli through the streets, amid sounds of rejoicing from all sexes present, and all were; glorious age of the shrine of Hercules at Coos, where the priests dressed in feminine attire; the shrine of Venus at Cyprus, where men in women's clothes could spot women immediately, for they wore men's clothes: golden day of the bride deflowered by the lingam, straddling the

statue of Priapus to offer her virginity to that god who, like all gods, even to the Christian deity who exercised it with Mary in the form of the Holy Ghost, had jus primae noctis, and no subterfuge permitted. So enough of these young brides had backed up upon the Priapean image and left their flowers there. So a voice said now, —Then let's go to Vienna, they've announced that you can wear drag in the streets if you don't offend public morals! Isn't that sweet? To which a dark-haired person in an evening gown of green watered silk said, —More than once I've dressed as a priest, just so no one would be troublesome about my wearing skirts. Sometimes I just can't *breathe* in trousers.

So priests down through the ages, skirted in respectful imitation of androgynous deities who reigned before Baal was worshiped as a pillar, before Osiris sported erection, before men knew of their part in generation, and regarded skirted women as autofructiferous. When they made this discovery, the sun replaced the moon as all-powerful, and Lupercalia came to Rome, naked women whipped through the streets around the Palatine hill, and the cross became such a glorious symbol of the male triad that many a religion embraced it, so notorious that when the new religion which extolled the impotent man and the barren woman triumphed over a stupefied empire, the early skirted fathers of the Church forbade its use.

So even now, under a potted palm with silver fronds, a youth making a solemn avowal held another youth by that part where early Hebrews placed their hands when taking oaths, for it represented Jahveh.

Ed Feasley had a hand on a smooth chocolate shoulder which rose from a lavender evening gown in organdy, standing in the less-lighted shelter of a pillar.

There were women there. At a large table near the dance floor one sat, with broad tailored shoulders, flat grosgrain lapels, short-cut hair and heavy hands (she looked rather like George Washington without his wig, at about the time he married Martha Dandridge (Custis) for her money), recently in trouble, someone said, over kidnaping a seal for immoral purposes. She had not spoken to a *man* for sixteen years. Somewhere submerged in childhood lay a little girl's name which had once been hers. Only her bankers knew it now. Friends called her Popeye. Now she was saying, to an exquisitely pomaded creature whom thousands knew as a hero of stage, screen, and radio, —I wish I *were* a little boy, so that I could dance with *you*. They were interrupted by Big Anna, in dinner clothes. —*Have* you seen Agnes? said the Swede. —My dear she has the key to my *box*, and simply *ev*erything's locked up in it. The most delicious gown Jacques Griffes made for me especially to wear *tonight*, and I've had to come in this silly tuxedo suit, simply everyone thinks I'm a *woman* . . .

The second in order of the strip-tease performers stood beside them, dressed now in silver lamé. —Rudy! the Swede said, —your dance was ex*cru*ciating.

—I feel simply ghastly, Rudy said. —I've been having hot flashes all evening. What divine perfume. Have you seen a book of mine?

—It's only *My Sin*, I borrowed it from Agnes. Is this your book? Rudy reached for it. —But what are *you* doing reading Tertullian?

—For my work of course. I'm designing sports costumes for an order of nuns, and I've been told that their ears simply must be kept covered, by a very dear friend. He lent me this book, Rudy said, fondling Tertullian. —*De Virginibus Velandis*, on the necessity of veiling virgins. Val told me the most divinely absurd stories this afternoon. Do you know why nuns must have their ears covered? My dear, so they won't conceive! The Virgin conceived that way, the Logos entered her ears. I have no idea what a *logos* is, but it doesn't sound at all nice does it. Val quoted Vergil and all sorts of dead people. Why, they all used to believe that all sorts of animals conceived that way. They thought that mares were made pregnant by the wind. And so I have to read this to really know what on earth I'm doing, covering their ears, because evil angels are waiting to do the *nas*tiest things to them. Can you imagine conceiving on the badminton court?

—It sounds really celestial, said Big Anna. —But what perfume are *you* wearing?

—I can't tell you, really. A very dear friend makes it himself. *Fuisse deam*, that's what he calls it. An aroma remained, you could tell a goddess had just appeared, Rudy said, waltzing toward the dance floor.

—I'd prefer French, Big Anna muttered, looking bitterly after Rudy's silver lamé. —*Where* is Agnes, he said, wringing his hands.

Otto was trying to order another drink. He stared on the festival with glazed eyes, and had decided for safety's sake to sit still until he could summon energy to leave. He waved with a heavy hand at a passing mulatto whose black hair stood out four inches behind his conical head in anointed streamlining, and that one was gone with his tray. Instead Cleopatra fluttered up to ask him for Maude Munk's telephone number, —because she's getting the most gorgeous baby by air mail from Sweden, and we want one so *much* . . . With the concentration of applied memory, Otto invented a telephone number. —Do you want to dance? Cleopatra asked him. Adeline returned to the table alone. —I was dancing with some guy and he suddenly let go of me and said, You *are* a girl, aren't you, and left me right in the middle of the floor. See him, that big handsome boy, he looks like he went to Princeton.

—He probably did, Otto mumbled. Then he swung around at Cleopatra. —Will you get that God-damned thing out of my sling? he said, and the queen removed the asp, alarmed. —That's the cutest disguise you wear, said Cleopatra, and then, abruptly, and as indignant —Aren't *you* queer?

—Of course not, Otto said, indignantly unoriginal.

—What a *shame*, said Cleopatra. —I must find my barge.

Otto looked for Esme, did not see her. He looked for Feasley, did not see him. He was about to speak to Adeline when she left the table and went toward the dance floor saying, —I see a gentleman.

A voice said, —I've never seen so much bad silk on so many *divine* bodies. Another said, —Let's elope. And another, —You can't *touch* me, because I'm in a state of Grace. I'm going to be received tomorrow, only think! *Tomorrow* . . .

—Pony boy, a voice crooned.

—But I thought Victoria and Albert Hall were going to be here. Have you read her book? Have you seen his play? Where are they? said Big Anna, looking, as he had each minute of the evening, nearer to weeping. —Oh Herschel! Herschel! Will you stop that singing and console me?

—What is it, baby?

—It's Agnes. She has my *key*.

—Yes, baby, Herschel said. He was almost immobile, but still standing. —I have to get home to work, he said in a voice which was more a liquid presence and barely escaped his throat. —Work. Work. Work.

—What work?

—Haf to write a speech. Have you ever read *The Trees of Home?* It stinks, baby. It's a best seller. I've been writing speeches for the author of the best seller *Trees of Home*, baby. Moral regeneration, insidious influences sapping our very gzzzhuu huuu I'm going down to Dutch Siam yes I am . . . he sang.

—I haven't seen you since the boat docked! At this, Big Anna turned around. —Victoria! Where's Albert? I'm so glad to *see* you baby.

—He's dancing with an archbishop. But darling tell me have you seen a tall dark girl here? Her name is Seraphina di Brescia, I just hoped she might be here, I know she's in New York. I met her at the Monocle in Paris . . .

—No, but have you seen Agnes? Agnes Deigh?

—You're joking, darling. Tell me, did you ever get your little what-was-his-name over from Italy?

—Little Giono! said the Swede, wringing his hands again. —No, and I've been after the immigration people, but they won't help. Why he'll be fif*teen* by the time I can get him over here, and he won't do for a *thing*. I'm going to have to adopt him, it's the only way out. But before I adopt him I have to join the Church my dear, think of it. He has to have a Catholic *parent*. I'm going back next week.

—To Rome?

—Oh yes, I can't bear it here a moment longer.

Otto, seeing Feasley approach, struggled to his feet. —Let's get out of here, he said. —Where are Esme? and Adeline?

—The hell with them. Just wait a minute. There's a little colored girl here I want to take along. See if you can find her while I go to the head. She's in a purple dress.

—We met in Paris, someone said, —in the Reine Blanche . . .

—In the Carrousel . . .

—In Copenhagen . . .

—The Drap Dead . . .

—The Boof on the Roof . . .

—Seraphina? The one they call Jimmy? I know she has money, but what does she spend it all on? —Don't be silly. She spends it on girls.

—Yes darling, said Adeline's dancing partner into her blond hair resting against the grosgrain lapels. —We have to follow Emerson's advice to treat people as though they were real, because, perhaps they are . . .

From somewhere in the middle of the floor, in a quailing voice, —Baby and I were baked in a pie, the gravy was wonderful hot . . .

—Of course there's time, Agnes Deigh's voice said, —just take the key and *hurry*. And don't let me forget to give you my mother's address in Rome . . .

—And the address of Monseigneur Fé, he has his own chapel right near the Vatican where he performs the most divine *marriage* ceremonies . . .

So they danced, as though ridden with the conscience of the Tarahumara Indian, whose only sin can be not having danced enough.

Feasley said, —Come on, let's get out of here, not stopping as he passed the table. —Chrahst, I found her,

the girl in the purple dress. Standing right beside me at the next urinal . . .

—I hate women, a voice said. It paused. Then, —I hate men too.

And so, as the Lord prophesied through the Greek Clement: *I am come to destroy the work of the woman, that is, concupiscence, whose works are generation and death*.

It broke up and spread itself, in couples and threes and figures of stumbling loneliness, into the streets, into doorways, they all went into the dark repeating themselves and preparing to meet one another, to reassemble, rehearse their interchangeable disasters; and the place looked like a kingdom stricken by papal anathema, as when Philippe Auguste, cunning pitiless monarch of France, was excommunicated for marrying Agnes while his wife Ingeborg still lived, and in his kingdom under the interdict there was neither baptism, marriage, nor burial, and corpses rotted on the high road.

—Wasn't it *fun*, said Agnes Deigh leaning against a garbage can. Herschel, scratching the sotted front of an evening shirt beside her, agreed, with the sound of a thing drowning. He excused himself, and when he had thrown up in an empty doorway returned singing. No doubt about it: tonight he was going to manage it. —Your strip-tease danse was *shock*ing, Rudy, he said. —Where's Tertullian? I can't lose *him*, Rudy said, and slipped a white hairless arm through Herschel's, pulled the evening cape tighter and with almost masculine exasperation thrust the long blond hair out over the fur. —Call a cab, baby, for God's sake. I feel awful. I feel like I was going to have a miscarriage.

Agnes Deigh returned a moment later, from between two parked cars. She was talking. But there was no one to talk to. There was no one there at all. The sound of thunder approached from the street's corner, a Department of Sanitation truck stopping every ten or twelve yards to open the huge maw at its back and masticate the immense portions left out to appease it with gnashings of reckless proportions, glass smashed and wood splintered between its bloodless gums. Agnes, leaning alone there, was suddenly frightened less than ten bites away. She was, as much as her haze of consciousness would allow her, terrified, and set off up the street in the opposite direction, loping in frantic steps as though dodging among trees, an injured doe in a landscape of Piero di Cosimo fleeing the patient hunter. She reached a lighted doorway, struggled into the vast and empty interior, and collapsed into a pew.

•

Ed Feasley and Otto were moving at seventy-three miles an hour. But neither of them wanted to go to Connecticut, and when they realized that they were taking that direction the car swung about with a scream, and was saved from what might have been a fatal skid by hitting its sliding rear against a lamppost. It headed south. —I want to see how fast I can make that ramp around Grand Central, Ed said, full of spirit. As long as he was conscious, he liked to have a good time. He had been having one, continuous, for years, and never a moment of craven doubt in any of it. He was not afraid: not a grain of that fear which is granted in any definition of sanity. In college, he had entertained himself and others, quiet evenings in his rooms when his allowance was cut off, by beating the back of his fist with a stiff-bristled hairbrush, then swinging his hand in circles until the pressure of descending blood broke small capillaries and spotted the rug and ceiling with spots turned brown by morning; or standing before a mirror with thumb and forefinger pressed against his carotid arteries until his face lost all color and he was caught by consciousness as he fell; or dropping lighted cigarettes into the trouser turn-ups of a friend's two-hundred-dollar suit; or setting fire to his hand dipped in lighter fluid; or setting fire to the extended newspapers of people in subways just before the doors closed, leaving him on the platform overcome with laughter at the fugitive conflagration. He liked a Good Time.

The car stopped so suddenly it might have hit a wall. Otto straightened up from the dashboard holding his head. They were in front of a hospital. —What is it? he asked, brushing at a spot on his sleeve until he realized that it was a band of light from the streetlamp above.

—I've always wanted to pat a stiff on the head. They shave them, Ed Feasley said. A minute later they were in a basement corridor of the hospital, talking to the watchman. He was lonely. They just wanted to know how to get to Connecticut. They were told. The watchman left on his round.

In a large refrigerated room, Ed Feasley raised a sheet and stroked a smooth pate. He groaned with pleasure. Otto opened drawers, and closed them. Then he turned with his prize. It was a leg, small enough to be a woman's, quite old, slightly blackened around some of the toes and its detached end neatly bound with tape. But Ed's felicitous imagination had been busy too: with some effort, he had brought together two lonely corpses of opposite sex, erected now in the act of life. But even that mortal pleasure failed to change their expressions, leveled into disconsolate similitude by their shaven heads.

Otto was having trouble keeping the leg wrapped. —You ought to get rid of that sling, Ed Feasley said. —It's just a gag anyway, isn't it? Here, give me the leg, and he left with it partially wrapped in the bit of blue cloth under his arm.

The car roared south in the dawn's early light. —We have to *do* something with it, said Feasley, nodding back at the fragmentary passenger in the back seat. —We ought to give it to somebody. Somebody who needs it.

—There's a girl I'd like to give it to, Otto said. —I'd like to give it to Edna Mims, God damn it, in a box, a nice long white flower box from Max Schling.

—That's *it!* said the driver. —She's the girl you used to go around with in college? She's a good lay. We've got to get the box now.

The sudden light of Madison Square showed day approaching rapidly, though the sky was not yet colored with dawn; but with this clearing sky above, and the knock he had got on the head, sobriety and trepidation descended upon Otto. —We'd better not, he said.

—No, come on, it's a fat idea.

They thundered into Washington Square. Otto tried desperately to think of an alternative, something safer, someone defenseless. Then he said, —Stanley.

—Stanley?

—We'll tell him it's a relic. He's a Catholic, and he must want a relic. We'll give him the Pope's left leg.

—He won't believe it.

—He'll believe it.

—I wouldn't believe it, even if I was Catholic.

—He's a Catholic. He'll believe it. How does he know what the Pope's leg looks like?

—How does anybody know, except the Pope?

—Except the Pope. There's more than one pope.

—The rest are dead.

—All right, they're dead. This is from a dead one.

—Well then he can't have been dead very long.

—Look, we don't have to tell him it's a pope's leg. Stanley lives in a basement apartment. All we have to do is break the lock on the grating, we can do that some way, and slip it into bed with him. He'll wake up and think it's the Pope.

—The Pope in bed with him?

—But then he'll find that there's no one attached to it. Then he'll know.

—What'll he know?

—Why then he'll know that the Pope is dead.

The car turned toward Sixth Avenue.

•

At four in the morning, the nurse told Stanley that his mother was sleeping well, that he had better go home and get some rest, they would get in touch with him immediately if anything happened. Mother lay in one of those bed machines which can be cranked and warped in any direction, to accommodate whatever vagary of accident or human ill. But even now, though the black beads lay quiet in her fingers, she was not asleep. Not at all. After a reassuring look at her teeth in the glass she had closed her eyes and pretended sleep, so that they would go away, mortally tired she was of all of their quietened voices in hope that she would live, their faces drawn in dolefulness trusting that she would not die when that, in unequivocal reason, was all she wanted.

For one thing, she was certain that somewhere along the way they had left a pair of scissors inside her. For another, they had played music to her when they made the amputation (this was called therapy), and she could not get the tune out of her head. When she thought of her missing limb, she remembered the tune; then as her weary unmusical mind dragged her helpless through that tune, she remembered the leg, which would at this point begin to itch. When she inclined to scratch it, it was not there. And as she bent her body, the scissors would shift. Then the tune would commence again. Could she wait? while one after another of her parts was carried away, in a bottle, in a glass, on a tray. What shabby presentation would she make, when she appeared at her final Destination? Her thumb twitched on the crucifix, and a lonely movement of the sheet toward the end of the bed betrayed her wakefulness, where her foot tapped against a metal rung. No one noticed it. Stanley went home.

He let himself into his room, bolted the door and fixed the chain, and lay down on his back, fully dressed, staring at the crack in the ceiling above. At first, he had only measured that crack once a week, but in these last few months he measured it every evening, and since the beginning of December, two ways: along its broken length, and the straight distance from the corner of the room to the end of the crack. In twenty months it had lengthened one and five-eighths inches. How long could it go on? before that ceiling, with the sudden impatience of inanimate things, would yawn open over him, and fall with the astonished

introduction of the lives above into his own. Who could live in a city like this without terror of abrupt entombment: buildings one hundred stories high, built in a day, were obviously going to topple long before, say, the cathedral at Fenestrula, centuries in building, and standing centuries since. A picture of that cathedral hung on the wall across the room, and when he lay down it was either to stare at the ceiling, or, on his side, at that print, the figure which seemed to be gathered toward heaven in the spired bulk of the cathedral. Fenestrula! If ever he should get to Italy, it was in that cathedral that he wanted to play the organ; a lonely ambition, solitary epiphany. Meanwhile he carried concealed a small hammer and chisel, escape tools, and tried to avoid travel underground.

On the ceiling grew the graph of Stanley's existence, his central concern: Expendability.

Everything wore out. What was more, he lived in a land where everything was calculated to wear out, made from design to substance with only its wearing out and replacement in view, and that replacement to be replaced. As a paper weight, on the pile of lined music composition paper tattered by erasure, lay a ceramic fragment from the Roman colony at Leptis Magna in North Africa. It was slightly conical, a triangular shape, dull, unglazed, and thumb prints were almost discernible in the scalloped edge: valueless as objet d'art, it had what might be credited as tactile value, and little else, except that it had been made to *last*. And Stanley, eating in the neighborhood with pressed metal cutlery, drinking from paper cups and plastic cups, often sat silent at table for minutes, weighing the dishonest weight of a plastic salt shaker, considering Leptis Magna, still standing on the Libyan shore of the middle sea. Phonograph needles? razor blades? thrown away entire, when their edges and points were worn. Automobile batteries? someone had told him that batteries in European cars lasted for years, but here companies owned those long-life patents, and guarded them while they sold batteries to replace those they had sold a year before. But there was more to it than gross tyranny of business enterprise; and advertising, whose open chancres gaped everywhere, only a symptom of the great disease, this plague of newness, this febrile, finally paretic seizure dictated by a beadledom of time monitored by clocks, observatories, signals on the radio, the recorded voice of a woman (dead or alive) who dissected the latest minute on the telephone when you dialed NERVOUS.

Stanley looked at his wrist watch. He was almost never seen in any but frayed and soiled clothing, but he owned others. In the closet at his head, which was locked, were three suits, two almost new and the third never worn. There were two pairs of shoes, brown and black, which he took out and dusted every week. He had two hundred new razor blades, and a porous stone on which he could get old ones almost sharp, which accounted for his half-shaven look. (Some day he hoped to own a Rolls razor; but he understood their sales were discouraged here by American razor blade manufacturers.)

Those were the outward signs. But like every legitimate terror, this obsession with expendability ran through every instant of his body's life. Stanley had haircuts infrequently, and even then only a trim. He did not wash often. People must suspect this. What did they think? But better, perhaps: let them think what they would. Every abrasive contact with the wash cloth and caustic soap *must* wear down the body a little. But here came another enigma: if washing wore things out, what of clothes? He always wore a shirt just one more day, not only making it last but keeping his supply of clean ones (and some never worn) *ready*. But when, eventually, the one he wore went to the laundry, wasn't it necessary to use the most harsh soaps and treatment to get it clean? Therefore wasn't it wearing out faster?

Still, he was most upset in these calculations over the prospect of the Last Moment. Would he have time to wash himself to perfect newness, dress in unworn, uncreased garments? Perhaps not. Perhaps he would be snatched up as he was! a picture so discomfiting that when it really came upon him, he would surprise everyone by appearing spotless for a day or two, leaving unanswered (except in his own apprehension) the cordial question, —Where are you going, Stanley? Perhaps what had happened to him when he went for an army physical examination was meant to be a lesson: told to undress, he was so mortified at the dirt on him that he went to the bathroom where the only place he could find to wash in privacy, in secret if you will, was the toilet bowl itself. Would he have time?

The perfect naked death of a baby (right after baptism).

What of Saint Catherine? appeared in pieces, did she? rolling that wheel before her. But there, she *had* that wheel, Saint Lawrence the gridiron, as witness to their unseemly appearances. But not in this world: things wore out, and you lost them in a thousand ways, preposterous and unconnected with any notion of devotion, martyrdom, sacrifice . . . What of Mother? a thought which had been running under the surface of all these others. What of *her?*

And at that moment a stab of pain penetrated a tooth, and slowed to a blunt ache as he turned his face to the wall, and his eyes to the crucifix there. The dull throbbing persisted, he took his jaw in his hand of cold thin fingers and turned his face again. On a low table near his head, under gathering dust and black flecks from the river and a railroad shunting track, were newspaper clippings, sequestered for no reason but to

avoid throwing them away, un-matching pictures and unrelated information one shred of which might, at some extremity, be demanded. On top lay the most recent, the feature story on the Spanish girl to be canonized in the Easter week of the year ahead. The pain in his jaw subsided as he stared at her picture upside-down hanging from the table's edge, and his mind confused its thoughts and images, more vivid and irrelevant, as it did always when he lay this way, as unable to sleep at night as he was torpid during day.

He shuddered at Esme, seduced by an apprehension in a world real enough to her: appalled one day when an airplane moving with the speed of sound had disemboweled the heaven above them and eviscerated its fragments in nausea from their bodies walking below. Alone, he might have thought nothing of it, but shut it out as he did all the frenzied traffic of the world. But her terror shook him; and she was right. And if on the other hand, they'd met that early Jesuit Father Anchieta in the street on a sunny day, sheltered under the parasol of birds he summoned to hover over him and keep pace, she would have appreciated such resourcefulness without profane curiosity, probably not have repeated what she'd seen to a soul. But the airplane! Had she met Saint Peter of Alcántara, Saint Peter Nolasco, Saint Peter Gonzalez, walking, as they did, upon the waves of the sea, why, there was more reason in those excursions than that streak of cacodaemonic extravagance sundering the very dome of heaven.

Stanley moved suddenly, sitting up as though to break a spell. He sat rigid on the edge of the bed, clenching his teeth as though to discipline the activity of his mind, which he could hardly stir during the day when he tried to work. How could Bach have accomplished all that he did? and Palestrina? the Gabrielis? and what of the organ concerti of Corelli? Those were the men whose work he admired beyond all else in this life, for they had touched the origins of design with recognition. And how? with music written for the Church. Not written with obsessions of copyright foremost; not written to be played by men in worn dinner jackets, sung by girls in sequins, involved in wage disputes and radio rights, recording rights, union rights; not written to be issued through a skull-sized plastic box plugged into the wall as background for seductions and the funnypapers, for arguments over automobiles, personalities, shirt sizes, cocktails, the flub-a-dub of a lonely girl washing her girdle; not written to be punctuated by recommendations for headache remedies, stomach appeasers, detergents, hair oil . . . O God! dove sei Fenestrula?

Still he did not get up, but sat staring toward the dim shape of the print of the cathedral. Beneath it was the table where he worked, a cardboard practice keyboard in the center, piled at both ends with papers in uneven stacks, one weighted with the ceramic fragment, another with the *Liber Usualis* opened upon the *Missae pro Defunctis*, his own cramped scribblings in the margins of majestic words between the bars, —Quántus trémor est futúrus, Quando júdex est ventúrus . . . And one page was marked with a tattered piece of notepaper. It was a *Misereris omnium*, and on the paper was written this piece of verse by Michelangelo, and beside it Stanley's broken attempt at translation:

O Dio, o Dio, o Dio,
O God, O God, O God,
Chi m'a tolto a me stesso
Who has taken me from myself
from me myself
Ch'a me fusse più presso
Who was closest (closer) to me
O più di me potessi,
And could do more than I
most about me
che poss' io?
What can I do?
O Dio, o Dio, o Dio.

Specks of dirt on the floor caught his attention from the corner of an eye, and as was his habit he reached out and flicked at them, to see if any moved of their own volition. The tooth throbbed; and as he lay back he thought again of his mother, to whom his work was to be dedicated when it was finished. He looked at his wrist watch, turned off the light, and in closed eyes embraced a vision of the antiphonic brass of Giovanni Gabrieli pouring forth from the two choir lofts in Saint Mark's, to meet over the heads of those

congregated below.

His work, always unfinished, was like the commission from a prince in the Middle Ages, the prince who ordered his tomb, and then busied the artist continually with a succession of fireplaces and doorways, the litter of this life, while the tomb remained unfinished. Nor for Stanley, was this massive piece of music which he worked at when he could, building the tomb he knew it to be, as every piece of created work is the tomb of its creator: thus he could not leave it finished haphazard as he saw work left on all sides of him. It must be finished to a thorough perfection, as much as he humbly could perceive that, every note and every bar, every transition and movement in the pattern over and against itself and within itself proof against time: the movement in the *Divine Comedy*; the pattern in a Requiem Mass; prepared against time as old masters prepared their canvases and their pigments, so that when they were called to appear the work would still hold the perfection they had embraced there. Not what was going on around him now, a canvas ready when it had been stretched and slavered with white lead, or not prepared at all, words put on paper, flickering images on celluloid, with no thought but of the words and the image and the daub to follow. (Stanley's work was done on scrap paper which he ruled himself and on envelope backs, old letters, or old scores which he had erased. He was saving a pile of new paper for the final composition.)

As dawn neared outside he was still fully awake, lying under the crack in the ceiling, under the yellowed ivory (thirteenth century) crucifix over the bed. He heard the truck collecting rubbish at the far end of his block. Christmas so near, again? Suddenly he looked at the watch strapped to his wrist, a rage of figures battling through his mind. He saw Anselm, and shuddered; Esme, and moaned: what unholy thing was that? what knowledge of evil did they share? for so they did, antipodal, but embracing in his mind, images profaning his love in their coupling. He stretched his arms above his head. Did one wear a watch in the tomb? A long walk, he decided; and then he would go to Mass. Why had Agnes Deigh refused to go to Mass with him, one day when they had met; it was just time, and near enough. —I've got to have drinks with someone, business is business darling, he could hear her voice again. Then her profane images shouldered his missionary intentions aside, and the more he thought of her.

He had turned his face to the window just above him, where uncertain light entered to show things as they had been left in each other's shadows the night before, shadowless now, older, wearing out separately and all together. This window he had to keep open in summer, so that passers-by could look in, upsetting to him, as though the friction of their glances might wear things down further; the window open in summer so that things might be thrown in, as some children one day, playing, had thrown something a dog had done on the sidewalk in behind the radiator.

There was a slight tapping on the door, as though someone were knocking who did not want to be answered to, knocking to find no one instead of someone there. Stanley sat up on the edge of his low couch, the door handle turned a slow quarter-circle, and back.

—Who is it? he cried out. —Who is it out there?

—Stanley? A girl's voice: it was Hannah, he let her in. —It's so cold, she said, —I'm sorry, but can I sleep in your chair?

—Stay here, he said. —Lie down, Hannah. I'm going out.

—But no, don't leave for me. Go back to bed. But you're all dressed?

—Yes, stay here. I'm going out.

—Is everything all right, Stanley? Has anything . . .

—Nothing has changed. Go to bed here, Hannah. I'm going out to Mass.

In the hall, where he stopped in the communal toilet, he was troubled again by the problem in arithmetic penciled on the wall there. Someone had multiplied 763 by 37, and got 38,231. He had checked it, idly, two years before; then carefully, at every sitting since. Who had made the mistake? Was it too late to find them and tell them? 10,000 . . . what? Had that person gained it? or lost it? Was it too late? Stanley looked at his wrist watch. He walked out into the cold morning asking himself this heretical question: Can you start measuring a minute at any instant you wish?

•

—I'll go in and try the door first, said Otto.

Feasley got out to follow, returned to get the leg out of the back seat, and rejoined him. The door was locked. —There's somebody awake inside, Otto said. Out on the sidewalk, he twisted the lock on the window grating. Feasley said, —I'll get a wrench, handed the leg to Otto and went back to the car. Suddenly the window shade shot up in Otto's face, the sash after it.

—What are you doing here?

—Oh, I . . . Hannah, I . . . I mean we . . .

—What are you doing here at this window anyhow?

—Why nothing I . . . Hannah was dressed only in a shirt, for all he could see. —We just . . . well, so long Hannah. See you later, he called as he heard the car's engine racing behind him, and he ran toward it, the bare foot waving his goodbye to Hannah from under his arm.

—He's got a girl in there, Hannah's sleeping with him, said Otto as they roared away. —Say listen, he said looking round him, —have you seen a little tan bag, a pigskin dispatch case? Suddenly frantic, he turned to look behind them in the car. The car slid around a corner, leaned to one side in a skid, recovered, skidded in the other direction, and Feasley was cursing as it went head-on into a pole. They got out. Otto looked, found nothing but the leg. —Come on. The hell with it.

—But what about this thing? Otto said, wrapping the cloth around it more tightly as they walked fast up Little West Twelfth Street.

—O Chrahst put it in an ashcan.

He started to, but three men rounded the corner, and he tucked it back under his sling. They got a subway, vapidly curious people appearing on all sides around them.

•

Stanley had taken a long bus ride, returning to the neighborhood of the hospital, and been walking for some time, it seemed, when he heard six o'clock strike nearby. Following the direction of the bells, he found the church and went in, mind seething as he stopped and genuflected. He moved toward a pew in the back, and had almost knelt beside her when he recognized Agnes Deigh. He clutched at her wrist. She started in terror away from him, awakened.

—*Stanley?*

—You're *here*, he whispered.

—Oh God. Her head lolled forward and away from him. —Take me home.

—But you're here, at *Mass*.

—I know it. Take me home. Stanley, now.

•

—Look, we can't carry this thing all over town in broad daylight. It's beginning to smell, too.

—Let's have a look. Chra-ahst, it's turning gray.

Across from them a woman stared, but did not see them, her mouth working, her fingers working at her beads. It was the first car of the train, and at stops a voice rose, where at the glass which looked forward into the tube a woman talked, so close to her own image in that glass that it was steamed by her breath. —They told us all about it, there it is in letters where anyone can read it, everyone knows, they're killing each other, boys killing each other millions of American boys are being killed you can read all about it . . .

The roar of the train drowned her out.

—What shall I do with it?

—Leave it on the seat, there in the corner. We'll get off at this stop.

—he cut them both up and put them in suitcases and those are the people who travel on airplanes . . . The doors clapped to behind them, and they waited on the platform for another train. —My old man's going to get me this time, for mucking up that God-damned car again.

A girl stood in front of them, waiting for the next train, on her way to work in a chewing-gum factory: Hestia, Vesta, virgin-sworn, the hearth and the home (a cheap fluff of a jabot she wore, imitation coral earrings, crippling shoes, under a thin elbow a tabloid catalogue of the day's misinformation). —Chrahst, I don't know whether it's a boy or a girl, after that little nigger at the party last night. Hey honey, do you want to make thirty-five cents?

•

—No, I'm really *not* a Catholic any more, I just put that picture of Cardinal Spellman up there because that corner of the room needs a little *red*, said Agnes Deigh, almost recovered. —Do you want a drink?

—*Now?*

—Stanley, you look exhausted too, she said. —Here, drink this, it will warm you. She handed him a glass of port, and swallowed down, herself, almost choking, some whisky. —What a God-awful mess this place is. He must have got here. Agnes looked around, at her own underclothing scattered broadcast in the living room. One of her best gowns was hung over her sunlamp, which was turned on.

—It is warming, Stanley said, drinking, —I can feel it all through me.

—God, I'm so tired, she said, beginning to undress. —Will you help me? He followed her into the

bedroom. —Thank God you found me.

—What's this? Stanley said, aghast holding up a card he'd taken from the table, reading in a whisper —"Christ has come!"

—Oh Stanley, you're not supposed to see that. It's a Christmas card.

—*Christmas* card! But who . . .

—Don't be upset, Stanley. From that Swedish boy they call Big Anna.

—But it's . . . disgusting, this picture . . .

—I know, Stanley. But these things happen in the world. Throw it in the wastebasket. No, don't tear it up, just throw it in the basket.

—But . . . why do you *know* those people?

—Oh Stanley, she said, and paused bent double over a rolled-down stocking. —Don't you see, Stanley, sometimes people like that are . . . are easier for a woman. They're safer somehow . . . She had taken off her stockings then, in the pause, and stood up dressed only in her slip. She picked up a plant, and carried it into the other room. —I just can't stand to have anything living and breathing in the same room where I'm trying to sleep. She sat down on the bed again with a glass of water, and laid two sleeping pills beside it. —God, what a smell of perfume he left in the place. He must have dropped the bottle. Oh, come Stanley, sit here. You do understand about people like that don't you? Just don't think about them. You've got to be philosophical, darling. Thank God you found me in that church.

—Yes, thank God, who led you there.

—But Stanley dear . . .

—You were at Mass, he said.

—I'm *not* a Catholic any more, I tell you.

—You will always be a Catholic. It is not for you to say. But why have you strayed so far? he asked, sitting beside her.

—Even when I was a child, I was frightened out of it, it seemed. Once in my convent school, I remember when we were all sent to look at a reliquary. It was . . . I don't know, a splinter of the Cross, or a crumb of something. They even had one that they said contained a bit of the original darkness that Moses called down on the world, imagine. Yes, I think it was a crumb, from the biscuit that bled when it was trampled by Zwingli's soldiers. But I didn't go, I went to a movie instead. The next day in class I was told to get up and describe the reliquary, and I gave a wonderful description, about it being big and fancy and gold, with a peep-hole and a magnifying lens so you could see the speck inside. Then they whipped me, and told me that it hadn't even been on exhibit, it was away being cleaned . . .

—But these things are our trials as children to prepare us . . .

—And I used to chew the wafer, she went on, almost somniloquent, in an arrested whisper. —I couldn't hold it in my mouth without chewing it. The more I knew it was sinful, the more I chewed His Body, I *had* to chew it . . .

—These sins we commit as children . . .

But now Agnes had breathed deeply and sat back. She glimpsed her face in a boudoir mirror and said, —Don't I look awful, my eye . . .

—What happened to it?

—At that party, that terrible party, in the ladies' room, another woman hit me with her hand bag. This has gone far enough, she said. She didn't think I was really a . . . she thought I was one of the people in costume. Agnes was staring at the floor. Then she sniffed and turned to Stanley with a smile forcing her lips. —But analysis is safer, and you have the same confessional.

—But don't you understand what happened this morning? he brought out fervently. —You didn't know you were coming to Mass, but you were directed there, as I was, as He led me there to . . .

She put an arm around his shoulders, and her strap came undone. Mickey Mouse pointed to 6:45. —Stanley, she said. —You're such a boy.

•

Dawn, somewhere beyond the incinerator plant which had won first prize in functional architecture a decade before: Fuller was busy in Mr. Brown's bathroom, picking up every piece of Mr. Brown's hair he could find and putting it into an envelope. Esme wakened for a moment in a strange bed, looked at the arm round her, could identify neither its owner nor its sex, and went back to sleep. Esther woke, hearing sounds which seemed to have been going on for a long time; as though she'd heard a key turn in the lock hours before, and footsteps, and the sound of a voice, or voices. But she lay still, and closed her eyes, as she did always on the dull sounds of Rose's dreams. In the street below, young policemen raced the engines of their motorcycles to arrogant pitch, and roared to duty. In the East Fifty-first Street station-house, Big Anna sat

on a bench weeping. —But nobody even saw my *gown*, he cried. —We saw it, Jack, said the man behind the desk, turning to another policeman in shirtsleeves, —Is he known? Anselm was descending the steps of the I.R.T. West Side subway, on all fours. Adeline had just closed a door behind her, having wakened beside someone with short-cut hair and heavy hands, whom she remembered having taken for a man the night before. Herschel was not to be wakened until some hours later, by two sailors in a Chelsea hotel room, where he lay bandaged over chest and back, the protective gauze of Dutch Siam, tattoo artist.

Dawn, just as it came to Australian skies, a woman of bad character in a cloak of red possum skins.

•

What Stanley marveled at most was the wealth of her that had appeared as her garments came off. There was so much *of* her. She stood, wiping the make-up from her face turned away, and he stared at her thighs from behind, as a collector stares at the fine patina glazed over the courses of worms, for those vast vermiculated surfaces were furrowed so. Terror struck him. He started to rise from the bed and reach for his shirt. Too late. She was there, tumbling the marvelous cucumiform weights down upon a chest which looked as though it would cave in under such manna. —Look, she said, joy of this world recovered, raising herself so that her front swung pendulant over him, unequaled, and unequal lengths untouched by baby's hand, —you can play telephone with them.

•

Trains from great distance over barbarous land, ships from civilized shores and airplanes from nowhere aimed at the island, dived at it, into it, unloaded lives upon it. Far uptown Mr. Pivner lay, unconscious arabesque in nervous imitation of sleep (he was, in fact, enduring a train wreck in Rajputana), that part of him already vigilant which would reach the control of the alarm clock an instant before it went off.

In Harlem, walking alone, Otto looked at his watch, forgot to see the time and looked again, as he sought the scene of Saturnalia where he hoped to recover the pigskin dispatch case.

The streets were filling with people whose work was not their own. They poured out, like buttons from a host of common ladles, though some were of pressed paper, some ivory, some horn, and synthetic pearl, to be put in place, to break, or fall off lost, rolling into gutters and dark corners where no Omnipotent Hand could reach them, no Omniscient Eye see them; to be replaced, seaming up the habits of this monster they clothed with their lives.

•

The newspaper quivered in Basil Valentine's hands, clasped behind him. Music, from another corner, plucked at his back. It was a pavan by a dead Spaniard.

Hungary to Sell Famed Paintings . . . Vienna . . . Diplomatic sources here said today that Hungary was attempting to sell in the West masterpieces from Budapest's National Art Gallery. The Gallery included paintings by Raphael, Tintoretto, Murillo, and others collected by the Austro-Hungarian emperors and princes. The informants said some of the paintings were being shipped to the United States as diplomatic luggage in the hope of interesting American art collectors.

He brought the newspaper up before him and read that again in the dull light of the dawn where he stood at the windows.

The desk in the far corner of the room was still littered with the papers he had spent the night over, finally snapped off the light and sat in a deep chair with his fingertips resting against his eyelids, and his head erect. The Vulliamy clock on the mantel had struck three times gently, at regular intervals, before he moved; and then, only his fingers moved, to remain arched before his face, meeting their tips in gothic contemplation, his eyes clear as though he'd done no more than blink them.

Now he gave an impatient sigh, dropped the newspaper on the window shelf, and stood looking straight out at the gray sky. —Another blue day? he murmured, as the stately strokes of the harp came to an end, and he turned from the window.

The letterheads among the sheaf of papers on his desk witnessed important oppositions in the world, languages as various as the devices and crests which adorned them. He sat down and hurriedly checked over a coded message against its original, —Put Inononu in touch immediately, have received necessary information . . . which he crumpled in his hand. He slipped the rest of the papers into a dispatch case, and was gone for a moment into the bedroom to lock it in a wall safe behind the chest. Then he went to the bathroom, dropped the crumpled note into the basin and put a match to it, washed the ashes down the drain, washed his hands slowly and with care, and went in to make tea.

There was exquisite correspondence between the Sèvres cup and the back of his hand, where blue veins showed making the flesh appear translucent: it was not a reflection of mutual fragility, but rather the delicacy of the porcelain completed a composition enhancing, as it did, the tensile strength of the hand which raised it. In the other, he opened a book, and read. Now and then his lips moved, as he turned the pages of Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises* which he had, contrary to habit, lent out (for this was not the only, certainly not the nicest copy he had). A fly landed on the print, and he struck at it. The fly rose and crossed the room to settle busily upon a golden figure, a bull lowering its jewel-collared head to thrust with its horns at the egg floating in the rock cavity before it. The figure was small, and stood on a column at the end of the couch.

He turned another page. A fine-sprung coil of brown hair lay in the inner margin. Basil Valentine leaned down to blow at it. The hair did not move. He made a sound with his lips, and flicked it away with a finger. Then he read for less than a minute more, closed the book abruptly and bent down, searching the floor for the coil of hair. He found it on the carpet, put it into an ashtray, opened the book again and gazed at the page. There was a faint hum, from the corner where the phonograph had shut itself off. His gaze shifted to the ashtray. Then he moved quickly, to stand, take the coil of hair from the ashtray, into the bathroom and drop it into the bowl. He flushed the toilet and washed his hands, studying his face in the mirror as he did so.

The expression of anxiety which he had worn all this time did not leave him as he returned to the living room, tightening the cord of his dressing gown, and taking the gold cigarette case from its breast pocket. Snapped open, without taking out a cigarette he snapped it closed again and stood looking at the inscription worn almost smooth on its surface. —Damn him, he whispered. —Damn him. He turned to look at the Vulliamy clock. It was adorned with a cupid. He loosened the cord of his dressing gown.

A few minutes later Basil Valentine had exchanged his black pumps for a pair of equally narrow black shoes, the dressing gown for a blue suit, and he returned pulling at the foundations under his trousers. Among the books at the back of his desk, he pushed aside *La nuit des Rois* and quickly found the copy of Thoreau. He pulled on his coat, and on his way out opened a panel closet and took out a large flat envelope. He paused in the doorway to look the room over quickly, and then locked the door with two keys, leaving the *Spiritual Exercises* of Saint Ignatius of Loyola open on the desk, where the fly had already alighted before the second key turned in the lock.

In the street door below, he paused to look in all directions. A slight drizzle had commenced. He came forth damning the wind, the hand with the gold seal ring holding his hat on as he hailed a cab with the other.

•

The wind from the river was quite strong. It was, in fact, strong enough to support a man; and this, at a corner on Gansevoort Street, is exactly what it was doing. The man himself, on the other hand, did not seem grateful. He was talking to the wind; and, as occasional words took shape from the jumble of sounds he poured forth, it became evident that he was calling it foul names. At this, the wind became even more zealous in its attentions to him. He hit at the skirt of his tattered coat as it flew up around him, addressing it somewhat like this, —Gway gwayg . . . yccksckr . . . until, its caprice satisfied, the wind flung him round a corner and went on east.

Abandoned, he swayed, and fortunately found a wall with the first throw of his hand, instead of the face of the man who approached, for he had struck out at just about that level.

—Here, my good man. Could you tell me whereabouts Horatio Street . . . good heavens.

Thus called upon, he took courage: the sursum corda of an extravagant belch straightened him upright, and he answered, —Whfffck? Whether this was an approach to discussion he had devised himself, or a subtle adaptation of the Socratic method of questioning perfected in the local athenaeums which he attended until closing time, was not to be known; for the answer was,

—Stand aside.

—Here, don't goway. Here, how do youfffk . . . He licked a lip and commenced again, putting out a hand. —My name Boyma . . . he managed, summoning himself for the challenge of recognition. —And you must be Gro . . . go . . . raggly!

He seemed to have struggled up on that word from behind; and he finished with the triumph of having knocked it over the head. He did in fact look down, as though it might be lying there at his feet. It was such a successful combat that he decided to renew it. —Go . . . gro . . . gorag . . . His hand found a wrist, and closed thereon. Bells sounded, from a church somewhere near. —Go . . . ro . . . grag . . . But the sharp heel of a hand delivered to the side of his head stopped him, and he dropped against the wall with no exclamation of surprise whatever.

•

The door was opened to the length of a finger.

—You . . . !

—I . . .

—How . . . how did you find me?

—It hasn't been easy. You might put *Rouge Cloître* out here on your bell, at least.

—Rouge . . . put what?

—The name of the convent that took van der Goes in, you know. May I come in?

—Oh, why . . . yes, yes come in.

—I'm not disturbing you? Basil Valentine asked, entering the room. —Coming at such an odd hour?

—Yes it is, but no, not if . . . you don't need the sleep?

—Unfortunately I do, I need it badly, Valentine answered with a smile. —Here, I brought down these van Eyck details. And your Thoreau. I went off with that quite by mistake.

—That, thank you for that. And you . . . your . . .

—My coat? Yes, it's wet. I'll take it off in a moment. First I'd like to wash my hands, Valentine went on, turning toward a door, —I had a rather disagreeable encounter on my way here. The room was the kitchen; and with one look at the sink, he returned to say, —Are you aware that there's something growing in here? A delicate plant, growing right up out of the drain?

—Oh no, but that, it must be a melon then. Some melon seeds washed down . . . here, here's the bathroom here.

A minute later, Valentine's voice came from there. —A towel?

—Yes, here, use this.

Valentine came out, drying his hands on a wad of cotton waste. —It's pretty stuff, isn't it, he said smiling again, and threw it into the fireplace. —And tell me, it's your habit to cover up mirrors? as they do in a house where someone's died?

—The one in the bathroom? it's only . . . something drying. But you, he asked Valentine suddenly, —don't you get tired of the image you dodge in mirrors?

—I don't dodge. Valentine had not lost his smile. He took off his coat, and put it with his hat on the bed, where he sat on the unmade edge and leaned back against the rumpled covers, hands clasped round one knee. —So, you're working, are you? he said agreeably. —You've been at it all night?

—All night, I've been working all night. I just finished it.

—What? could I see it?

—It's this one, this big one here.

Valentine got up to help him move it out from the wall, and stand it face out against the inside of the door. He offered his cigarette case, lit their cigarettes, and studied the painting for some time before he said, —Brown won't like this, you know. The face there, how badly you've damaged it.

—But the damage? It isn't as though I'd done that. A hand was flung up before him. —The painting itself, the composition took its own form, when it was painted. And then the damage, the damage is indifferent to the composition, isn't it. The damage, you know, is . . . happens.

Valentine shrugged. —I know, of course, he said. —But I doubt that Brown will. It will cut the price down badly.

—The price! What's that to do with . . .

—Good heavens, I don't care about it. But your employer is rather sensitive about those things, you know. After another pause, without taking his eyes from the painting, Valentine stepped back, and the figure behind him moved as quickly as his own shadow in the glare of the bare light above them. —It's magnificent, isn't it, Valentine said quietly. He stood entirely absorbed in it, and when he spoke murmured as he might have talking to himself. —The simplicity . . . it's the way I would paint . . .

There was no sound after his voice, and nothing moved to move him; until his eyes lowered to the shadow streaking the floor beside him: at that Basil Valentine turned abruptly and cleared his throat. —Yes, a splendid sense of death there isn't there, he went on in the tone usual to him, more forceful and more casual at once. —Death before it became vulgar, he went on, walking down the room away from the painting, —when a certain few died with dignity. And the others, the people who went to earth quietly like dung. Eh? he added, turning. He threw his cigarette into the fireplace, lit another without offering one, and blew the thin smoke out compulsively in a steady stream. —Yes, there is what you wanted there, isn't there, in this painting?

—Almost . . .

—Almost? Valentine repeated. He brought up the cold brilliance of his own eyes, to drive the feverish

stare fixed upon him down to the floor between them. —Almost what?

—The . . . strength, the delicacy, the tenderness without . . .

—Weakness, yes. Valentine kicked a book on the floor at his feet. —Pliny? what, for his discourse on colors? Yes thanks, I wouldn't mind a little of that myself, cognac is it? He held out the unwashed glass he was given while the bottle-neck clinked against it, but still looking at the damaged painting. —You do work fast, don't you. Yes, van der Goes was a fast painter himself, but one, the Portinari triptych I think it was, took him a good three years. But after all this is rather different isn't it, you know where you're going all the time. None of that feeling of, what was Valéry's line, that one can never finish a work of art? one only abandons it? But here there's none of that problem, is there. Eh? What's the matter.

—If one minute, first you say, or people say It's beautiful! and then if, when they find out it isn't what they were told, if it's a painting when they find out it was done by, or rather when they find out it wasn't done by who they thought . . .

—No, no, not this evening, or not today is it? No, really, we won't settle that here now. It's not . . . not the point, is it. Drawn by his eyes, Valentine faltered for the first time. —Or if it is the point? the whole point? And he looked away, to the damaged painting.

—What you said, about signing a picture? About that, that being all they care about, the law . . .

—Modern forgeries, forgeries of modern painters, Valentine dismissed him quickly, but looking about the room found only the man and the damaged painting to draw his eyes. —And be careful, he said, forcing the ease in his voice. —If Brown should decide that there's as much money in modern painters as there is in his old masters, no, it's not funny, he's already threatened you with van Gogh . . . He had commenced to pace the room, and paused to draw to him, with a toe of a black shoe, a detailed drawing which he picked up and studied. He held it up between them and said, —A remarkable likeness.

—A study, from the . . . last work.

—Yes, I see. And reversed, the mirrors? Backwards, like a contact print. Exactly like, and yet a perfect lie. The thing dropped from his fingers and he laughed. —You? the, what was it you said, the shambles of your work? What a pitifully selfish career! being lived, as you said? by something that uses you and then sheds you like a husk when its own ends are accomplished?

—Yes, but if the gods themselves . . .

—Is it worth . . .

—If they cannot recall their . . . gifts, to . . . redeem them, working them out, do you understand? living them through . . . ?

And Valentine turned quickly from those eyes back to the damaged painting leaned against the door, to murmur, —On second thought I believe I would have put another figure or two there in the lower left, the sense of ascendance in the upper part of the composition would gain a good deal . . .

—You?

—and the blue is rather light isn't it. I think if I'd done it myself I would have used a more . . .

—But you didn't.

Basil Valentine turned on him slowly, and studied him for a few moments before he spoke. —My dear fellow, he brought out finally. —If you are this sensitive to any sort of criticism, I didn't come down here to . . .

—Why did you come down here?

—I came down to ask a favor of you. But if you are so painfully sensitive to criticism, such a self-conscious artist that . . .

—No I, it's just, listen, criticism? It's the most important art now, it's the one we need most now. Criticism is the art we need most today. But not, don't you see? not the "if I'd done it myself . . ." Yes, a, a disciplined nostalgia, disciplined recognitions but not, no, listen, what is the favor? Why did you come here?

Basil Valentine had dropped a cigarette on the stained floor; and stooping to get it, a suspender button at the back of his trousers came off, and he straightened up feeling half his trouser-seat hanging and the other half binding high. —That Patinir? he said. —The painting that Brown has just inside the door, hung opposite that idiotic portrait. I wanted to ask you if you'd mind making a copy of it for me. He put his hands in his pockets, to hitch his trousers up square, and spoke rapidly. —It wouldn't even have to be a perfect copy, you know, since the original doesn't exist. You didn't know? Brown had the painting heavily insured, and it was destroyed in a fire. At least he had the evidence that it was when the insurance company's experts came. He'd sawed off one end of it and he showed them that, pretty badly charred but not so much that it couldn't be identified as all that was left of the original, which he's waiting now to dispose of again, "in secret" of course. Yes, what's the matter? what's funny?

—These. I've done the same thing with these.

—What do you mean, the same thing? sawed the ends off and . . .

—Kept them.

—What? What for?

—Proof.

—Proof? Basil Valentine stepped aside quickly as he passed, and watched him pull canvases away from the wall.

—This! he said holding one up. —Do you see? It was going to be a study, it was a study for this . . . this new work, this van Eyck.

—But what? The *Annunciation?* Valentine hitched up the sagging side of his trousers. —And it's not turning out what you wanted? But it's an old thing. On linen? What is it? and this, these, earrings? Who is she? These old Byzantine-looking hoops, what is it? Who is she? This? a study for a van Eyck?

—No, but for what I want.

—What are you talking about? And this, what is it? It's exquisite, this face, the reproach, like the faces, the Virgin in other things you've done, the reproach in this face. Your work, it's old isn't it, but a little always shows through, yes something, semper aliquid haeret? something always remains, something of you. But what are you talking about? Valentine found the feverish eyes fixed on him. —Here, this . . . I've brought down these pictures, these photographic details of, here, if you're going to bring the critics back to believing in Hubert van Eyck? And the, why we may enshrine your arm in a casket right over the door here? in Horatio Street? like Hubert van Eyck's right arm over the portals of the church of Saint Bavon's in Ghent? But what is it? what's the matter? what are you talking about, this proof? to prove what? Valentine demanded.

—Listen, this, if I wanted to go on with this work, myself? And to clear up the other things I've done? The Bouts, the van der Goes? If I want to tell them, and I have the proof, off every one of them, a canvas or a panel, I cut a strip off the end when it was done, and I have them.

—Where? Valentine asked quickly.

—Yes, they're safe.

—Where? Valentine repeated.

—And that will be proof, won't it.

—Proof? Valentine stood up. —Do you think it's going to be that easy? Yes, do you think they want to be told? Any more than Michelangelo's Cardinale di San Giorgio? Yes, he'd kept aside an arm from his "antique" cupid, and he went to get the Cardinal's help starting his career, showed him the arm from the statue to prove he'd done it, do you think the Cardinal thanked him? Valentine picked up his glass and finished it. —Do you think it's that simple? Why . . . He put a hand out to the shoulder before him. —That you can do it alone, that simply? He withdrew his hand slowly. —But you're wet, your jacket's damp. You've been out?

—Earlier, just before you came, for a walk . . .

—But you told me, when I came in you said you'd been working here all night.

—Yes, but, I went out, I'll tell you, I went out, I took those fragments, those strips from the ends of the paintings, where they'd be safe.

—Where? Valentine demanded.

—I took them up . . . where I used to live.

—Where you haven't lived for, two years is it? To your wife, your wife, so you trust her? You trust your wife to watch over them?

—She doesn't even know. She wasn't there. Only her sister, yes her sister, we hid them.

But Basil Valentine had turned from him, to pace to the end of the room, where he stood looking at him, at his impatient eyes, and the crumpled damp black jacket hanging from his shoulders. —Your wife, eh? He paused, but spoke more rapidly as he went on, —The Rouge Cloître? Yes, and where's the mother superior? Who keeps house for you here, then? This floor, how do you keep it so dirty? Why . . . so you trust her with it, do you? these fragments that are so important. And here, this van der Goes, what happens to her face in that, eh? All the rest of them, yes, the men, you out of your mirrors, you're there half a dozen times, backwards? Drawing death and modeling it under your own hand, but what happens to her face? Oh, the damage doesn't respect the composition? No, not a bit, not a bit of it. He stopped; the vein stood out like a bulb at his temple. He touched it with a fingertip, dropped his shoulders back against the empty irregular brick mantel, and lit a cigarette. Immediately the draft caught its smoke and drew it up the flue behind him. —And this, who's this in this study on the easel? It's old, isn't it. Your wife?

Standing under the bare bulb, facing Valentine, he started to speak, but all he said was, —She . . .

—Yes, or your mother?

—Yes. My mother, he admitted in a whisper, looking back at the picture on the soiled gesso, his face

drawn up in lines of confusion as though he had just remembered.

—Yes, is it? Valentine muttered. —The *Visitation*, then? He laughed. —A *Stabat Mater?* No. No more, thank you. Suppose . . . like Nicodemus I come down here? Yes, the Pharisee Nicodemus in Saint John, that . . . least reliable of the gospels? "Except a man be born again"? Yes, verily, " . . . Nicodemus saith unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born?" Valentine coughed and cleared his throat. He'd snatched up his, coat before he seemed aware of the clouding of anxiety which had risen in the eyes fixed on his sudden movements, an expression near a wince drawing up the face, and the figure seated unbalanced on a high stool, retreated there from avoiding him with the alert caution of a shadow, the crumpled shoulders sunk unevenly and still. Nonetheless Valentine pulled on his coat, but slowed, and his voice recovered its sharp ease. —You want to get on with this work, don't you. But we might go up together sometime, and have a look at that *Eden?* The snake there, he laughed, gripping his lapels and lifted his overcoat into shape at the front. —The snake of consciousness? And there she is, Eve, the woman. The same woman, personalizing everything. Good Christians, good targets for advertising, because they personalize everything. A deodorant or a crucifix, they take it and make it part of them. He picked up his hat, dropping his voice to an irritating monotone. —What was it, in Ecclesiastes? God hath made man upright, but the women have sought out many inventions . . . ?

—Wait . . .

—Eh?

—Do you think . . . here, do you want some more brandy?

—I'll get along, I don't want to keep you, Valentine said, in his voice a tone of cordial deference; and back a step, something rolled away from his foot, and he stooped to retrieve it. —Rose madder? he read from the label.

—Oh that, it's nothing. Rose madder, it's too late.

—Too late? Valentine looked up pretending surprise at the eager distress in the voice, and the unsteady hand where he surrendered the packet.

—I got it for a Bouts, the first Dierick Bouts, but these colors, . . . madder lake wasn't used until the sixteenth century. And Bouts was dead. Dierick Bouts, he . . . he was dead. Wait . . . listen, do you think something might go wrong?

—Go wrong?

—If I try to tell them, about these pictures?

—Have it your own way, Valentine shrugged. —If you think you can do it alone.

—But the proof? even with that?

—You're sure they're safe? Valentine's lips drew to a thin smile.

—Well, wait then. Wait. If you . . .

—I? If I could help you?

—Yes, these fragments . . .

—Bring them along, then, if you like. We'll work this thing out. Basil Valentine put on his hat; and his eyes, gone hard under the black brim, were drawn over the wrinkled shoulder from the lined face before him to the clear face on the easel, as he added, —Bring them up to my place, then. Do you hear? There's no room for mistakes. He stood like that, staring at the picture up on the easel whose unsurprised eyes looked beyond him; and finally, murmuring, —Your mother, eh? he took his eyes from it with abrupt effort. —A *Stabat Mater?* Not a girl, not a woman at all.

He turned on his heel and pulled open the door. —It's going to smell strange out there, after this . . . odor of sanctity? The gold seal ring shone against the edge of the open door, glittering softly in the light of the bare electric bulb, as the slow light of day entered behind him with the sound of bells. —Hear Saint Bavon's? Another blue day. I'll be waiting for you. And many thanks for the cognac.

There was not a cab in sight.

•

—Blood is all they know, every hour boys being killed, an airplane just crashed and who was surprised, forty-one people killed, though there is some hope that the stewardess, who survived, will be able to tell police, because it is all there in the newspapers that anyone can read . . .

What was it?

Stanley sat down. Across from him a woman stared into his face, lips moving, fingers moving on her beads. He clutched the chisel in his pocket, the first time in years he had been on the subway, as though overcome with the necessity to dive down into darkness and not emerge until he reached home. He was not shivering from the cold, though it was cold in the subway. He was still buttoning his shirt. What was it she had cried to him when he asked her to kneel beside him, beside the bed; and then as he retreated through

one door, fled toward another, escaped naked with all of his clothes in his hand, out into the hall where her voice died but the smell of her perfume followed him. He pulled his necktie's knot to his throat. The train roared into its rock firmament where lights twinkled in warning ahead of this front car and the woman's voice disappeared while her lips still moved, steaming the glass before them, and Stanley realized that he was on the wrong train, going in the wrong direction.

He looked up anxiously; as though another passenger might have made his mistake and, confirming him, prove everyone else misguided, misdirected. (It was an expression Stanley wore much of the time.) Standing across from him, gazing as though able to see through the dirty glass, a tall man stood with a handkerchief held to his nose and mouth. Gold glittered at his cuff. Then a woman of an uncertain age and massive shifting proportions trod on Stanley's foot, and swung, with grand inertia, into a white pole.

—You never see Jews drunk like that, said the person next to Stanley.

—Yehhh? the woman shouted, turning to them. The train was nearing a station. Stanley got up and went to the door where the tall man stood with his handkerchief to his face, turned, now, to the car. —Yehhh? the woman shouted, swinging round with Stanley. Both her hands were free. —Is that what you want? That's what you want is it? she cried, and as she did gripped the hem of her dress, and it became immediately apparent that it was the only garment she had on.

Stanley staggered into the tall man with the handkerchief, whose eyes had frozen in a cold blue horror, who whispered, —Good God! . . .

—Here! Come and get it! Come and get it!

Then a commotion started in the other end of the car, where a shabby old man had found something: but the commotion was his, only two others got up to look; the others stared in dreadful scorn, just as these seated near Stanley stared, not at the woman, but at him and the man beside him.

—Come on, both of you, you scared . . . ? The train lurched, approaching a station, and her skirt sagged and dropped as she caught a pole. The doors opened, and she kept shouting after them, —Come on, come on, you . . . throw a toilet seat around your heads and we'll all use it . . .

HE WAS WOUNDED
for our
transgressions,
he was bruised
for our iniquities:
. . . and with his
stripes we are
healed,

read the placard against which the tall man steadied himself. Across the top someone had scribbled, *Jesus a comunist*. He stood there with his handkerchief covering his face, and Stanley stopped, himself beside a placard which called public attention to a lower East Side knishery, where someone had penciled, *Hitler was right*. The handkerchief came down slowly, and the man caught a glimpse of a dirty shade of himself in the mirror of a chewing-gum vending machine. —Excuse me . . . are you all right? Stanley ventured.

The handkerchief was withdrawn, and he said in a level voice to Stanley, —Those, my dear young man, are the creatures that were once burned in witch hunts.

When Basil Valentine got home, he ran his bath immediately; and as the warm water closed over his shoulders, and one dry hand supported a cigarette, he exhaled, looking up at the clean ceiling, and his lips moved as though, all this time since he had taken his fingertips from his eyelids, seated out there in the big chair waiting for the dawn, he had been talking to himself.

•

Trucks were moving, loaded, toward the docks, and loaded away from the market as Stanley hurried toward his locked place, already assaulted. Why had he let Hannah stay? the last person he wanted to explain to now: even running, the odor of perfume from Agnes Deigh's nakedness rose to him. Birds clustered loudly at a horse trough. It was daylight.

His room was empty when he got there. Immediately, he noticed that the window over the bed was open, but he had no strength to pull it down. He dropped on the bed and lay still in the cold. What was it she had cried out as he ran, the cry and the voice of her a thing almost tangible hurled through the air between them, which entered and froze him in flight, as though an eternal abstraction were materialized in cast metal and bone, and Love showed its scarred steel jaws edged with broken teeth.

What was it? With his ear against the mattress, he stared at the cathedral of Fenestrula; and the beats of his heart were magnified in the bedsprings and sent back to him with the regular clattering resonance of snare drums. Crang, crang, crang, they went in regular familiar rhythm, missing a beat, or doubling one, in faithful accompaniment to something.

On the walk outside, a man approached unsteadily rubbing a rough cheekbone with a rough hand. The lucidity of the blue day rising over him seemed to prompt him to clarify the immediate issue of that turbid pool which, if questioned later on, he would call his memory, but found now resident in his cheekbone, where the blood was already dry. —He was Boyma, the man muttered, —then I must be Go . . . ro . . . gro . . . go . . .

Crang . . . crang . . . crang What was it? With his last breath of consciousness he realized that he had left his glasses on the table beside her uptown bed. *Crang crang crang* came the drums over the hill and into sight. They were playing *Onward Christian Soldiers*.

Two feet away from Stanley, the man stopped in the shallow covert that the window afforded to commit a nuisance, never glancing down at the face which lay in exhaustion under the open window at his feet.

II

> This is as if a drunk man should think himself to be sober, and should act indeed in all respects as a drunk man, and yet think himself to be sober, and should wish to be called so by others. Thus, therefore, are those also who do not know what is true, yet hold some appearance of knowledge, and do many evil things as if they were good, and hasten to destruction as if it were salvation.
>
> —The Clementine *Recognitions*, Book V

—I MEAN to tell her about the toast, this morning putting butter upon his toast, and the toast spoke with me, Fuller said, his voice in the near-inaudible confidence of intimacy. —But though I pause to listen very close, the toast conversed in a language with which as yet I remain unacquainted. Perhaps it was instructin me? he added, and his hand stopped its motion, the dirty polishing rag came to rest on the lance-rest, and he peered into the dark eye-slit of the helmet. Nothing moved. The armor stood at attention to his confidences, as it had been doing for some years. Polishing every hinge and joint, every plate and vent, had long since established his close informal acquaintance with this figure which, on first meeting, had posed no such possibility. It was some time before Fuller penetrated the cold reserve, and gained the ascendancy over the formidable hauteur with which it had greeted his reluctant advances. Left to himself, he would certainly have avoided it, and at best passed it with that respect inspired by mistrust, regarding it as his oppressor's ally. But as so often happens under the hands of tyrants, it was Mr. Brown himself who had brought them together. In his insistence that this, his favorite, be kept spotless and irreproachable, Mr. Brown had fostered a conspiracy right under his own nose.

—I already tell Adeline that the drawer method apparently destined to no great success, he went on, as the polishing rag moved again over a palette. He was recounting a recent visit to a woman of his own age, color, and forebears (but substantially heavier) whom he consulted, hands extended but not touching across a polished wood table top, concerning his affliction. Adeline, in turn, consulted her daughter Elsie, who had died when only three and was now going to school on the other side, but willingly played truant in this good cause. —I assure her, every time I enter my room I write his name upon a piece of paper and secrete it in the drawer. But when she learn that I spell his name in a variety of ways, there lies the hindrance. Perhaps you already brought misfortune to others whose names you spelt unwitting, she reprimand me.

The polishing cloth had by now reached the breastplate, which Fuller saved until last because of its flat accessibility, the directness of the encounter it permitted, and the rewarding way in which it shone. —Next we contemplate tryin the hair method, he continued, sounding slightly troubled. —She direck me to gather an envelope of his hair, which Elsie will proceed to treat the secret way, and return to me to burn sayin over it certain words from the mysteries she resides party to. Fuller rubbed hard, showing severe vexation in his sudden energy, bent lower, addressing now not the patient helmet but his own darting reflection in the breastplate. —I suggest perhaps this method reek of a kind of magic, I hesitate to do an unchristian act even upon him. But she hasten to assure me this method is Christian because I employ it against the forces of evil. Then she proceed to recount to me what Saint Louis instruck, this in the olden time of course, when a Jew have the best of you in controversy, to thrust a sword into his belly right up to the handle. He stopped and stood back to look at his work, but added, —Seem when Elsie die, ten thousand people die that

same moment, nine thousand nine hundred ninety-five depart to hell direckly, four to the purgaratory, only Elsie carried straight to heaven. Thus she appear highly recommended, he reassured the impassive figure before him. They faced each other silently for a moment. Then darting the rag forward for another quick rub at the beaver, Fuller said, —I must hurry, to return in ample time, and he straightened up, and went to his room.

On his way back, the thick envelope deep in an inside pocket, he peered round the door onto the balcony, first to the head of the stairs, to see if the black dog were watching. He ventured to the rail, and there it lay below, a still blot on the Aubusson roses. With a glance of intrepid calm at his lustrous confidante, he turned to the stairs looking somewhat harried, but satisfied. Fuller was a good head taller than that suit of armor; and surely, on short acquaintance, his heart would have filled with foreboding suspicions toward one so anxious at his own safety, so apprehensive of others, that all his beauty lay in his defense. But year by year, polishing every plate and vent, every joint and hinge, Fuller had discovered every weak link in the mail, every chink in the armor, and he saw it now as a weaker demonstration of his own more elastic resistance, a hollow hope, but one which held its gauntleted hand forth, and a face which no longer glittered with disdain, but where, in their moments of confidence, familiarity had bred content.

•

Some time later Fuller entered with what he considered great stealth. He had not got far in the dark front hall, however, before he tripped on something. The large flat package fell flat on the floor. Fuller remained suspended before it. Then he saw two black eyes fixed upon him. The moment he looked up, the dog turned and trotted away. —You goin to write it down in your report, Fuller muttered, and straightened the package up again. —Some day I goin to discover where you keep it and destroy every page, he went on. —Rescue many good people from grief and vexation. Notably myself, he finished, entering the vast living room.

There, rising from one of the chairs before the fireplace, he saw a thin column of blue smoke. He retreated, put the straw hat in a very small panel closet in the hall, and approached again. Then, with great relief, he said, —Oh, it is you, sar. Good afternoon.

—Yes, it is, Fuller. For the moment, anyway. Who did you think . . .

—I take for granted maybe it's goin to be Mister Valentine, sar. I fallen into the habit of expectin the worst durin my residence here.

—We all have, we all have. Bring me some brandy, will you Fuller? Bring in the bottle of cordon bleu. The bottle with the blue ribbon on it.

—Yes sar, but Mister Brown, sar . . .

—When he sees me drinking the best he's got, I know it. Bring it in anyhow.

—Yes sar. A few minutes later, Fuller came in with ice and a glass, siphon, and the bottle of cordon bleu. —Could I mix somethin up for you, sar? he asked from the pulpit, where he stood, white-gloved. Given permission, he came across the carpet bearing a tumbler of brandy and ice in one hand, the siphon bottle in the other. He stepped with care. —A curious thing, he said upon arrival, —seem I always inclined to avoid steppin upon the flowers. Though he got no response, he continued to stand there, white hands swinging slightly above the table of the Seven Deadly Sins. Finally he said, —Thahss your package I encounter in the hallway, sar? and brought his eyes about in what he considered a surreptitious glance, if only because of the oblique angle of the steady stare which he lowered upon the face before him. —I trust I not responsible for any damage to the contents when it fall downward at my feet. We have a small collision there in the darkness. After another prolonged pause, Fuller said, —Upon my enterin the room seem like there not a soul present but myself. Mister Brown still occupied at the office, I presume.

Siphon was blown into the glass; and at last the voice said, —What is it, Fuller? What have you got on your mind?

Fuller's chest rose; at the same time his voice lowered to a tone consonant with the commonplace topics through which he planned to approach his question. —You tell me then, sar, is there such a thing as octopus?

—Yes. Of course.

—You have really observed one, sar?

—Well, I . . . not actually, no. But enough pictures of them, photographs.

Fuller looked at him with respectful disbelief. —Yes sar, I encounter the pictures myself upon occasion. Sar? Does there exist such a thing as mermaids, sar?

—That's legend, Fuller. They don't really exist, no.

Fuller looked at him with respectful disbelief. Nevertheless, he went on, —Are you acquainted with Saint Louis, sar?

—I've never been there.

—No sar, this one to which I refer is a mahn, sar, a kind of ghost-mahn they havin in the church. Fuller paused, and was rewarded with what appeared to be a look of reminiscence.

—The Crusader, who bought the original crown of thorns.

—Most likely the very same gentlemahn, Fuller said, raising his white hands. —Sound very reliable.

—For what purpose, Fuller?

—For wise counsel upon the problem I been rackin my understandin some time now, sar. If a mahn try to lead the good Christian life, and he find his path vexed by what he consider evil, sar, . . . can he righteously and justly have a recourse to the bahd method to combat the adversary?

Fuller waited eagerly. He even added —Sar? in encouragement. But his answer was simply, —Fuller, that is one of the oldest questions in the world.

—Yes sar. So it seem to me very old when I contemplate it. So the answer got to be very old too, no question but have his answer, for if you have got no answer you have got no question.

—Fuller, this is dialectics you're getting into.

—Yes sar, Fuller answered and withdrew a step. —These problems continue to vex me, sar, he went on. —Like the mermaids, sar.

—Fuller, Fuller . . . keep your mermaids, if they please you.

—Yes sar. But it remain complex, sar, for if they mermaid womans they got to be mermaid mahns too. For the first time the face which Fuller was, by now, staring directly at, turned to him with a smile.

—I suppose you're right, God knows, Fuller.

—Yes sar. God keep Himself very well informed upon these subjecks.

—Fuller . . . ?

—Sar?

—You . . . you've never seen a picture of God, have you Fuller?

—No sar. If some artist paint His picture it become quite a hindrance to the faith, sar.

—Yes, yes, Michelangelo tried it.

—What appearance he give to Him, sar?

—An old man.

—Seem like the foreign people find a comfort makin these pictures . . . Fuller took a quick step back, and almost fell over the table, when the figure suddenly rose from the heavy chair. —I don't mean to disturb you, sar, comin forward with my vexations when you sittin quiet and peaceable enjoyin you . . . refreshment. Fuller took a step toward him, in the middle of the room.

—No, Fuller, it isn't . . . damn it, if these were just your problems we could lock you up and forget you.

—Yes sar, Fuller said, taking the step back. —That eventuality I preparin myself for daily.

—No, no, I didn't mean . . . I simply meant that . . . we all have the problems you ask about.

—Yes sar, Fuller said, looking relieved. —It seem an impractical measure, to lock up the whole world.

—Yes, but . . . you lock it out. You can lock it out.

—Can you, sar? Fuller looked up at the face suddenly turned upon him. —Seem like such a measure serve no good purpose, sar. Then the mahn lose everything he suppose to keep, and keep everything he suppose to lose. Fuller stood still, a conscious stolidity, as though to offset the movement before him, the shoes stepping heedlessly upon the roses. —It seem a very general inclination to contemplate God as an old mahn until the mahn become old himself, he said to the moving figure.

—I suppose it does, was all the answer Fuller got; nevertheless he went on, —Seem like the foreign people find a comfort makin these pictures.

—And you find them unnecessary, do you?

—If it give them comfort and sustain them . . .

—No, but for you. For you.

—No sar, it make itself an obstacle for me.

—And you just believe God is there.

Fuller answered, —We don't see him, sar, but we got to believe he there. And Fuller made wild anxious motions with his white hands in the space between them, like someone waving farewell to a friend on a departing ship, a friend constantly obscured by the waving arms and figures of other people. —So the preacher say . . .

—The preacher?

—Sar?

They were both silent. Fuller's hands fumbled in the white gloves, at his sides, as though in caricature of the hands he was watching, opening and closing on nothing. —The preacher, sar, the Reverend Gilbert Sullivan, thahss the preacher whose meetin I attend upon occasion. Finally he become a hindrance too.

—Reverend Gilbert Sullivan?

—Yes sar. The Reverend Gilbert Sullivan a very highly trained preacher, but it seem like when he acquirin his high trainin he lose somewhere along the way the first thing he require to be a preacher to us. Fuller had pulled the white hands together behind him, and stood with his eyes lowered, as though finished. But then he looked up anxiously to add, —Not that I presume to make the judgment upon him . . .

—But what requirement, Fuller? What requirement?

—Why sar, requirin the Reverend Gilbert Sullivan to believe he the mahn for whom Jesus Christ died.

—And you . . . you can believe that, Fuller? With no trouble, just that simply, you can believe it?

—Oh no, sar. It remain a challenge to believe, always. Not so simple to accept, like the mermaids.

—The mermaids . . . the mermaids . . .

—Yes, sar.

—And you can . . . accept the mermaids, without much difficulty?

—Yes, sar, though they remain the complication of the mermaid mahns.

—Yes, there does. There does.

—But the mermaid womans . . .

—Yes, the women . . . you can believe in the women . . .

—Oh yes sar, Fuller said, and then after a pause, —Woman bring you into the world, you got to stick with her.

—Wasn't it woman brought evil into the world, then?

—Sar?

—Yes. When she picked the fruit from the forbidden tree; and gave it to the man to eat?

—So the evil already there provided, and quite naturally she discover it.

—Yes, yes, and she gave it to the man . . .

—She share it with him, sar, said Fuller. —Thaht the reason why we love her.

The black poodle, which had been biting its nails, raised its head, then got up and went toward the hall doorway. Fuller looked at the back turned toward him, silent. Then he straightened his lapels, and followed the dog.

•

—*Effluvium?* Brown muttered, under his breath.

> Sweet Norah Winebisquit bedewed with sleep
> Swept down through sooted flues of chimney-sweep.
> And where? she cried, can be this sceptered rod
> That men call Recktall Brown, and I call god.
> Straight through a frosted glass-partitioned door
> They led her, and she doubted now no more.
> (The fair, the chaste, and unexpressive she)
> Might no more question wherewithal of he:
> Dreadful he sat, bastioned in golden oak,
> The humanizing of some dirty joke
> The gods tell one another ere they stand
> To attend the last obscenity, called man.

His wide sleeve covered the rest of this work on the clear mahogany surface where, their right hands extended but not touching, the thin yellow hand shifting nervously, his own couching the weight of the diamonds, Recktall Brown faced a wild-eyed youth with one arm in a sling, who said —I hope you do find it, I mean find a copy, I need it, if you don't need it, I mean if you don't think you can use it? . . . There was hope in that last.

Brown raised his eyes from the poem, still muttering, the pools behind the lenses disturbed as he brought his attention up. —What are you asking me about a copy of it for? What makes you think you sent it to us? Ask the secretary.

—But I sent copies to . . . I know I sent one here, your secretary . . . and your secretary isn't here today, she . . .

—We get things from agents, and send them back to agents. Ask your agent. Then Brown appeared to notice that the reddened eyes of this young man, who looked enough in keeping with that stereotype of disheveled insanity suddenly assembled so often associated with genius, eyes strained open to abnormal width, were fixed on the scrawled page protruding from under his sleeve. He pulled some papers toward

him, partially covering it, to return to the day's business correspondence. But the voice went on, the words coming out brokenly, —Yes sir, but, since I'm here . . . A new intensity brought Brown's eyes up again. —There's one thing, something I want to know, if I could ask you what you thought, because some people have said, or I mean they've intimated, that they think I've . . . well that it really isn't mine, that I'd used some other . . . that I'd . . . plagiarized it.

—Plagiarized? Recktall Brown sat back. With a quick look over his desk, locating a manuscript, he pushed it forward with one hand and took off his glasses with the other. He fixed the figure across from him with his sharp eyes, and laughed. —Take a look at this, he said, as the quivering yellow fingers received it. —This is lifted. The whole God-damned novel is lifted. One of our readers spotted it the first thing. A lawyer went over it, and it's safe. A couple of things changed around, it's safe and it's good, and it will sell.

Wild Gousse Chase, Otto read on the title page.

—So you picked up a few things here and there for yours, what the hell? What hasn't been written before? You take something good, change it around a little and it's still good.

Otto was staring at Max's name on the title page of *Wild Gousse Chase*.

—You just take the words and string them around a little different, Brown went on, raising his glasses again.

—But . . . but words, Otto murmured helplessly. He looked up. —Words, they have to have a meaning.

—Let me give you some advice, boy, Brown said, standing. —Don't you worry about that. It's right when the idea's missing, the word pops up. You can do anything with the same words. You just follow the books, don't try to get a lot of smart ideas of your own. Brown pressed a button under his finger. There was belligerence and triumph in his voice; but it was belligerent solicitude as he finished, —It's all right there, you just take it out and write it down as though Jesus Christ himself dictated it.

—But this play, the retreating figure kept on, —it can't be lost, I'm sure a copy came here, she . . . it isn't plagiarized, I didn't steal it, I wrote it myself . . .

But Recktall Brown was seated again; and, when a secretary appeared, already returned to muttering over the rest of the open scrawl which his sleeve, drawn to him, had uncovered.

> Heaven's crown, brown-bought, fell lightly on his brow,
> Lay heavy on her perspicacious Now.
> (Still on the dreadful teeth of time she trod,
> And marveled at the maleness of god.)
> Sweet Norah Winebisquit, bedewed with sleep,
> Awoke this decorated painted heap
> Of present woman: could she doubt her sin?
> Sought furiously for the flame within,
> Presented in a naked leaping cry
> The burning plunder of the present I.
> Pride drew her garments up, and swathed her face
> In lineaments incapable of disgrace.
> Slipped then away, her face bedewed with do,
> Beyond the glass, and knowing all, she knew
> That the immortals have their ashcans too.

—Yes sir?

—What is this thing? Where the hell did it come from? Brown demanded, waving the paper in the air. He held it out to her.

—I don't know, sir. It was in your mail this morning, I thought it might be something . . . literary.

—And him, how the hell did he get in here?

—I'm sorry, sir. Miss Mims is away this week, and . . . She cleared her throat. —Mister Valentine to see you, sir, she said, retreating.

—Friends? Otto heard as he came out. The tall man in gray pinstripe gave him barely a glance, from a face entirely empty whose eyes affirmed, clearly and immediately, that they did not know each other. —Of course, choose your friends with as much care as you choose your clothes, the man continued, speaking to someone no more than Otto's age. —Infinite care at the outset . . .

In the outside hall, the pencil scribbling Chse frnds lk clthes suddenly stopped: he had just seen Gordon, and he had no place to put him.

Down below, Otto came out upon the street muttering imprecations of a general, pointless nature, until the wind hit him, and provided an object for his curses as it blew him along, mussing his hair from behind.

—Did I hear you giving some future Menander advice? Basil Valentine asked, entering. —And did I hear

the word, plagiary?

Brown finished trimming a cigar before he answered, —You heard it. You can hear it again.

—Again? Valentine had not sat down. He commenced to idle up and down the room. —How do you mean?

—I mean I just saw an advance review of your art book, some half-ass critic takes it apart.

Valentine paused, lighting a cigarette. He held the match before him, looking at the flame. Then he blew it out. —How do you mean, takes it apart?

—He takes your own words out of it, and quotes them to . . .

—Yes, to condemn me. I see what you mean, Valentine said coldly. —He does sound rather . . . half-assed, as you so graphically describe him.

—Not only that . . .

—My dear Brown, nothing amuses me more than that, exactly that, Valentine interrupted. —Why do you suppose I put them there? To give your . . . half-assed reviewer opportunity to expose his own total lack of resources, in what he considers an exemplary demonstration of his own cleverness. Can you imagine the satisfaction that gives someone who has never done anything himself? Our great half-assed priesthood, so to speak, he finished with asperity, turning on Brown, or rather the cloud of cigar smoke that rose between them.

—Not only that, Brown went on with belligerent satisfaction as Valentine paced the floor away from his desk. —He says you plagiarized just about the whole thing, that you lifted . . .

—Plagiarized! Valentine turned, and controlled his voice with a thin smile. —You make me feel like Vergil, when someone saw him carrying a copy of Ennius, and implied . . .

—He says you lifted . . .

—I'm simply plucking the pearls from Ennius' dunghill, was Vergil's answer.

—If you think you can lift whole parts out of somebody else's . . .

—And now what? Valentine brought out quickly. —Making me out another . . . Chrysippus? Seven hundred five volumes, he went on, recovering the forced dilatory calm of his voice as he spoke. —But the work of others pleased him so, that one of his books contained a play of Euripides almost entire. The . . . drudgery of such a career would be appalling, he added in a mutter and turned away. Brown watched his nervous tread, and noticed a gesture familiar elsewhere: Valentine's hands, opening and closing on nothing at his sides. At the far end of the office, Valentine stopped, looking over the array of books and magazines on the table there. The slow-rising clouds from Recktall Brown's cigar seemed to accentuate the silence between them, and finally Valentine turned holding up a small stiff-covered magazine. —A symposium on religion! he read from the cover. —A rather old issue. I gather you've bought it?

—Where'd you hear that?

—The only possible reason you could have a copy lying around. You must be buying the whole thing.

—It's no secret, Brown said. —I picked it up for nothing.

—It's about time you breathed some life into it, I suppose, Valentine said, dropping the thing on a chair by his coat. —It's become quite a dismal affair, a frightened little group who spend all their time criticizing each other's attempts in terms of cosmic proportions, and then defend each other against the outside world. Even the fiction, the stories they write are about each other, they don't know anyone else. A sort of diary of dead souls.

—A bunch of second-hand Jews . . . Brown began, if only to interrupt.

—I doubt the windows of their editorial offices have been opened in decades, Valentine went on, in a monotone whose only purpose was to establish its authority to continue. —If there are any. What future do you plan for these . . . critics?

—Critics! Brown muttered. —They call themselves critics just because they never learned how to make a living. It's got a lousy circulation of about five thousand, but it's got a reputation. Intellectual. I'm going to bring it around to where even a half-wit can feel intellectual reading it. The circulation will be twenty times what it is now.

Valentine laughed quietly, walking away again; and only when his back was turned did Brown, shifting in his chair, show impatience. He seemed prepared to let Valentine go on, wasting time until whatever had brought him here, and strained his nervous presence now, broke forth.

—Like that incredible book you published, what was it? Valentine went on, looking over the array on the table. —"Soul-searching" the reviewers called it. By some poor fellow who joined a notorious political group, behaved treasonably? And after satisfying that peculiar accumulation of guilt which he called his conscience by betraying everyone in sight, joined a respectable remnant of the Protestant church and settled down to pour out his . . .

—It's already sold half a million, Brown said patiently. —That's what people want now, soul-searching.

—Soul-searching! Valentine repeated. —People like that haven't a soul to search. You might say they're searching for one. The only ones they seem to find are in some maudlin confessional with the great glob of people they really consider far less intelligent than themselves, they call that humility. Stupid people in whom they pretend to find some beautiful quality these people know nothing about. That's called charity. No, he said and shrugged impatiently, turning with his hands clasped behind him. —These people who hop about from one faith to another have no more to confess than that they have no faith in themselves.

Brown watched him carefully through the thick lenses, ambling slowly with head lowered, a slim hand raised to the strong profile of his chin, to stop again at the table and flick open the cover of a book there. —*In Dreams I Kiss Your Hand, Madam*, he read. —Really . . . "Selected and edited, with an introduction by . . ." yourself? All the world loves . . .

—There's no plagiary in that, Brown said. —Everybody who wrote something's got his name on it.

—You couldn't have sold a single copy if it weren't. But here, Esme? who the devil . . . ?

—Who?

—"To Esme, whose unerring judgment is responsible for whatever value this book may have . . ." Your humility is really quite touching.

—Some girl in the office pulled those together for me, Brown said, drumming his fingers more rapidly, as his lowered eyes caught the edge of the poem scrawled under his sleeve. —Now what . . .

—Your modesty is overwhelming, as always.

—You came up here to talk about my modesty? Brown broke out at last.

—Hardly. Valentine turned on him. —I dropped in to talk to you about your . . . most successful protégé. He smiled.

—What about him? What have you been up to with him?

—I? Nothing, nothing at all. If Valentine's composure had seemed to suffer, it was totally recovered; but Brown continued to look at him, hands splayed on the desk, as though nothing were more familiar than composure which was serene only when it had something to dissemble.

—You've seen him? What about?

—Let me see, Valentine answered vaguely. —As I remember, we discussed the Lex Cornelia, an ordinance against Roman matrons who poisoned . . .

—I told you, I wasn't going to have any of your crap interfering. Valentine raised his eyebrows. —My what?

—Yes, God damn it. I've allowed you a lot of things, but this time . . . Look here, there's a lot of things about you I know, that maybe you don't know I know, Recktall Brown said leaning forward over the desk, looking at him with the centerless eyes in those thick lenses.

—My private life is hardly any concern . . .

—Not just your private life. A God damn lot of other things.

—Other things? Valentine repeated blandly.

—What about a trip you made to Paris about six months ago? For a week in Paris. Where did you go from Paris?

—The Midi, as I told you. A pleasant town near . . .

—Midi hell. Do you want me to tell you where you went?

—Not especially, said Basil Valentine, tapping his chin.

—I could tell . . .

—But you wouldn't, would you, Valentine said, resting the finger on his chin, and looking up, as Recktall Brown looked down.

—I told you the day you met him, Brown repeated, —I don't want any interference from you.

—You know, I believe you rather like him. It must be an odd sensation for you.

—We're in business.

—Tell me, just how interested in him are you?

—Right now, a quarter of a million dollars. I'm not going to lose interest, either.

—I suppose not, Valentine said, taking out another cigarette, and pausing until he'd lit it. —Tell me, suppose something happened to sever this partnership of yours?

—Something like that over my dead body, Brown said evenly.

—And if these forgeries were discovered?

—What do you mean, discovered.

—I might have said, exposed.

—So that's it! Brown stood up, his hands remained planted on the desk. —You know God damn well, nobody could prove a thing.

—But if he . . .

—*He?*

—As you've told me, one cannot insure against inherent vice.

—What do you mean?

—Never mind, Valentine said. —I'm glad I understand you. Yes, for you he doesn't exist except as an investment?

—And for you he doesn't exist except as . . .

—We've had quite enough of this, Valentine cut in. —Now, this joint bank account you put his money into for him . . .

—It's safe enough, Brown muttered, sitting down. —Nobody even knows about it, nobody could touch it but us, you and him and I. Then Brown looked up. —That's what you're thinking? to reach in there and take out . . .

—Good heavens, Valentine laughed. —You know me better than that. All I could do would be to stop payment anyway, you know. But he . . . Valentine stood looking down at the reflection of the diamonds in the mahogany. —With his genius . . .

—With his genius and your ambition, I'd have . . .

—Why, Valentine interrupted again, looking up at him. —Perhaps you should settle down and raise a family. I can't imagine a prouder father than you might make.

—Listen, Recktall Brown said standing again, —we're not going to have any more of this. You're going to forget all this crap about exposing these pictures and ruining him.

—*Him?* But suppose . . . suppose it were he who had this notion himself?

—You think he's crazy? Maybe in other ways, but . . .

—But you cannot imagine anyone being crazy when it comes to making a million dollars. Basil Valentine picked up his coat. He stood looking round the large office as he pulled it on. —You know, you might start a novel factory here, he said. —It's been done before. And after the success of that "soul-searching" book. And that remarkable abomination, *The Trees of Home* was it? A regular assembly line. Incidentally, he went on in an agreeable tone, pulling up his lapels, —what ever happened to that boy who was up here with a book of poems to sell you? The one with a rather bad case of acne, whom I stumbled on sandpapering his cheeks in the lavatory? Arthur something . . .

—He's still around, with his God damn poems. Religious poems.

—They weren't awfully bad. You might allow him some money on them, you know, some chance to live like a human being.

—Do human beings write poetry? Recktall Brown demanded, looking up. Then his pointless gaze fell to the paper under his cuff. —Poets do.

Basil Valentine stood looking at the heavy bowed head for a moment. Then with his hat he picked up the stiff-covered little magazine from the deep chair. —I wish you luck with this, he said, tossing it over before Brown's hands on the desk, where it slid toward the mass of hand mounting the diamonds, which withdrew with instant volition. The cigar had almost gone out in the ashtray, but continued to give off a faintly noxious emanation. Brown did not look up. He stared at *Effluvium* and mumbled something about how popular religion was now, and something about —those poor intellectual bastards.

—Perhaps they all ought to be crucified? Basil Valentine suggested, pulling the door open behind him. —That might give them some idea of religious experience.

•

—But this book is about religion, said a sub-editor, standing aside for the tall man in the black Homburg to pass. —It's Buddhism.

—But it's by a Jew, said the other, standing aside.

—Well, I've told him if he'll change his hero from a Jew to a homosexual, we might accept it.

—But that's the way it was in the first place.

•

Recktall Brown entered to demand, —Who the hell is the Reverend Gilbert Sullivan, and what the hell does he want here? When he got no answer (though he paused no longer than it took to shift himself from the outside door to another) Recktall Brown entered a large roomy closet, and hung his coat among many others of the same size, and shape, and style. The dog, moving its stump of a tail slowly, met him, and he reached down to give it a single pat on the head which seemed to please it greatly.

—Sar . . .

—Why the hell don't you answer the door, Fuller? Recktall Brown said, advancing. —Instead of . . . who

is this Reverend Gilbert Sullivan, what . . .

—Oh no sar, Fuller said, backing into the room before him. —The Reverend not present here, I alone here . . .

—Then why the hell don't you answer the door instead of talking to yourself.

—Oh no sar not exackly alone sar I . . .

—Well who the hell . . . Well, my boy. I'm glad to see you. God damn glad to see you. Fuller, bring me the pitcher over here. Recktall Brown stood by the chairs before the fireplace, watching Fuller get across the room to the pulpit.

—Fuller? he said suddenly.

—Sar . . . ?

—What have you been up to, Fuller?

—Sar? Nothin, sar. I been most peaceable and quiet of late.

—See you stay that way. Recktall Brown glanced down at the table, and Fuller glanced down at the dog.

—Fuller?

—Sar?

—Isn't there any more regular brandy?

—Yes sar but . . .

—I told him I wanted this. You can take it out of my next check.

—It's all right my boy, relax. I just thought that dumb nigger made a mistake. He gets vexed by liquor, he says, don't know one from another. Recktall Brown settled down in a chair, and looked across the table. —You look tired, my boy. Tired as hell.

—Little dogs in the street bark at me.

—What the hell, my boy. What the hell. You can't blame them.

—You mean if you were a little dog in the street, you'd bark at me?

—Now listen, my boy, what the hell . . .

—That damned congenitally damned glowing fiend of a dog of yours is the only one that doesn't bark at me. This is good cognac.

—Listen, my boy, I want to talk to you. Now what about this picture you're working on?

—That's why I'm here. It's out in the hall.

Recktall Brown had been sitting forward in the big chair with his hands turned in upon his knees. He shifted so that flesh rolled over the back of his collar, and shouted, —Fuller!

—Sar?

—Bring in that big package in the hall, bring it in here. Is that it, my boy? he asked, turning. He got no answer, and shifted again to watch Fuller advance, carrying the thing, picking his way among the roses.

—Hurry up, Fuller. What the hell are you doing, playing hopscotch? Now lay it out here and open it and be careful, be God damn careful. As the brown wrapping paper came away Recktall Brown was saying, —I told you not to bring these God damn things up here on the subway. I told you to call me and I'd send a car down for it. Look at here, you already banged up a corner. Then he stopped speaking, and gathered his breath to say, —What the hell!

Fuller had taken three careful steps backward, and stood now staring with a look which another face might have refined into anxiety, but on his was simple expectant terror. The explosion was not for him, however; but however, he remained bound.

—Where the hell is her face?

—Sar?

—I'm not asking you, Fuller, God damn it. Where the hell is her face?

—Appear she deprived of it by the many centuries passin respectfully over . . .

—Fuller! By God, Fuller! Have both of you gone crazy? Get out of here. The pools behind the thick lenses quivered like water disturbed by wind. —This is . . . by God. Now here. Tell me where the hell is her face.

—As Fuller says, it appear she deprived of it by the attrition of many respectful years passing their loving hands . . .

—Stop! Recktall Brown lowered his voice, and then his bulk into a chair. He was perspiring. —I'm tired too, God damn it. Now just tell me simply why the hell you damaged it like this. Fuller, I told you to get out of here.

—Yes sar.

—Ah, to dictate to the past what it has created is possible; but to impose one's will upon what it has destroyed takes a steady hand and rank presumption. My wife told me once, that I looked like a criminal.

—What you've done to this picture here, it's a crime.

—A supralapsarian criminal.

Recktall Brown sat forward gripping his knees. —You mustn't laugh like that, my boy.

—Why not? Tell me, tell me. Some time I haven't laughed.

—It just don't sound right, Recktall Brown muttered, and looked down at the damaged picture. Then he looked up again. —Are you all right, my boy?

—Yes, well. There is often now the sensation of weightlessness, or weighing very little. There. Weightless but well. When you live where I do, upsets of the liver are seldom occurrences.

—It wasn't your liver I'm thinking about, Recktall Brown said looking down again. —Look, you got to paint this face in here again, the face on this woman. Ten thousand dollars you've taken right off the price right there.

—And dishonored death into the bargain, so they tell me. Could I have a cigar?

—You?

—A cigar.

—My boy . . .

Recktall Brown watched him tear the cellophane cover away, and commence to trim the end with his thumbnail. —Here, take this, he said and offered the penknife. —Don't just stare at it, my boy. Trim the end of the God damn cigar with it.

—Indeed.

—My boy . . .

—Nothing moves in this room. If you had music . . .

Nevertheless, the smoke rises.

—There! something moved, intimate movement there on the far wall . . . He recovered with a shudder, to draw a hand over his eyes and whisper, —Never mind. I thought I saw Patinir hanging there, I keep forgetting he's in mortmain, gone home and taken his wages. You see how the prospect draws us on? Making perfect dice. They have to be perfect before you can load them. Goodness! what beautiful diamonds. How their impurities dance with life! Not deceit just skin-deep, like this intricate, cunning field full of fraud separating us here, seven and deadly. It's not even a very good copy. He stared unblinking at the table, and suddenly came forward to pick at the edge of it with the penknife.

—Here! Brown lunged his naked hand out. —It's real, this table picture, stop scratching it. Don't worry, right after Valentine shot his mouth off about it I had some real experts look it over. Don't worry, Brown grunted belligerent satisfaction, looking down at it. —It's the genuine original.

—I can see, it is not, came the whisper distinct across the table of the Seven Deadly Sins. —Christ! to have copied a copy? and that was how it began!

—My boy, says Recktall Brown, and stands to his feet to light his own cigar and jam it among uneven teeth. The youthful portrait hangs still as he approaches it, and perhaps, as Basil Valentine remarked, serves in some measure to humanize the fragments of motion which compose his progress toward it. Immediately upon arrival there, Recktall Brown turns his back upon it, a gesture which leaves its expression unchanged as he obscures it with the one which has superseded it. —Maybe you need a girl.

—A girl?

—How long is it since you've had one?

—Had one?

—I don't mean a God damn wife hanging around all the time. I mean just a girl. You can't go around month after month with all this piling up inside you. Of course, hell anybody can see that will drive you crazy as hell. You got to release that once in a while, or it drives anybody crazy. Do you want me to send you a nice girl down there for a couple of nights?

—But the cost.

—The cost? Each foot planted upon a rose, Recktall Brown's laughter might seem to rise the entire distance of his frame, a laborious journey, complicated by ducts and veins, cavities and sedulous organs whose functions are interrupted by the passage of this billowing shape which escapes in shambles of smoke. —You can pay for anything in this town.

—Barefoot on that vast acreage, for love or money.

—God damn it, my boy. God damn it . . .

—Without love?

—Do I fall in love with the barber when I get a haircut? God damn it, my boy.

—Reverend Gilbert Sullivan . . .

—God damn Reverend Gilbert Sullivan!

—Exactly.

Recktall Brown starts to turn away; his reversal is remarkable for its quickness, a feat of muscular co-operation which happens before his eyes can contain the reason. They do, though; his voice too. —Put that

damn bottle down now and sit down.

—A hindrance to the working of reality. Ah, Brown, Brown, your daughters all were fair. But the youngest . . .

—Are you getting anything from Esme?

—There remains the complication of the mermaid men.

—Sit down. We're both going to sit down and figure this out. Did he put you up to all this crap?

—I hear singing.

Sinking, on heavy tones into the depth of the vast room, come these weights, ——Littel girl

——My bachelor room

—Fuller!

—Sar? drops from above.

—Stop that God damn noise.

—You and I, Brown. You and I. You are so damned familiar.

—You've got to get hold of yourself, my boy.

—If we are, as he says, projections of his unconscious. Then the intimacy is not at all remarkable, is it.

—Stop it. You got to stop talking this way. Valentine does the same God damn thing to me, he tries to wear me down. Did he . . . has he been bothering you, my boy? Now damn it talk to me, let's get all this straight. What's on your mind?

—The equation of x to the power of n plus y to the power of n has no nontrivial solution in integers for n greater than two.

—Sit down.

—That is Fermat's last theorem.

—Sit down. What the hell's the matter, is there . . . have you got a pain in you? The motion reflected on the thick lenses (and entering through aqueous chambers to be brought upside-down and travel so, unsurprised, through vitreous humors to the confining wall of the retinas, and rescued there, and carried away down the optic nerves to be introduced to one another after these separate journeys, and merge in roundness) emerges upon his consciousness in the constraint of slowed motion. —What are you grunting for?

—I'm pretending I weigh three hundred pounds.

—Sit down. Stop this. Give me that God damn bottle.

—It isn't difficult.

—Sar?

Nothing moves but the intimate landscape of Patinir, a self-contained silent process which demands no attention, for the prevailing color there is blue.

—Sar? What I goin to do with these relics?

A full dozen of crosses lie massed in Fuller's arms.

—Fuller, says Recktall Brown, with stolid deadly patience, —you take those little men you been rubbing and nail each one of them on a cross, and get them right side up, and do it quietly, and get the hell out of here, now.

—The little Jesus-men, sar?

—Get out. Get out. Get out.

—Saint Peter, upside-down. Wait, Fuller. Confirm me. Isn't there, in every one of us, a naked man marching alone down Main Street playing a bass drum?

Recktall Brown limbers the heavy extensions which support him, and rises. —Did you hear me, Fuller? Are you crazy too? Did you hear me?

—I think perhaps in the condition he enjoyin now sar he can understand the language the toast . . .

—Get out!

Fuller and Recktall Brown diverge. The old crucifer treads with care and mounts the hill of stairs. Recktall Brown reaches a corner, where he takes off his glasses, and from eyes sharp and open as those of undersea he stares into the soft diffusion of the room. —No, he says toward the fireplace; and then pursues his word. —You can't do this, my boy. You can't go crazy on me now.

—Now? Now?

—God damn it, my boy. Not before you finish this Herbert picture. Wreathed in smoke, he stands above his property. —How's it coming along?

—Beautifully. Excitingly. Wondrously.

—Good. Good, my boy. Good.

—But not van Eyck.

—What do you mean?

—Not Hubert.

—What do you mean, my boy? What the hell do you mean? The smoke itself hung on diffracted planes, and Recktall Brown sat down. —You want the credit for it, do you? Is that it?

—But not from you, and not from them, from the thing itself.

Recktall Brown rolled the cigar between thick fingers. Then he put it to his lips, and without relinquishing hold upon it, rolled it there. —You can't do this, my boy. He paused. —You know God damn well if you tried to sell one of these pictures as your own it's worth about forty dollars. Now wait, my boy. Don't laugh like that. It don't sound right.

—Suppose . . .

—God damn it, my boy. Did we make a bargain or didn't we. We're in business, you and me. Do you see that book over there on the shelf there, the yellow one? *The Trees of Home*. That guy is in business, and he's in business with me. And you . . .

—I . . .

—You knew when you started, said Recktall Brown, —you couldn't stop.

They were silent. The lines of their stares formed two sides of a triangle, that was all.

—God damn it, my boy, if it wasn't for being in business with me, you'd float away. This God damn world of shapes and smells you say you live in, you'll turn into one of them. Look at you, you almost have already. By God, Recktall Brown said, standing, so that the look from his eyes no longer needed cross the distance between them, seated, but fell like a weight with his words, —you can't go crazy now. I won't let you. He threw his cigar into the fireplace; and took out another. —Do I have to send Christ down there to model for you? His voice was rising again. —Do I have to send the Virgin down there to spread her . . .

—It's too late now.

—Too late for what. Go on. Talk to me. I feel like I'm talking to myself here.

—The Steenken *Madonna*. Well there. When Hubert van Eyck painted that, it wasn't just a man, painting a picture, of a woman.

—Well then what the hell was it, tell me.

—Feeling? Belief? Say sensation, then. Ask Caligula.

—Belief necessary? So is money, and look how many people have it, for Christ sake. You leave feelings to other people, you do the thinking. Look at them. They'd rather feel than think, and look at them. You let them do your feeling and believing for you, and you do their thinking for them, or you'll end up the same creek all of them are. In his throat, the two veins, either of them vital, pulsated under rolls of flesh. The two before him stood out in invitation to any passing blade.

—It is too late now. "The finest painting, and perhaps the culminating achievement of the fifteenth-century genius Dierick Bouts." You see? I have to tell them.

Recktall Brown lowered his voice. —Like you say, my boy, It isn't that simple. Do you think they want to know? Recktall Brown did not take out his penknife, nor even look for it in the pockets swung against his belly, where it was a familiar tenant. He bit off the end of his cigar, and began to pace before the fireplace. —Eminent scientists agree, after exhaustive tests, that a fifteen-cents-a-gallon chemical in a fancy bottle with a lot of scientific words on it is proven superior. So they pay a dollar a bottle because they want to. These pictures of yours, do you think you could get two hundred dollars for one? No. But these poor bastards crawl all over each other trying to get them away from me for prices in the thousands. They don't know, they don't want to know. They want to be told. This guy whose picture you print with a stethoscope in his hand, he's the same as your half-assed authorities. They want credit for discovering one of these old pictures. So just like the people who are proud to pay a dollar a bottle for this chemical, the same God damn people are proud they can hire an eminent authority to tell them what they ought to buy for art. If there aren't enough pictures to go round . . .

—We sanction Gresham's law.

—Don't talk to me now about law, just listen to me. Who would gain anything if you ran around telling people you painted these things? They'd all be mad as hell at you, most of all the people who bought them. Do you think they'd even admit they paid forty or fifty thousand for a fraud? Do you think anybody would thank you?

—I'll trade my cigar for that bottle of brandy, that bottle of cognac for this half-smoked Havana cigar which I am not enjoying.

—Do you think they'd even believe you? They'd lock you up, my boy. You could get up there and paint these things all over again, and they wouldn't believe you. They'd think you're crazy. That's what they'd want to think. My boy you've fooled the experts. But once you've fooled an expert, he stays fooled. Wait a minute. Sit down. I'm not finished. Who put you up to this?

—The midget who married the tall woman. Have you heard that one?

—Valentine's doing this, is he? Answer me. I warned you about him, didn't I? God damn it, I warned you about him. He's jealous of you, my boy, can't you see that?

—You and he are very close, Mister Brown and Basil Valentine.

—I know him, Recktall Brown said, looking down at the cigar in his hand. Its leaf had started to unroll, and he threw it so into the fireplace. —It's a long time now I know him, and the one thing I know, he went on looking up, —you can't trust him. Nobody can. He's mixed up in a lot of things. Brown was fumbling in his pocket down front. —In God damn near everything. He's too smart for his own good. Have you got that knife? Don't get up, don't get up, just hand it to me here.

—A brilliant man?

—He's got the best education money can buy, I'll tell you that.

—If we are priests, conspiring against you, do not be surprised.

—I . . . God damn it, I told you not to laugh that way.

—What is laughter?

—It makes me nervous.

—You don't think about me when I'm not here. Well, should I be surprised at that?

—Where are you going now?

—To be with my wife. Sheer enterprise, as you will understand. I wonder, when I step out of doors, how the past can tolerate us.

Recktall Brown came round the chairs, and their paths converged. He raised his arm, and it came to rest. —I can feel your bones right through your shoulder. Don't you eat anything?

—Your reassurance strengthens me, for I have sensed I felt them there myself. But no one has confirmed me in some time. Would it have been beyond temptation then, to take a knife and dig for them, and prove they're there?

—Christ, my boy, you've got to get hold of yourself.

—Small choice, then, to take what others leave.

—You feel better now, do you? Take a rest. After this Herbert picture, take a rest. And just forget these crazy things you've said. Hell, you can paint this picture and you know it. And as for what you said about . . . well hell, we'll just forget the other things but don't forget, just keep away from Valentine.

—You are so damned familiar, Brown.

—Why Jesus Christ, my boy, I've known you quite awhile now. I want to watch out for you. And keep away from him, do you hear?

—So damned familiar.

—I'd trade him for you any day. Now take care of yourself. You'll feel better when you get yourself back to work.

In the hall doorway, the weight of the arm remains extended for another moment, and the cumbrous diamonds, hanging beside the rough cheek. Behind, the dog lay licking her belly. Beside hung the portrait, udder-like hands to the front. The weight of the arm and the diamonds, the milkless mamma, malfeasant, even at pendulant rest, that and the sound of the dog, licking, licking, in pestilential heat, as inertly oppressive as the hand, shaded in insensible intimacy to suffocation; and had Recktall Brown not, just then, patted the shoulder which he released, saying, —Get hold of yourself and finish up this last one, my boy, and then take a rest. You just need a rest . . . the shadow which united them, after an instant's complication, might have been simplified by one-third.

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——Hi, gang! Your friend Lazarus the Laughing Leper brings you radio's newest kiddies' program, *The Lives of the Saints*, sponsored by *Necrostyle*. Before we hear from your friend Lazarus, just let me ask you a question. Does Mummy have trouble sleeping? If she does, and ha ha what Mummy doesn't, ask her if she knows about *Necrostyle*, the wafer-shaped sleeping pill. Remember the story Laughing Lazarus told you last week, kids? About the saint who didn't sleep for the last eight years of her life? That's right. Agatha of the Cross. But Mummy's not a saint, is she. Mummy needs her sleep. Tell her about *Necrostyle*, if she doesn't already know. Don't forget, kids, *Necrostyle*, the wafer-shaped sleeping pill. No chewing, no aftertaste . . .

—Ellery, Esther interrupted.

—Just a second. Ellery sat forward with a newspaper rolled in his hand, his head down, listening to the radio. —This is a new account.

——your friend Laughing Lazarus will be here in just a minute, but listen kids. Here's one real confidential question I want to ask you first, just between us. Do you have enough brothers and sisters? I know, you love big brother or little Janey, don't you. But too many can spoil your chances. Look at it this way. When you have pie for dessert, how many ways does it have to be divided up? Do you get your share?

If you have enough brothers and sisters, or even if you don't have any and don't want any, tell Mummy about *Cuff*. *Cuff*, the new wonder preventative. *Cuff* is guaranteed not to damage internal tissues or have lasting effects. But you don't have to remember all those long words, just tell Mummy to ask about *Cuff* next time she visits her friendly neighborhood druggist. Remember, *Cuff*. It's on the *Cuff*.

—I feel ill, Esther said.

—Listen.

——and *Zap*. But I'll be back to tell you more about *Zap* later on. Now, here's your friend Laughing Lazarus, ha ha, who's going to tell us about what happened to Blessed Dodo of Hascha, when he . . .

—Can you turn it off now? Esther asked, resting her head back, her eyes closed.

—Rose wants to hear it. I'll just turn it down, Ellery said. He walked over to the radio with the laborious movements of a football player demonstrating that simply the act of being physical is one of high achievement. Ellery was lithely, easily built. He handled himself and everything round him with an air of clumsy familiarity. When he walked it was with an air of patient indifference to where he was going, though he never arrived anywhere else. Clothes looked well on him: he was what tailors with a sporting bent had in mind when they designed loose-fitting jackets and pleatless narrow-legged trousers. Cigarettes smoked from between his fingers lifelessly, forgotten, leaving him unresponsible for the ashes which dropped to the rug when they grew heavy enough. Smoking, he blew rings heavy with disdain which seemed to jar wherever they hit. He looked at things and at faces with patient boredom, and he shrugged his shoulders. Sometimes he winked, as he did now at Rose who sat on the floor, cowered against the loudspeaker of the radio. Ellery turned the volume down. Rose stared at him.

So did Esther. —Sometimes . . . I hear those things and I just can't believe them, she said.

—It's a big account, Necrostyle Products. That's the way to get at them, through the kids.

—But it . . . how can it be so vulgar? She breathed that last word heavily. She had opened her bloodshot eyes to stare at the ceiling.

—Vulgar? That's what people like. That's what vulgar means, people.

—Ellery, but I don't see why . . . I don't see why . . .

—You told me that yourself. They didn't teach Latin at Yale.

She lowered her eyes to look at him. In her lap, Esther held the kitten too close, threatening the strain of life in it with her attention.

—Not that I ever knew of, anyhow. He shrugged his shoulders. —How many people have you got coming to your party?

—Twenty or so, she said wearily.

—It's a hell of a time for a party. For you to give a party.

—I know it is, do you think I feel like it?

—Why don't you just call it off, then? Because you've already invited this great poet you've always wanted to meet. I know why, too, honey. But believe me, it won't help your writing any.

—I wish . . . She was staring at her typewriter and its silent litter.

—Isn't one enough?

—I wish you wouldn't talk this way now, please. We've got to find a doctor, Ellery, quickly.

—There's a call I have to make, he said, and went into the bedroom where the telephone was with the newspaper rolled in his hand. His voice broke above the radio. —Just a second, operator. It's the Hospital of the Immaculate some damn thing, hang on a minute . . . He opened the newspaper on the bed.

Rose turned from Blessed Dodo of Hascha. —Someone is at the door, she said to her sister. —Blessed Dodo, Blessed Didée, Blessed Bartolo of San Gimignano . . .

—Rose!

—Or even Doctor Biggs of Lima Peru.

—You . . . ? Embracing his weariness in her own voice, Esther opens.

—Don't disturb, don't disturb. Only to find some things I left here, for safekeeping, they say. I enter sparingly.

—And Rose? says Rose.

—Rose.

—Rose of Lima, Peru. Saint Rose of Lima. Then you . . . Don Diego Jacinto Paceco . . .

—Rose, now, that's enough, says Esther. —She is . . . but you . . . ?

(—Yeh, that's the guy, honey, he jumped out a window but the newspaper says he only broke a few ribs . . .)

—My wife God love you, even now some Mozart especially. Symphony Number Thirty-seven especially. Four four four.

—But you, you . . . here you are.

—Kind words then, while it's still daylight. Have you kept my secrets, then? I've come to get them.

(—Visiting hours, two to four and seven to eight. Thanks honey.)

—You look . . . are you . . . is everything all right? Esther comes alive; even her eyes seem to clear. —I have so much . . . there must be some way to . . . is it drinking has you this way?

—Its powers of magnification embrace us all, do they not, or do they not. Well, into the study, for I've trusted you there.

—Well you . . .

—I . . .

—Oh, this . . . is my husband, Ellery?

—How do you . . .

—This is a . . . friend, Ellery.

Lighting a cigarette with the hand he had used to shake the hand he had been offered, Ellery sat down. —I fixed it up, he said to Esther. —It's a cinch.

She looked at him, her eyes wide, daring relief. Ellery drew heavily on his cigarette, and then sent a smoke ring rolling toward Rose curled before the radio. Rose cringed at its approach. —She's like a kid, isn't she. I could probably get a good audience reaction from her on this program. Ellery picked up a magazine. It was an issue of *Dog Days* devoted to Doberman pinschers which had been here when he came.

§ Announcement §
As a Token of his Appreciation
To every bitch who presents him with a Champion heir
Dictator will give an additional service
with his compliments

Ch. Dictator von Ehebruch was offered at stud ("to bitches for whom only the best is good enough") for one hundred fifty dollars.

—My eyes. May I show him my eyes?

—Sit down, Rose. Rose has been upset, Esther said, standing with the kitten. —She had a job in Bloomingdale's for the Christmas rush, and she was victimized. They fired her. Let's . . . sit down?

—Somebody pulled the old twenty-dollar-bill switch on her, Ellery said looking up from his magazine. —Somebody comes in and pays for something with a twenty with the corner torn off, then another guy comes in and pays with a buck, and when he gets change for only a buck he raises hell, see? He says he paid with a twenty, and he's got the torn corner to prove it, he got it from the other guy outside . . .

—It's a shame, Esther interrupted. —All she could tell police about the first one was that he had a hair-line mustache.

—And his hair! Rose burst in, —that he wore like a hat. She stared at them, and then returned to the radio and left them there abandoned to each other's vacancy like three children met in a summer bungalow colony where the plumbing in each ugly cottage is the same, the beds sagged in discouragement, used only for supporting sleep, where the heat of the sun serves only to excuse the appearance of white-skinned parents in offensive states of undress while they pretend that there is something new under this sun and they have come to find it; while the children know that there are no new secrets, and so they are satisfied to keep the old ones from each other.

—What day is it? Esther asked, pushing the switch on the table lamp beside her.

—Wednesday.

—Thursday, Ellery corrected, damning a day later, and she winced.

—What is it, Rose?

—How old you all looked, when the light went on. How quickly you grew up together, Rose said from shadow.

—I just read the Pope uses an electric razor, said Ellery. —I wonder what make it is, how much do you think he'd take for a testimonial.

Looking across the room Esther said, —But . . . can I get you something? Are you all right?

—Just for a minute, I was dizzy just for a minute. But here, I've come for other things . . .

—Are you . . . have you been working lately?

—Not lately, no. Not lately.

Ellery got up suddenly, dropping *Dog Days;* and he picked up another magazine as he crossed the room. —Esther tells me you've done a lot of painting, and I've got something for you if you want something like this. He held forth a page of advertisements. —This here, this is one of our accounts. He indicated the largest. Over a saccharine line drawing of a woman, her head covered, eyes raised, *YES, the Mother of God WILL relieve Your Pain, Disease, Distress* . . . The name of the Virgin Mary is making the headlines in today's

newspapers . . . Write today for your free copy . . .

Beneath, another ad said, STIR UP YOUR LIVER BILE

Beneath, another ad said, Are YOU troubled with STICKY HOT SORE FEET?

—I just thought of this, Ellery went on. —I'll bet you could do it, and it would pay you good money. They're spending a hell of a lot on publicity. See, at first here we were going to have reproductions of some old masters, you know, pictures of the Virgin Mary like you see in museums. But this is better. It's more modern, catches the eye. And if you could paint a couple of pictures for us, the Virgin doing . . . something, whatever the hell she does, but a real arty picture . . .

—Ellery, please . . . Esther said weakly.

—They've got a lot of money behind them, religion's getting popular all over again. It would be a good deal for you, and I can . . .

—Ellery, wait. Let him go, Esther said. —It isn't . . . he wouldn't . . .

—All right, the hell with it, Ellery said, returning to his chair. —I just thought maybe he could do it, but he didn't need to be so damn rude did he? Ellery picked up *Dog Days* again, watching the door to the studio come half closed. —I just thought maybe I could help him out. He returned to Ch. Dictator von Ehebruch, and his chest filled as he studied the Doberman.

Esther did not hear; but sat staring at the door half closed upon her: Persephone then, and Proserpina now, the same queen in another country, she stared at the doorway to his kingdom and faltered forward.

—What is it? Can I help you? she asked, entering. —Rose has been sleeping in here, that's why it's different.

—Well, I trust Rose then. What are these marvelous things?

—Oh, those are pictures of eyes. Rose does them. She likes . . . eyes.

—Somewhere, strips of canvas, somewhere strips of wood, painted upon. Hidden, Rose helped.

—Then you were here? You were here last night?

—Or was it?

—Because she said, Rose, said, she'd seen you in the mirror. And we . . . I didn't understand. I was worried for Rose.

—The mirror, there?

—I've seen you in it too.

—To correct bad drawing. There.

—Under here? She put the kitten on the floor, stooping, reared the long lines of her thighs, and recovered a package wrapped in newspaper. —This?

Then face to face so abruptly that she startled back, her lips move before she can speak. —You don't look well, is all she finds to say.

—Not myself?

—Not yourself? When you loved me, then . . .

—When you loved me?

—I was a whole dimension larger then, and now . . .

—This is where I sleep, said Rose putting her head in the doorway. —Because it smells so nice in here. This is where I sleep.

—Goodbye, for I have to leave.

—This is . . . you've got what you want? Esther asked, following him. —What you came for?

—And can carry away.

—Hey wait a minute, before you go, Ellery said, standing, —there's a book here I wanted to borrow but Esther said it was yours.

—Ellery, don't . . .

—It's all right, here, Ellery said, raising Aunt May's copy of the *Book of Martyrs*. He read from the title page, —*A History of the Lives, Sufferings, and Triumphant Deaths of the Primitive Protestant Martyrs from the Introduction of Christianity to the Latest Periods of Pagan, Popish, and Infidel Persecutions . . .*

—But in the name of God . . . ?

—Another program like this one, see? Ellery waved his hand toward the radio. —But for different denominations, like Catholics and Protestants. Stuff like this. Listen. "In Arethusa, several were ripped open, and corn being put into their . . ." wait, here . . . "scourged, put to the rack, his body torn with . . ." here, "Martha Constantine, a handsome young woman, was treated with great indecency and cruelty by several of the troops, who first ravished her, and then killed her, by cutting off her breasts. These they fried, and set before their . . ."

—Esther, goodbye, please God . . .

—Here, there's another about the guy they tie little bags of gunpowder . . . it's for kids, this is what kids

like.

—Esther, please God, this man is mad and dangerous.

Ellery came forward with the book. —What, is he gone? Is he gone already?

—Yes. Yes, gone.

—Well what about this book. He is a weirdy, all right. Drunk?

—Oh take it, take it, take it.

Ellery returned to say, —Turn the radio up, to Rose, who sat immersed in the sounds it shaped from the silence she maintained.

—What was it, that phone call, Ellery. You said it was all fixed up. You found a doctor?

He looked at her, vaguely, shoulders hunched unevenly like a man deformed from holding a plow down in a thousand furrows. —A doctor? Oh, that call, no, I meant it was all fixed up about this guy who jumped out a window.

—What . . . ?

—Never mind, it's something for a TV promotion stunt.

—Ellery, you've got to find one.

Ellery put down John Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*. He scratched the back of his head and looked uncomfortable. As he sat down he picked the book up again and said, —Martin Luther was struck by lightning, did you know that? He was knocked down and this guy with him was killed, that's why he entered the hermits, see? Imagine that on TV, the Combined Electric program . . .

—Ellery, *for the love of God . . .*

He looked up at her, then. —Don't worry, he said, hunched, perhaps, now like Blessed Catherine de Racconigi, suffering curvature of the shoulder from the blessed burden she was allowed to wield. —Listen.

——*Zap*, approved by doctors everywhere. Tell Mummy about *Zap*, the wonder-wakener, one *Zap* first thing in the morning and she'll zip into the day. So don't forget, gang. Tell Mummy about these new scientific aids to modern family living. *Necrostyle*, the wafer-shaped sleeping pill, swallowed just like a wafer, no chewing, no aftertaste. *Zap*, the wonder-wakener. And *Cuff*. Remember, it's on the *Cuff*.

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—Spelled backwards. Spelled backwards, of course, the Holy Sacrament turned inside out, you know. Basil Valentine stood with his eyes closed, the telephone resting on his shoulder. —Yes, the redemption of women, if you like, he went on, forcing a wearied patience in his voice. —Eve, the curse Christianity had put on her. What? . . . Yes, the priestess and the altar too, the Mass performed on her open loins, I've come across something about the bread being baked on her loins, the wafer for profaning the Eucharist, but what in heaven's name do you want to know this sort of thing for? A novel? But . . . yes, perhaps he can, if he thinks it will do any good. But you can tell your friend Willie that salvation is hardly the practical study it was then. What? . . . Why, simply because in the Middle Ages they were convinced that they had souls to save. Yes. The what? The *Recognitions?* No, it's Clement of *Rome*. Mostly talk, talk, talk. The young man's deepest concern is for the immortality of his soul, he goes to Egypt to find the magicians and learn their secrets. It's been referred to as the first Christian novel. What? Yes, it's really the beginning of the whole Faust legend. But one can hardly . . . eh? My, your friend is writing for a rather small audience, isn't he. Incidentally, the next time you borrow Loyola . . . So I gathered, but that's hardly the place to read Loyola. Do they have what in the Vatican? A mold for fig-leaves? . . .

He stood for a moment, his eyes closed still, after he'd hung up the telephone, and murmured, —What can drive anyone to write novels? but thinking not of novels nor the Black Mass nor even the mold for fig-leaves kept in the Vatican museum; thinking instead and vainly of the dream which this telephone call had broken, though he could not recapture it, re-enter it, could not alter, even in that wishful fabric, events of a quarter-century before.

Eyes closed, attempting to revive the dream, it shut him out, escaped him; eyes open, he walked into the front room to stare at the face of the Vulliamy clock on the mantel, the gilt cupid atop oriental alabaster, and the dream pursued him. The shade of the boy whom he had not seen since they were boys together (Martin was Father Joseph's "suck") lived on the air as though they had parted only minutes before. —It's true then? We're not supposed to understand? Whether thirty seconds or thirty years ago he could not tell; and only memory rehearsed his own words spoken in childhood's shadows under the tower of Saint Ignatius where they met daily, met for the last time when he said, —Weeping will not help you. There is no place for weakness among us. You will grow up to be a fool, Martin, but I shall not. Obedience is the first servant of love. It was for love I did it.

Basil Valentine forced his feet into the black leather pumps and drew his dressing gown tight. He went into the bathroom where he washed his face with cold water, and stood for a moment looking into his own

eyes reflected in the glass as the soft towel revealed them. The clock struck in the other room, and he dropped the towel and returned to the papers spread on his desk. —Idiots, he murmured, gathering papers together. —Ten million babbling idiots. He thrust the papers into a dispatch case and was standing with a cigarette unlit, looking at the gold case absently, when a sharp continuous bell severed the sentence, *Much I ponder* . . . Basil Valentine muttered, and crossed the room to the telephone connecting the downstairs entrance. —Who is it? he demanded.

—The Reverend Gilbert Sullivan? Yes, my dear fellow, come right up.

Then at the door he said, —Good heavens, come right in. Where have you been?

—I? With my dear wife, listening to Mozart. Sie kocht schlecht, my wife. It is some time since I have heard music.

Basil Valentine stood lighting his cigarette, watching the motion before him carefully; care, that is, which extended from every part of himself, to correspond with the movements he repeated, bearing them out, as he followed into the room, weighing the cigarette which distinguished him.

—I have been in the rotting room, to tell heaven's truth. The pudridero, where Charles the Second sits out his last days surrounded by his dead and Spanish family. Good God, now, some preservative is indicated.

—Sit down, my dear fellow. Cognac? Valentine glances at the irregular newspaper-wrapped package laid on the marble top of the coffee table; and hands over the decanter.

—Precision of shape and smell, and the sixth heaven all enclosed. Basil Valentine watches the decanter tipped over the crystal globe, seconds too long, and his right hand shifts, stopping it; while it continues to pour. —Not the seventh, of shining light, but a cigar, perhaps, to weigh me down.

—And perhaps some music? Here, do sit down, where I can see you.

—Music? To leave my heels swinging free in the air? No. I'm obliged to take refuge in fabrication as it is, where I can see you. It's the accumulation, you see. The accumulation. We are all in the dumps, for diamonds are trumps, the kittens have gone to Saint Paul's, do you remember that one? The babies are bit, the moon's in a fit, and the houses are built without walls. Well, you wouldn't remember it, without a childhood you wouldn't. As for me, I've just left a round dozen of crucifixions. Allegro ma non troppo.

—Do come over here and sit down.

—There's nothing I'd rather do, but it doesn't help. Here, would you believe me if I told you that Martha Constantine . . .

—Please, don't touch anything on that desk.

—And do you fall in love with the barber when you go for a haircut?

—My dear fellow . . . Valentine crossed the room quickly. —Put down those papers.

—Here, here, Hungarian . . .

—Give me that book.

—Magyar, isn't it bad enough without coding it?

—This . . . a dictionary, obviously, Basil Valentine said, taking the plain-cover book and jamming it into the dispatch case with the papers.

—Transdanubia . . .

—Do go over there and sit down, now. Valentine snapped the lock on the case.

—Buda Pest, they tell me, was the most civilized city in the world. And within living memory.

—And they are right, Valentine said curtly. Close upon the figure before him, he followed as though to enclose and drive it before him toward the couch. —Now sit down and tell me what you've been up to.

—Down to, consorting with mermaids in the bottom of a tank where the troll king lives (here a cough interrupted; and Basil Valentine held his breath)—God love him. I had willingly fastened the tail to my back, and drank what he gave me, you know, but there, when he tried to scratch out my eyes. "I'll scratch you a bit till you see awry; but all that you see will seem fine and brave."

—So you've been to see Brown, have you? Basil Valentine leaned down and pulled open the loose newspaper package. —And this?

—There they are, from A to izzard, from under the watchful eyes of Rose . . . protected, cautious, circumspect, eyes in every variety, but mostly those of children.

Valentine looked up from the painted fragments, and poised, the lines in his forehead wove concern. —What's the matter, what's the matter? he said suddenly, —groaning like that, what is it?

—I'll explain . . . as soon as I . . . yes . . . get settled . . .

—My dear fellow . . .

—It's a liberty I'm taking today, pretending I weigh three hundred pounds. Damn it, will you allow it? "I min Tro, i mit Håb og i min Kjærlighed" . . . eh? No, it didn't work out that way, I tell you. There's Solveig locked up with a dangerous man, human and industriously mad, he may save me yet like Luther saved the Papacy. Good God, today I dishonored death for ten thousand dollars. I'll die like Zeno then, strangling

himself at ninety-eight because he fell and broke a finger coming out of school.

—Now relax a bit, my dear fellow. Tell me, what did Brown say to you.

—Took the bottle away from me just like you're doing, and he swore if he were a dog he'd bark at me in the streets. Then he went on to ask me about my liver, and he offered me work selling a bottled chemical in the streets to some lowland consumers dead four centuries. But good God, I'd just come in from the streets, you know. The streets were filling with people like buttons, and you can't sell anything to them. Someone once told them the best things in life are free, and so they've got in the habit of not paying. So I simply warned him and came on my way. He was so kind and fatherly, I left him with a warning and came away.

—Tell me what you mean, you warned him.

—Oh yes, yes. Warned him the priests are conspiring against him, and he hasn't a chance. You, and I, and the Reverend Gilbert Sullivan.

—Now wait a moment . . .

—What chance has he, old earth, when hierophants conspire. Especially three like you, and I, and Reverend Gilbert Sullivan. He believes us three, at any rate. How he will dance when he finds that we are projections of the Reverend Gilbert Sullivan's unconscience. You and I.

Basil Valentine had been seated. He stood up now, his hands clasped behind him and walked toward the window, his head down (watching the toes of his black shoes on the plain carpet) and back. As the voice sounded he would raise his head, and lower it again immediately.

—Or like Cleanthes then? Gums swelling, and two days' laying off from food, the doctors' orders. With leave to return to his diet, I'm far along on my journey now, he says to them, and starves. There's dieting to extinction, that's the thing. People stop too soon. Doubled in one century, from a billion to two. We're being devoured. Here, let me walk up and down the room with you. We'll see better that way.

—Sit down, Basil Valentine snapped, behind him.

—I've brought my report. In the year two thousand and forty, four billion. Twenty-one forty-one, eight billion. Twenty-two forty-two, sixteen billion. Those are statistics. What are we to do to civilize them? Centuries of art and celibacy, plagues and wars and abusive acts of God, religious ascetics howling in the desert and cultured mermaid men whispering sweet absolutely nothings on the beach, and good God they won't learn they're not wanted. One pair of human beings, there, a man and a woman at the rate of love of one per cent per annum, could equal our population in nineteen hundred years. Our work's laid out for us. Stamp out polygamy, I say. That's the first thing. Our exemplary African missions have shown us the way. Why, good God, as a result of their fine work we're able to spend twenty thousand pounds sterling on syphilis in the Uganda alone. Perhaps we should have been doctors then, you and I, instead of what we are. Cardinal Richelieu drinking horse dung in white wine on his death bed, it's not hard to see why France is first son of the Church. And in Egypt . . .

—My dear fellow . . .

—We treated sore eyes with the urine of a faithful wife. Today of course we're forced to buy drugstore make-shifts.

Basil Valentine had walked down to the windows and returned to the couch from behind, the fingers of one hand tapping the palm of the other: there was more to it than the agitation his face betrayed, for every moment he seemed to become more aware of his own physique, and the weight of its members extended in space. Most oppressive, however, became the respiratory system; not a sense of constriction (though it might amount to that if it went on so) but an acute sense of what was going on there, among fibro-elastic membranes and cartilaginous rings. He was having difficulty in swallowing. He put his left hand to his throat, manifesting in gold the cricoid cartilage within, its seal turned behind. There was no one on the couch. Basil Valentine swung around. —What . . . what are you doing prancing behind me here. Good . . . good heavens, my dear fellow, come along now, and sit down again.

Basil Valentine turned a light on, and herded the figure before him like a shadow. —Put your feet up and relax, if you like. But I want to talk to you seriously.

—Seriously? Then talk to Richelieu. I've only been ordained a matter of months. Or years, is it? I can't distinguish now, I've come so far, tempted by the daughters of Mara disguised as beautiful women. That was before Buddhism was corrupted by idolatry. Where is that good cigar you gave me?

—Take one of these and sit down, Valentine said, holding out the gold case.

—Varé tava soskei . . . soskei . . . I can't sit down with one of these things. I'd float away. Here, what's this thing over here, this gold bull busting an egg.

Basil Valentine breathed more easily as the figure before him seemed to weary and wither a little. —An altar figure, my dear fellow.

—Well that's apparent, that's apparent.

—A small copy of one that stood in the Miaco pagoda, in Japan, Valentine went on, watching the hand

stroking the gold of the bull's back. —The time of Chaos, you know, before creation, and the world concealed in an egg floating on the waters. And the bull here, the symbol of creative force, breaking the egg to give birth to the earth.

—Is that what the Jesuits are teaching now? Good God! How far back do you go, anyhow? Before death came into the world? Before the time of Night and Chaos? Before good and evil, before magic, before religion. There, religion is the despair of magic . . . no, that's not you Jesuits, is it. Religion is the mother of sin. I like that. That's Lucretius. You do keep occupied, don't you. Books, papers, a griffin's egg? You can't manage without one of those. All the churches had griffin's eggs hanging around. Hung them on the lamp ropes so the rats couldn't get down and eat the oil. Exterior brown and hairy, white inside and the yolk a clear liquid. Tell them about the egg that Leda laid, and make them laugh.

—My dear fellow, Basil Valentine said, approaching, with his arms extended (triceps, biceps, semi-lunar fascia all conscious). —this is enough, you know. You must . . .

—Let me loose. Just give me a good book to read, and I'll improve my mind while you're out preaching. Here we are, *Die Geschichte der fränkischen Könige Childerich und Chlodovec*. Christmas day, the year four hundred ninety-six, and Clovis is baptized in Rheims. A white dove flew down from heaven with a vial of holy oil for that express purpose. Did you know that? His wife converted him. Clotilda. That's exactly what she did. She brought him round, in the middle of a battle. He gave up the sun for that. Mithra, the sun god, and Clovis threw him over. Why, even the Stoics believed the sun was animated and intelligent, and Clovis throws him over eight hundred years later, just like that. Why I remember, a child in church (the voice went on, as Basil Valentine gently guided the shoulders before him back toward the couch)—sitting reading the *Pilgrim Hymnal*. "Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, the God of my salvation," my father reads out. "For Thou desirest not sacrifice, else I would give it," we all shout back at him. "For Thou delightest not in burnt offering," he goes on, "the sacrifices of God are a broken spirit." "A broken and a contrite heart, O God, Thou wilt not despise," we agree.

As the weight, at which Valentine was surprised, lowered to the couch, he noticed that the eyes before him were closed. —But what I remember is the countryside then, the brilliance of outdoors and outwindows, and the sunlight streaming through the lozenge shapes of glass, and we were locked away from it, locked inside to worship. And there was the sun out there for everyone else to see. Good God, tell me that Clovis wasn't lonely at dawn. Tell me he wasn't sick at the sunset.

—But what is it? What is it? For heaven's sake tell me, Valentine said, and his own shoulders quivered too, —instead of this . . . babbling, what is it? What is the matter?

—Thank God you love people. Thank God you love people. Thank God you love people.

—I?

—But the night you caused that cab crash . . . why didn't you go down and look. I've wondered. I've wondered.

—Caused? I caused it?

—As sure as Mother Shipton. Good God, are prophets guiltless?

Basil Valentine sat back with his cigarette. He spoke with some strain, as though to convince and repress some part of himself. —If one pauses to enjoy vulgar satisfactions, you know, one loses sight of one's objectives.

The eyes were raised to him. —I know why you don't like them. They have too many hands, is that why? For each heart there are ten thousand hands, is that it?

—Precisely, Valentine said, and crushed out his cigarette, and stood. He walked toward the windows again, each step more composed, and each word, as he spoke, more calm. —Hands, hands, hands, he said. —Dirty hands picking things up, and dropping them, beautiful things, defiling them. Hands pushing, hands grabbing, hands outstretched, hands knotted up in violence, hands dangling in helplessness, hands . . . on you. He stood at the window, looking out on the city. —Hands . . . he repeated.

—Yetzer hara, the evil heart, were Adam and Eve in love? What I mean is, do we only know things in terms of other things? Well then, I'll die like Socrates, there's dignity .

—Will you now? Valentine turned his back to the window, though he remained there, and almost smiled. —A condemned felon. Do you think they'll let you? He turned to the window again. —Hands dropping pennies at the newsstand, in exchange for a picture of a man strapped in the electric chair, the faces gaping over the papers in the subway until every car looks like a traveling asylum. Thick heads bent over the radio, waiting for the news that the switch has been pulled in the death-house.

It was silent; and remained so some minutes. Basil Valentine stood looking out the window, as it was his habit when alone.

—Tell me, have you ever fallen in love with someone already engaged away, and then won the beloved away from your rival? And then as time goes on, you begin to suspect that you look like him? Him whom

you hated and found ugly.

—No, my dear fellow, I can't say I have, Valentine said, sauntering back to the couch.

—Well, let me tell you what happened to me. When still a boy I read Novalis, and there was great appeal, you know. But after a few more years of study I understood the mistake I'd made, the romantic mistake I'd almost made, I saw eventually how Novalis had appealed to all the most dangerous parts of me, all the romantic and dangerous parts, so I settled down to extinguish them. After two or three years I emerged triumphant, to tell the truth quite pleased with myself, to be rid of all those romantic threats which would have killed me if they had taken me unawares. Thus cleansed, I went on in the rational spirit, easily spotted romantic snares and stepped aside. One day I picked up the work of a man named Friedrich von Hardenberg, and my rational mind became quite inflamed, with the logical answers to just the things I'd been questioning . . . since I'd turned my back on Novalis, and all he stood for.

Valentine sat down. He tapped a cigarette, commenced to smile, and look up, and say, —My dear fellow . . . when the figure before him leaped from the couch.

—Damn it! Damn it! Good God, can't you see what I mean? When you see yourself . . . when you see yourself . . . The hands before him quivered in the air, the fingertips almost touching. Then one hand seized the other. —And you know you'll do it again . . . and again.

Before Basil Valentine could stand, he found himself alone. He held the unlit cigarette, tapping it with his index finger, and heard a crash in his kitchen, and footsteps, and the bathroom door. He paused only to light the cigarette, and then quickly picked up the loose newspaper-wrapped package, and his dispatch case as he passed the desk on the way to his bedroom. He'd got them both in the safe, and was back, standing before the windows, before he heard another sound.

—They tell me there's no scene in all Greek literature should make us more ashamed of our Christian culture, came in a calm voice behind him.

—And they are right, Valentine said, turning, to see him sitting nonsensically on the empty marble top of the coffee table. —Now, my dear fellow, let's be sensible, Valentine said, approaching. —You look better, a good deal better than when you arrived. Now sit down and tell me just what you propose to do with yourself.

—Play *The Stars and Stripes Forever* and I'll march up and down the room. Play the *Thunder and Lightning Polka*. I'll dance.

—What did you say to Brown?

—I asked him, What's laughter.

—And I suppose he told you it distinguishes us from beasts.

—He said, It makes the present. He said, it must be shared, and being so, makes the present. Laughter.

—I imagine, Valentine muttered. —But . . . what did you and he . . .

—We laughed. Brown and me, and that damned, congenitally damned . . . He sat muttering to himself, then he looked around slowly, and had begun to subside when something caught his eye. —What's that? He half rose, pointing to a painting on a corner wall.

—That? Valentine repeated, and smiled. —Valdés. Juan de Valdés Leal. You know him?

—Where'd you get it?

—It was among the worthless pictures that Brown got in that country house. I asked it of him, because we are such . . . friends.

—And he gave it to you?

—Of course. Since Brown was assured it was worth no more than twenty dollars, he gave it to me for fifty . . . Watching the eyes staring fixed on the Valdés painting, as though it recalled something, Valentine pursued calmly, —And now, getting back to work are you? Have you thought any more about that favor I asked of you? The Patinir?

—It's all over, he shuddered. —I swear, by all that's ugly it's done. But you . . . He'd suddenly begun pinching up rolls of flesh on the back of one hand. —Why are you doing this to me? he demanded without looking up. —When you know it doesn't exist? to ask me to copy it? Like he . . . restoring an empty canvas, yes. He scratched me a bit, I'll tell you. Until today, God! that damned table. God's watching? Invidia, I was brought up eating my meals off envy, until today. And it was false all the time! He spoke with more effort than he had yet made to control his voice. —Copying a copy? is that where I started? All my life I've sworn it was real, year after year, that damned table top floating in the bottom of the tank, I've sworn it was real, and today? A child could tell it's a copy, he broke off, wrenching at the folds of flesh and veins on his hand, and he dared look up.

Valentine was watching him closely, the watery blue of his own eyes hardened, the narrowed lids sharpening interest into scrutiny: he saw what appeared as a weak attempt at a smile, but no more, a quirk on that face and it was gone while the voice picked up again, —Now, if there was no gold? . . . continuing

an effort to assemble a pattern from breakage where the features had failed. —And if what I've been forging, does not exist? And if I . . . if I, I . . .

—Perhaps if you could listen to me for a minute . . .

—Listen! He was bolt upright, broken through by a shudder and left rigid there, as lightning freezes motion. —Do you hear? he whispered. Nothing moved. Valentine stared, until he saw the lips commence to tremble in sharp tugs, —two, three-four-five, sixseven . . . hear? you, you're wearing the watch? hear it? racing with the clock, hear them racing? tick, tick-tick-tick, tick tick . . . there! the watch is ahead. Is it? listen!

—Now really, if you can't . . .

—Listen! I say . . . And then he sank back slowly. —No, it's over. You ruined it, interrupting. But didn't you hear them? racing? Tick. Tick-tick. Zeno wouldn't have, Zeno . . . what I mean is add one, subtract anything or add anything to infinity and it doesn't make any difference. Did you hear? how they were chopping time up into fragments with their race to get through it? Otherwise it wouldn't matter. But Christ! racing, the question really is homo- or homoi-, who's who, what I mean is, who wins? Christ or the tortoise? If God's watching, . . . Christ! listen, O my sweet gold! why were we born so beautiful? That's why we're here, an alchemist and a priest, without blemishes, you and I. It's true? You've never seen a cross-eyed priest? an ordained amputee? No, never! By all that's ugly, it's done! He sat, pinching up folds on the back of his hand. —Now, remember? Who was it, "gettato a mare," remember? an anchor tied to his neck? and thrown, caught by kelpies and martyred, remember? in the celestial sea. Here, maybe we're fished for.

Valentine muttered, —What are you trying to . . .

—Making a mummy, but, what I mean is which came out first? the heart or the brain. Why, the brain with the optic lobes, pulled out through the nose by the nates . . . But the heart, didn't come out till very late. He sat quivering, lips still moving over that last, —Very late. He paused; and then his lips scarcely appeared to move when he took up, —By the damned, I mean the excluded and . . . keeping the path to hell clean, to fool good people. Fished for? why, fished for . . . Have you read Averroes? What I mean is, do we believe in order to understand? Or understand in order to be . . . be fished for.

Basil Valentine stood over him a moment longer, then shrugged, turned away, and spoke both humoring and impatient, —If you remember Saint Anselm, Credo ut intelligam . . .

—Yes, yes, that's it. That's it! Flesh, remember? flesh, how thou art fishified. He'd jumped to his feet. —Listen, do you understand? We're fished for! On this rock, remember? and I shall make thee a fisher of men?

—Where are you going?

—Philippi. Yes, the first . . . with Paul, to Philippi.

—You're not going anywhere. Sit down and tell me what you propose to do. If it's a rest you need, there's money.

—Ish Kerioth bought a cemetery with his . . . thirty pieces, do? do? he went on loudly. —While there's still time, we . . . follow our training, there's no way out. I'll go to North Africa, and tempt Arab children to believe in the white Christ by giving them candy. That's accepted procedure. They're prejudiced. They accept Him as a prophet of their own Prophet. That's worse to fight than if they never heard of him at all. Charity's the challenge.

—If it's simply some childish obsession with the priesthood . . . ?

—And you? for you the priesthood is just, spreading damnation?

—Nothing can be given, which cannot also be withheld.

—By all that's ugly . . . yes, if they had but one neck? Do you remember the seventeenth-century messiah Shabbetai Zebi, but . . . he faltered, backing to a doorway, —What's that to do with . . . Dominus ac Redemptor.

—What's that? Valentine asked quickly, surprised, but he sat down.

—Yes, Clement the fourteenth, his brief suppressing the order? Remember? I know . . . the Church must punish, to prove it has the power to punish? But you . . . you . . . ?

—You remind me of a boy I was in school with, Valentine said quietly. —You and Martin. The ones who wake up late. You suddenly realize what is happening around you, the desperate attempts on all sides to reconcile the ideal with reality, you call it corruption and think it new. Some of us have always known it, the others never know. You and Martin are the ones who cause the trouble, waking suddenly, to be surprised. Stupidity is never surprised, neither is intelligence. They are complementary, and the whole conduct of human affairs depends on their co-operation. But the Martins appear, and cause mistrust . . .

—There's Lent! Martin's? Martins? you killed him with much cherishing?

—I was a syndicus then. Martin was below me. In such a school the first thing one learns is obedience. Not encouraged to think for one's self, because one is not yet ready to do so. And you understand, one is

encouraged to report the . . . breaches committed by others.

—A spy system! ac redemptor, I know. And you! he cried out from the doorway where he stood. —For you, if you hate their hands, and you hate their faces, and you hate their suffering . . . and you a priest! You . . . you . . . yes, a pope . . . a pope's . . .

The telephone rang behind him.

—Ici Castel Gandolfo . . . A Mister Inononu calling the SS Basil Valentine . . . hurry . . . the forty days is almost done . . .

Basil Valentine wrested the telephone from him, and he went through the doorway taking the lamp to the floor with him. The phone was dead in Valentine's hand, but he stood holding it, staring in the dark.

—*The Triumphal Car of Antimony*. Now I remember your name, Basil Valentine, the alchemist who watched pigs grow fat on food containing stibium, wasn't it . . . you tried it on some fasting emaciated monks and they all died . . .

Valentine dropped the telephone into its cradle, and the figure retreated before him, its back to the window.

—And so they named it antimony, anathema to monks . . .

Basil Valentine stood still in the near darkness, feeling every physical detail of his body, every one but his eyes; for the figure against the window was indistinct, its shape and size ambiguous, but for the eyes. —Preach to them, then, my yetzer hara, speak to them, then, my evil heart. While I fly like a piece of cloth on the wind, or the color itself, the street is filling with people like buttons in Galilee. Speak to the Am-ha-aretz, preach to them, pray. Tell them, as the composer predicted, there's nothing left but knowledge and evidence, and art's become a sort of tailbone surviving in us from that good prehensile tail we held on with then. Tell them that Peter died an old man, and right side up. Tell them that Mary broke her vows to go off with a soldier named Panthera, and wandered away to give birth to his son. Tell them, the ones who are conscious of what happens to themselves only in terms of what has happened to themselves, who recognize only things they have seen with their eyes, tell them the whole thing hangs on a resurrection that only one lunatic saw, one and then twelve and then five hundred, for visions are contagious, and resurrections were a stock in trade, and the streets were full of messiahs spreading discontent, that Jesus Christ and John the Baptist would both be arrested on the street today, and jailed, and for the same reason. Tell them the truth, then, that Christ was thrown into a pit for common malefactors, tell them the truth, then, not that power corrupts men, but men corrupt power. My yetzer hara, speak to them, preach to them, my evil heart, to the ones who look out the window and are not surprised to see the sun, burning itself out, ninety-three million miles away, the ones who dream of the dead and expect themselves to be dreamt of, the Am-ha-aretz, filling the streets and seeking authority and no further, write with a brass pencil on a clean tin plate, I A O, I A E, corruption is no more than knowledge that comes too soon, tell them of Atholl's coronation with a red-hot iron crown, and of how the Egyptians burned red-haired men and scattered their ashes with winnowing fans, tell them of Justinian's pavement made like an ocean and destroyed when the roof of Saint Sophia fell in, and of the son of the ruler of Cairo, Ibn Tulun, sleeping on an inflated feather-bed on a lake of quicksilver, tell them of Antiope and the goat, of Pasiphaë and the bull, and the egg that Leda laid to make them laugh if they'll listen. The Am-ha-aretz, whose memories include nothing but their own failures, tell them their suffering belittles them, tell them that, my yetzer hara, tell the ones who trade only in false coin where they can buy clothes to wear when they are alone. That is all, and Gresham's law, and Gresham's law, and Gresham's law for love or money. Go out among them and tell them that their nostalgia for places they have never been is sex, the sweating Am-ha-aretz, and when they hear music, tell them it is their mother, tell Nicodemus, tell him there is no other way to be born again, and again and again and again of a thousand other mothers of others-to-be, tell him, my yetzer hara, tell them, tell them my evil heart, that they are hopeless, tell them what damnation is, and that they are damned, that what they have been forging all this time never existed.

On the couch, Basil Valentine rested a hand on his forehead, and moved it gently. —You are feverish, he said. He got up to turn on a soft light near the windows, and returned to the couch. —Just lie still, he said. —A little cognac . . . there . . .

—Yes, you see . . . ? You see?

—Don't try to talk now for a minute. And close your eyes. Basil Valentine held the hot squared sides of the skull between his hands, and rested his thumbs softly on the eyelids. —There's no need to say a word. You're safe here.

—You see, if . . . I became the one who could do more than I could.

Valentine moved his fingertips gently against the temples throbbing beneath them. He shifted slightly; and loosened his dressing gown. —And the one you left behind? he whispered, —the one you lost?

—Yes, yes, came the answer in a whisper. —Yes, I miss him . . .

Valentine lowered his face slightly, out of the light from over the back of the couch; and both his hands moved against the skull. —We're safe here, he said.

The telephone rang. Basil Valentine's hands drew together for an instant, pressing the skull between them. He raised his hands, and the eyes remained closed.

He got over to the telephone quickly, glanced back round the corner of the door, and picked it up, talking in a low voice, facing the wall directly before him, his eyes lowered. —Yes, it's all right, he said, —but . . . this telephone? Of course it may, no private telephone is safe . . . Meg van az informacio ami kell, itt vannak a papirok. Eh . . . ? nem most, hivjon holnap reggel . . .

At that he hangs up, and stands for a moment with his weight resting on the instrument. Then in to wash his hands, where his face and the one in the glass exchange confirmation at the speed of light, as palms abrade knuckles and thumbs fret cuticles under warm water.

He walks back slowly, registering resolution in his steps, watching them placed before him in a path between there and the windows, does not raise his head until he stands looking out, movement compassed by the soft lamp in a black leap on the ceiling. —Even down among them, he says, —the stupid, thick-handed people, is there any one of them who doesn't know him, who has not suffered the indignity of his stare, and heard the mockery of his laughter, this other self, who can do more, who always escapes, but . . . now you are here, my dear fellow, and we . . . Basil Valentine pauses, to seat half his weight on the window shelf. —Would you be surprised, if I told you about myself, as much about myself as I know about you? Why I know that I hate them, where you wish you could love them. Direct in his view, ascendant in lights, the Empire State Building rears its stiff glans fourteen hundred seventy-two feet above the street. —There is their shrine, their notion of magnificence, their damned Hercules of Lysippus that Fabius brought back to Rome from Tarentum, not because it was art, but because it was big. S P Q R, they all admired it for the same reason, the people, whose idea of necessity is paying the gas bill, the masses who as their radios assure them, are under no obligation. Under no obligation whatsoever, but to stretch out their thick clumsy hands, breaking, demanding, defiling everything they touch.

Though his tone remains calm, he raises his hand to his temple and finds the vein standing out there, suppresses with two fingertips the life pulsating through it, and lowers his hand to his knee rearing half his weight in the window.

—We live in Rome, he says, turning his face to the room again, —Caligula's Rome, with a new circus of vulgar bestialized suffering in the newspapers every morning. The masses, the fetid masses, he says, bringing all his weight to his feet. —How can they even suspect a self who can do more, when they live under absolutely no obligation. There are so few beautiful things in the world, Basil Valentine says, taking a step toward the back of the couch, where it is quiet, where he has not yet raised his eyes, —that they must be protected. He stands looking down, to say the few more words, as though they were simply that, appended, when all this time he has been making toward, —The pity which none shall have who demands it. I called your work calumny once, so it was. But the face of Christ in your van der Goes, no one could call that a lie. And now, he says, advancing again, —here you are, and I shall teach you, I shall teach you the only secret worth knowing, the secret the gods teach, the secret that Wotan taught to his son . . . His hand reaches for the gold cigarette case and finds the pocket empty. When he looks up he notices first not the empty couch, but the empty pedestal where the gold bull stood: the egg is still there, unbroken.

Then Basil Valentine put a hand to his throat, as though to stem the rising nausea; and he leaned forward, still with the hand to his throat, the hard rings shifting on nothing in a rise and a fall between a thumb and a finger, swallowing, while the shadow on another wall and clear because unobserved, figures a steady hand pouring cognac.

A swallow of the stuff crystal-bound in his hand, and he clears his throat with abrupt loudness. —Of course the Athens of Socrates was a phenomenon, he says, glancing at the couch he passes, —the most civilized thing that has ever happened on earth, while the rabble of the Roman Republic, he goes on, nearing the windows, —Rome, you know . . .

•

Three stars in his belt, Orion lay out of sight beyond tons of opaque building material now dissolved in darkness, serving only to support fixed points of light, the solid firmament of early Jews where stars were nailed lest they fall; beyond, the flight of seven doves Orion hunts, out of sight.

Look darling he found my necklace
(The capacity of this bus
The new Wonder Gems Developed in the laboratory
(Please do not speak to driver while bus is in motion
More brilliant than diamonds

(Expectorating in or from this omnibus is a punishable offense

(Step down to open doors

Above hung the cliff that Alexander climbed in India, the cliff studded with diamonds, hung with chains of red gold, five hundred steps to the house of the sun, to paradise.

Though Sir John Mandeville (in his *Travels*, among the earliest and most heroic of plagiaries in the French) confessed, "Of Paradise I cannot speak properly, for I was not there": what matter? Here above, the concrete cliffs had disappeared, only their lights studding darkness which posed as space and postured firmament.

—John!

—You? . . . bumping into you again on the street like this? But I have to hurry, I have to get a train.

—Yes, a train, a train.

Lights flashed past, their beams tangled in darkness to confirm it.

—Are you all right? What's that you're carrying? is it real gold? Where are you going?

Through the world of night, lost souls clutching guidebooks follow the sun through subterranean passage gloom, corridors dark and dangerous: so the king built his tomb deep in earth, and alone wanders the darkness of death there through twenty-four thousand square feet of passages and halls, stairs, chambers, and pits. So Egypt.

—Back.

Red in the west as it set, because of the fires of hell says the Talmud: red in the east from the roses of Eden.

—Back where?

—Can we stop for a minute? a glass of brandy?

—I have to make this train.

—Gentlemen . . .

Few anywhere disagreed, but that the sun and the moon and the planets issued from a hole in the east, descended into one in the west and returned, by night, through a subterranean passage.

—Gentlemen, I have a religion too. I'm a drunkard.

Raging up and down the sky like a beast in a cage, says the Talmud, and unable to escape, enclosed in the firmament, the gates of its entrance and exit only at opposite ends.

—All right, yes, a train. Wait.

—Gentlemen . . .

—Hurry . . .

Down: down went Tammuz (slain by the boar's tusk), entering at Babylon, the center of the earth, for there was the lid-stone to the lower world.

Thus the Assyrians invoked the bull who guarded the gates: O great bull, O very great bull, which stampest high, which openest access to the interior . . .

Please show your ticket at gate

—Leaving on track seven

Their death pursuing its descent, the Piute Indians followed the sun to that hole where it crawled in at the end of the earth, creeping constricted to earth's center, there to sleep out the night, and to waken and creep on to the eastern portal. The sun emerges, eating the stars its children as it rises, its only nourishment; and those on earth at the dawn see only its brilliant belly, distended with stars.

This ticket is your receipt and baggage check. Please keep it with you until you reach destination.

May the bull of good fortune, the genius of good fortune, the guardian of the footsteps of my majesty, the giver of joy to my heart, forever watch over it! Never more may its care cease.

(So reads the inscription of Esar-Haddon, whose father, the murdered Sennacherib, had destroyed Babylon; and he, the son, returned to restore the sacred city, to rebuild the temple of Baal, and refurbish its gods.)

Thrown open, the gates on the eastern face of the temple meet the dawn as the golden tips of the obelisks burn, and the red rim appears from the underworld. Those on earth prostrate before it, and the gates close upon Baal, Who has entered His Temple.

III

It was a man, sure, that was hang'd up here;
A youth, as I remember: I cut him down.
If it should prove my son now after all—

Say you? say you? —Light!

—Kyd, *The Spanish Tragedy*

Above the trees, the weathercock atop the church steeple caught the sun, poised there above the town like a cock of fire rising from its own ashes.

Few witnessed this inviolate miracle, for reverence here subscribed to roofs: worship was, as childhood had noted, an affair of defensive indecent enclosure, and few indeed the eyes raised on high unless assured the protective embrace of beams. As a matter of fact few eyes were ever raised at all, but rather lowered in consecrated embarrassment, finally closed in severe chagrin as the voice intoned, —The Lord's mercy is from everlasting to everlasting unto those that fear Him.

When the eyes opened it was to stare at the back of the neck of another similarly occupied; and if the eyes were raised no further, the voices were: O God be-neath Thy guid-ing hand Our ex-iled fa-thers crossed the sea, they sang under that roof which rose to the level of the treetops outside, mounting New England gothic toward the white spire alerted by the weathercock which caught his eye, as he climbed the hill toward the Post Road. But even he, when he reached it, walked with his eyes lowered up the silent nave.

On either hand, the visages of the houses watched him pass, self-contained façades indifferent to his presence, but watching still, guarded, as he passed immediately before the panes and fanlights; and when with seven more steps he escaped their line of vision, they did not turn in indecorous curiosity but continued to stare out straight ahead. Unconcealed by walls, or coy behind hedges, sober-mouthed some of them with columns Ionic and Doric (with never the cheer of Corinthian), these miens of narrow clapboard and eighteenth-century brick looked upon the passer-by without deviation or interruption, with stares neither crooked nor circuitous, the lineal stare of propriety.

(Beyond, there were, to be sure, occasional cupolas, sportive relics of nineteenth-century profligacy.)

He passed the Civil War monument which thirty years before had spiked the sky, and stood now dwarfed in deference to greater wars. (And the resolute iron cannon at its foot was replaced by a mobile 75, albeit crippled by loss of one of its wheels.)

As he reached the transept, the spire behind him burned at its tip with the light of the sun, and from it the bell labored the early hour. Beyond the lucent spire the sky was patched with small clouds which did not move, no more than the ragged-edged patches of snow, reflecting here that celestial course of the sun which he trod on earth.

Past the highway's curve (and the arrow there, pointing the wrong way to delude barbarians), the mile from the railway station, and he had not paused; nor so much as raised his eyes but once when they were raised by the transfiguration of the gold cock in the sun. Mirabile dictu: another blue day. What a narrow chin in his hand, when he raises his hand there, then taps two fingers on his lips and looks over the shoulder quickly. Bells, from far down the nave there. —God of our fa-thers, known of old, Lord of our far-flung bat-tle line (fingers stifle the lips) hymn no 383. Singing way, over the shoulder elders from preference heard no music, alarm it was for it set something living in them, and would that their children believe no such thing existed, to hang their heels on the air. But they heard, they heard and what's more without humility and nor lightened nor lost set instanter to compose, whipped their children to practice as they'd been done for discovery. The bell again. Again. Adeste —ad esse fidelis: hymn no 223 larynges distended A,M,D,G, infra dig dominocus: Oh for a Faith that Will Not Shrink.

Demons the motes in a sunbeam, said Blessed Reichelm (though serious statisticians precisely populated hell's habitant host at 1,758,064,176): the Saxons driven through a river blessed upstream by bishops (kept their sword-arms dry). Blessed Leo X, could nicht anders, the 95 Thæces stuck to the door, in the beginning this end:

Town founded 1666 annus mirabilis Oh gosh Oh gee h-Holy Cowrist w-We got a big job ahead of us interdenominational infra supra sub threw the inkpot: Nunnery lecture, illustrated, Pagan ceremony, robed priests, Nuns, high altar, &c. A wail from the tomb. See girl in dungeon. Uncle Sam to the rescue. Public invited. Collection 50¢ leadeth us not into temptation.

Surprise! to be kissed on the cheek so. After all that time. There, over the shoulder describe necessity without touching me. Abscondam faciem meam white Christ the fugitive. Consider me with my nose gone, knock on wood, —or ask Helen for a piece, she found it: rub it, Aladdin, Constantine, Nicodemus blown back by the wind from the river m-Mthrfckr et considerabo novissima eorum (sic)

The birth of a nation. Let in the light Open the nunneries And save the girls. Free lemonade, Mineral water, Shower baths Coming! to Haggard's Gospel Tent A drama of eighteen live people This is a clean high-class lecture exposing the whole Roman Catholic Religion from the Confession Box to the Nunneries, High Priests, Mother Superior, Altar Boy, Six Nuns, Holy Altar, Holy Candles, Holy Water, Holy Gods Just

as it looks in Catholic Churches everywhere. With the mother giving her daughter to the church for a supposed more holy life, daughter taking the Carmelite nun vow (Black Veil) buried alive, thrown into a dungeon and how are they to be rescued

He stopped to cough, and courteously caught the cough away from the air in his open palm and walked on again. Courteous, to this flood of unspeakable hyperduliacs, and why? to be rescued and wear a stinking merkin for a beard? If she is only a woman (but a good cigar is a smoke) with Eve caught by the furbelow, Hae cunni (the oldest catch we know): Dido a dowdy, Cleopatra a gypsy, Helen and Hero hildings and harlots, praebeat ille nates (I seem to mean usefulness), but Thisbe's gray eye on Alfonso Liguori —There is no mysticism without Mary. Stabat Mater shrouded in the decent obscurity of a learned language, fœmina si furtum faciet mihi virque puerque: dolorosa while Origenal sin wields the blade. Carnelevarium (the heart came out very late) reveling in lavish polymastia (Zwei Brüste wohnen, ach! in meiner Seele) now, in Martinmas, Saint Martin's given or only Lent to SS Pelagia & Mary of Egypt, thence to Thaïs, Kundry, Salome, and even Saint Irene; Costanza (Ds ac Redemptor, S.J.), Valeria Messalina, Marozia in the garden, in the Garden, Messalina in the gardens of Lucullus hic jaceted age 26 years, Thrawn Janet's black man gone down the garden wall, and the men et ardet: Anaxagoras pre-empted in contemptu Christianae fidei; Lucretius (dead of an overdose of love philter) preempted, —Religio peperit scelerosa atque impia facta. I.e., exhomologesis (c. 218) by Calixtus I. Pelagic miles distant, on the Rock, resident Barbary apes pelt stones at the local Y.M.C.A. In Spain Ignatius' militant limp and Xavier 4'6" exhomolojesuis abhor the shedding of blood, and the Inquisitor De Arbues describes Love ex hac Petri cathedrâ without raising a Welt. Amor perfectissimus explaining what is dark by what is darker still: Who then was the gentleman? (I mean the excluded.) Not Philo, De Exsecrationibus! not Philo, certainly not Aristobulus busy-handed Alexandrine Jew to prove plagiarism: Pythagoras Socrates Plato Homer & Hesiod, all plagiarized from Moses, one and all. Pues díme Sigismundo, dí: El delito mayor del hombre es haber nacido. Calixtus, then, after all? Politicking, No, no, don't listen to them 1870! Nono the winner: infallible (what is that racket?). The College of Cardinals turns to look. —It's Arkansas, crying Non placet.

The snow had hardened into reefs along his path and he narrowly avoided falling a number of times, even though he looked nowhere now but there where he walked. Schizophobic, how near the edge can he approach? how much longer disdain simple ruses? —Give me force and matter, and I will refurbish the world! Blame Descartes, then! resisting with some fortitude the purchase of a bowler hat, and wearing a cigar, and even then preferring perhaps a dry Brazil-filled, Java-bound, Sumatra-wrapped panatella: but soggy all-Havana is more weighingful, and; temptation to stop along the way, weary, damned weary, damned weary of it passing the campfires so many tents pitched with such care to the pegs insisting permanence when (God blind me) by their nature they are tents and Lord love me by the nature of things they will blow away, by the nature of force and matter blown away and the God-damned Cartesian with them. Mauled by luxuries, asking now no more than some well-chronicled illness to stir the viscera into affirming its existence within, the member without. Caveat: —On which side do you dress, Job? Mauled by luxuries, Oh doctor Æsculapius found out the hard way lightningstruck. Reality defined by the (luxury) gratuitous crime. Peace by (luxury) war. Love by (luxury) mugging, rape, Senta retires with Sabine smile of satiety, Thankyou ma'am. —E ucciso da una donna! M'hai tu assai torturato?! Su! Parla! Odi tu ancora? Guardami! . . . Son la Tosca! Son la Diva! . . .

Arsk Saint Bernard about women, their face is a burning wind, he'll tell you, arsk him, their voice the hissing of serpents, he'll tell you.

(fa un ultimo sforzo:) Soccorso! . . .

In rehearsal: Chrysippus. Cleanthes. Zeno. Pyrrho. Again, the story of Hipparchia's courtship, spare no details (the dress of Telephus and Crates then the groom are especially amusing) but one: —Kissed on the cheek after years, was it? A,M,D,G, sequence of unsurprise (Lao-tse's 84-year gestation), right Nicodemus? right? under a burning bush (I lost my wife) Ad Mariam Dei Genetricem, dixIt, pinxIt.

Sang, —Varé tava soskei . . . soskei . . . Mermaid mahn stole my heart away.

(verso:) Ti soffoca il sangue? . . . il sangue? . . .

Configuring shapes and smells (damnation) sang —Yetzer hara, in the hematose conspiracy of night When they shout gfckyrslf Come equipped her morphidite.

Arse Alexander VI for a loan of his concave emerald, watching the rape of (Christian) girls through it. —Ah! è morto! . . . Or gli perdono! . . . E avanti a lui tremava tutta Roma!

Then he fell. He fell twice. The first time, a stone turned under his foot as he reached a slope of the east lawn of the parsonage. He went down on one knee, got up immediately and three steps later he slipped again. The ground was hard, and he caught himself on the back of a hand, and remained, down, for a good half-minute, looking at the back of his hand where he'd torn it, not badly but enough to bring blood. He sat until he'd got his breath; and the bull on the ground, its gold dull in the dull light, held his eyes, glistening

themselves no more than the dulled jewels of its collar. For the first time, the sharp edge of the air startled him deeply, cutting his lungs as he breathed it. The hand with the blood to mark it he reached to the bull and rested it there; and his other he rubbed over his dry face, then to his bare head. That hand stopped there and the fingers drew together against the skull as though to wring out the occupant brain. He had a bad headache. It seemed to have been going on for some time, throbbing with permanence. His hand reached the back of his neck and closed again there, squeezing the muscles and tendons in its hold. They were sore. He spat on the ground. Then he coughed. The air was still. Cold came to him evenly. Again he hastened to get up, for his body was drawing the cold right up out of the earth.

His expression, which all this time had been one of confusion, drew gradually together as he rose, bringing the gold bull up with him, and under his arm. As the diffused look of bewilderment left him, his features lay in a concentration of anxiety, staring up toward the house. The sun had just touched the peak there and begun to descend; and again, for the first time, the sounds which he distinguished seemed to have been going on for some time. As long, that is, as he might have been within earshot: a regular ka-klack, ka-klack, ka-klack was the least sound, coming apparently from the house itself, and an irregular series of hammer blows from beyond. It was the voice, however, which arrested him. It was neither sharp nor loud, but lingered, and was gone, and rose again on this cold air, leaving off and rising like the smoke of a boat gone under a bridge, and emerging.

—Jupiter. Ammon. Adonis. Chemosh. Hercules. Osiris. Dionysus. Phoebus, Bacchus, Moloch, Baal . . .

The light of the sun spread over the face of the house, and its margin verged steadily lower toward the figure exposed on the open porch. The words lingered and were gone, leaving an emptiness which the silence rushed from all directions to fill. Then when he went on speaking his voice was lower, a tone of admonition which the silence retired before, but no great distance, as it had before the names of the sun. Now the silence withdrew barely to the point where the figure approached up the slope of the lawn, advancing with him, but hesitant, before then behind him, breaking the stream of the words, —man or woman . . . wickedness . . . transgressing his covenant, And hath gone and served other gods, and worshiped them, either the sun, or the moon, or any of the host of heaven . . .

Then as he climbed nearer the silence no longer infringed, but followed and closed in behind on the cold air, —And lest thou shouldst lift up thine eyes unto heaven, and when thou seest the sun, and the moon, and the stars, even all the host of heaven, shouldst be driven to worship them, and serve them, which the Lord thy God . . .

Reverend Gwyon was a big man. And, as the increscent light of the sun reached him and covered him, and he broke off speaking and stood exalted in the light, the sunlight and the silence seemed to augment him, actually to make him larger, standing alone up on the porch. Abruptly he cried out to the figure approaching him, —Turn around. There, turn around!

The sun stood emerged, glowing its great belly, motionless with the effort of emersion accomplished, paused, over the earth's rim, in confident prospect of the journey of the day. Suddenly breaking his own pattern of stillness Reverend Gwyon clattered down the porch steps, and stopped where he could get a full view of the sky. —A bad time of it, he muttered scanning the sky from one end to the other and back, east to west, to east and the sun itself. —A bad time of it today.

—Bad time of . . . what?

—Why there, the dirty sky, Gwyon said flinging a hand up. —He has a dirty path before him today. As he spoke he lowered his eyes, and what might, on a smaller face, have passed as a look of surprise, settled upon his own as one of curious, even inquisitive abstraction, a look which summoned every battery of history to bear simultaneously upon the immediate problem at hand.

Reverend Gwyon was a tall man; but it was his stance made him appear indomitable, that and the sense of a full meter of silence surrounding him which only he could penetrate, or roll back with the invitatory ardor of his own curiosity. His face was heavily lined, but lines in nowise the fortuitous tracings of disgruntled weariness with which one after another generation proclaims abrogation of responsibility for the future, and liability for the past. Venerable age had not, for him, arranged that derelict landscape against which it is privileged to sit and pick its nose, break wind, and damn the course of youth groping among the obstacles erected, dutifully, by its own hands earlier, along the way of that sublime delusion known as the pursuit of happiness.

Not to be confused with that state of political bigotry, mental obstinacy, financial security, sensual atrophy, emotional penury, and spiritual collapse which, under the name "maturity," animated lives around him, it might be said that Reverend Gwyon had reached maturity.

It must also be noted that, though his position in the community was appointed to justify the accumulated clutter of the things of this world in the eyes of the next, neither was there present in his face that benign betrayal of total incomprehension of the designs of eternity, and the concomitant suspension of

the intellect, which so carefully separates this world from the next on Sunday mornings all over the country and, in asylums all over the world, every day of the week.

Gwyon's face was creased with lines of necessity. They sprang away from the eyes he lowered down from the clotted sky and right past the face before him, a face lined itself whose every lineament watched him anxiously. —Ahh, Gwyon said, —you've come . . . and his gaze settled on the gold bull. Then as Gwyon reached forth a resolute hand and rested it on the head of the bull figure, an unsteady and blood-streaked hand came up and took his arm and they stood like that, each looking at the hand of the other, when the sun was suddenly blotted out and they were left standing shadowless on the lawn.

The sky was becoming littered with fragments of cloud. They were being fed across it from a great bank in the north. The cloud bank was gray and motionless, and it did not diminish.

Gwyon shivered suddenly under his hand, and looked up at the impaired sunrise with an expression of severe indignation. Then the bull figure was lifted decisively from under his arm, and with it Gwyon turned before him and made with long strides for the house.

By the time they reached the porch the sun was unencumbered. It had already commenced to diminish in ascent, and to lose the fierce coloring of its violent entering into the sky.

At the top step Reverend Gwyon halted in front of him so abruptly that he almost lost his balance. —There, Gwyon said, making a sweeping motion with his free hand which included the porch and the sun behind them, —any fool can see what the churches lost when they put the entrances around facing the setting sun. His tone rang with the same direct and peremptory appeal that his face had reflected a moment earlier; but as he went on, rearing his great head to the presence he'd apparently expected to find beside him, surprised to find it moving unsteadily round behind, Gwyon's voice lowered as though talking to himself, and as though in the habit of so doing. —The Christian temple at Tyre, he muttered. —The propylaeum faced the rising sun, of course. Attracted passers-by with its glitter that way. Then he glanced quickly as though to secure that he was being followed in.

The hammering began again from the other side of the house, down in the direction of the carriage barn, clear sharp blows from a great distance it seemed; otherwise all was very quiet but for the heavy footfalls of Reverend Gwyon crossing the porch ahead of him. The muffled ka-klack ka-klack had ceased some time earlier. Watching Gwyon stoop before him to open the front door, he was inclined to do so himself, once inside the house, where it was darker and he had only the gold tail of the bull figure to guide him. Surely there was no danger of bumping a doorframe with his head nevertheless childhood still obtained and every portal was lower, and hallway more narrow, every turning closer and room smaller. Thus he hunched, past Olalla as though with cold and past the cruz-con-espejos into the dining room. The house was cold at that.

For some reason he went straight round to Aunt May's place at the dining-room table and sat down there. Gwyon poured two glasses of sherry wine. It was rich dark oloroso, a fresh bottle though the cork had been pulled. He put the bottle down between them and remained standing, one hand on the bull figure which he had not relinquished.

—What a trip, getting here.

—Yes, yes, Gwyon affirmed immediately, agitated. He emptied his own glass quickly and then, a moment later, looked down at it in his hand as though it were an unfamiliar object and he didn't know how it had got there. He put it on the table carefully. —You've come a great way . . . a great distance, he said looking up again at the figure seated there much, perhaps, as he might have looked upon the incarnation of some abstraction conceived long before, disturbed less by the actual epiphany and its haggard unsteady appearance than by its abiding and familiar permanence, in spite of the transient air it had assumed immediately he gained the weight of the gold bull figure into his own hand. Gwyon stood, with one hand still, heavy on the bull figure, the other busily contriving upon nothing at his side, configuring recourses in the air.

For this moment he seemed bound there, standing at his place at the head of the table. The sun by now was coming through the dining-room window which faced to east where the porch left off on that side of the house. —Here, this . . . Gwyon said to him, sitting there with his left side to the exposure where the sun entered, —for safekeeping, this had better be put away for safekeeping. Gwyon flourished the gold figure in a strain of sunlight and left him sitting there in the sun, his back to the buffet, looking at the empty place across the table. He looked up when Gwyon turned out of the room, but too late to see more than the departing back, that most prominently distinguishing feature of Reverend Gwyon.

He sat still for a moment, then raised a hand to his forehead and found it smooth. Inside, the headache persisted, its insistence ignominious, calling attention to tenancy and no more, devising, perhaps, a quantum theory of memory upon the departure of the old man gone, step by step, ushering the gold bellowless bull, Oorooma way? Gone Krakatao and the yellow day in Boston, the Grand Climacteric and Valerian, Ballima, way? while he sat here in the full of the morning sun warming Aunt May's side of the

face at the breakfast table, looking as she did never across at an empty place. (To right was the dark corner where all Good works were conceived.) —Cave, cave, he got to his feet, —dominus vulgus vult. His eyes were cooled; the sun itself did not warm them, lowering them from the glory there through the window to the low table beneath, and the faded figure in the table's center shivered for an instant, underclothed, and remained still as he passed, shoulders drawn, listening, under surveillance, abruptly considering Tyndale strangled and burned for his labor of love. —The devil finds work for idle hands, here, without music, where reverberations of the human voice weary in recall with generations of fruitless exhaustion, denied the very possibility of music. A sharp unfriendly sound from the kitchen confirmed the silence and the vigilant conspiracy of inanimate things, watching for any break in the pattern. A movement broke it, his hand reaching forth to put his glass at his place at the table; and he stood in suspense sustaining the trust thrust upon his frame by the static details of dark woodwork, maintaining the inert vigil which belied music: music as ideal motion, a conceit in itself manifestly sinful, as the Serpent, gliding in the Garden, moved with unqualified motion, as the sound of a lute, struck here now, would move upon undulant planes never before explored, to be cornered and quickly killed by the ruthless angles of the room, proving that those planes had never existed, affirming, in sharp consentaneous silence, the illusion of motion, the sin of possibility, the devil-inspired absurdity of indetermination.

Above, another blue day, (upstairs) the room papered with green-capped pink-faced dogs, and the button drawer, only apparitions move to perfection, there! Pray the Lord to keep you from lying, there, O spectral stabat mater may I go out and play the violin outside to the town wearing its sinside inside and not a soul in sight. Church bells inspissated the air, dropping it in sharp fragments. He sat down in his place at table, excused by the falling weights of the bells, and motionless when they had done. There, old vicary, congratulate my refuge, the saneside outside sheltering the insane inside: to present the static sane side outside to another outside saneside, to be esteemed for that outsane side while all the while the insaneside attacks your outsane side as though we weren't both playing the same game, and gone down Summer Street (singing unchristian songs) the inane sinside, pocketing a cool million wearing the shoutside outside and the doubtside inside, the vileside inside and the violinside outside skipping dancing and foretelling things too come all ye faithful, of thine own give we back to thee.

He swallowed some of the oloroso sherry, and its warm course sent an imbrication of chills over his back. Still, there under the window, the low table looked to be faded, a parody of perfection more Bosch than Hieronymus, the seven deadly sins in meddy-evil indulgence, painted with damning care round the maimed hand upraised in the caveat, as below the brown wainscoting, and the fabricated angles above where the molding met in soiled beaded intimacy, the uneven patches faded on the walls between, and even an unfamiliar floor lamp standing beside him with the cold intentness of an unknown sentinel, watching, patient at all events with his prolix presence now the years of waiting were done, rewarded to find him twice-size, twice as difficult of concealment. No part of the room he could not see now, points and attentive angles he had never seen from his chair, saw him now.

He raised his glass. The streak of blood on the back of his hand was dried to a hard ridge of dirt's appearance, hypostasis on the outside and the skin drawn to it in mortal amends, a clot of the essential sediment crusted on the surface, hypostatic scab of the world of shapes and smells provided force and matter to touch a line without changing it, here, untormented by music, where as everywhere matter whetted its appetite for form and was easily pleased, circumspice, low levels of perfection issuing the remorseful timbre of the monogenetic voice, The prosperity of the godly shall be an eyesore to the wicked, Psalm 112, —Wealth and riches shall be in his house: and his righteousness endureth forever, moaning, lowering over the printed page (head bowed), Psalm 112, —*GLORIA!* sings Handel's soprano, —*Gloria!* across an ocean and centuries, *gloria!* far away.

A sharp bell from the kitchen shivered the air for an instant. Then as his fingers loosened on the emptied glass and he rested his elbow on the table and with it his arm and his shoulder and that whole side of him, one after another disposal of muscles went out of use, and contrary to usual sense of awareness in flex and strain (so the man chopping wood the first time in his life, a hand clutching tight right up under the ax-head, measuring the length of the haft between closed hands, right down it goes, neither hand moves on the haft so smoothed from sliding hands, the blade strikes a knot, the end of the haft his knee, and he looks up, pleased though, to say, —Say, using muscles . . . (by that night he'll have pulled a tendon in some unconcerned part of his body he'll tell you and not unproudly) . . . using muscles I never knew I had . . . and not in the stroke but recovery he finds them), so now right down from the neck muscles and tendons recovering from usage so long fell in unusual awareness one after another and one after another satisfied now he was asleep.

Reverend Gwyon returned to the breakfast table empty-handed. He startled slightly upon seeing the empty chair to his left, and looked no more composed upon seeing the one to his right occupied. So

Reverend Gwyon sat alone there at the head of the table as he did every morning, with a second, a third, and a fourth glass of the dark oloroso from Spain and the look on his face of a man who's just come on a bone in a mouthful of fishmeat.

•

—"Ah, that dear old mother's Bible, Wherein my name she wrote, And marked me many sacred texts, Which once I well could quote . . ."

These words, rising on the clear New England morning air, were neither loud nor clear, for the Town Carpenter was absorbed in his work, and the five ten-penny nails he had clamped between his gums did not serve song as teeth, even so few, might have done. He continued to hammer, and word by word the next stanza became clearer, as nail by nail was taken to be driven into the wood. By the time he reached the last stanza, and stood back to look at his work, his mouth was quite empty of anything but song, which came out quite clear, and the small dog lying there raised its head to attend,

> *—So who'll bid for a Bible?*
> *A purchaser I crave.*
> *Live while we may, we'll drink today:*
> *There's no drinking in the grave.*

With that, he threw his hammer in the dog's direction. The dog moved as fast as the hammer, gained its feet, and followed him up the lawn wagging its tail.

Janet was there in the kitchen, older, square-shouldered, her face dark about the chin and faintly blue the rest of it from that mercuric compound of Aunt May's prescription renewed year after year. She strode to the stove, where two pots stood over the fire. The one she stirred, with a large spoon worn off square with stirring, was Scotch oatmeal. The other pot bubbled on, and Janet paid it no attention but to sniff the rising steam and turn away the large features of her face, drawing down her upper lip so that that gum was almost covered, and appearing not to breathe, careful and troubled about many things.

When the Town Carpenter arrived she was to her knees on the floor there and he, hearing the sharp tinkle of a bell as he got near, had slowed his uneven pace, and paused in the door respectfully. He waited for her to rise before he advanced into the kitchen with, —"Nymph in thy orisons, be all my sins remembered," crossing then to the other pot on the stove, —as Tom Swift has it, he added.

—Not that fork, not that fork! Janet said, coming to take away the fork he'd picked up.

—There . . . now, he said to her, looking helpless until she thrust a piece of lath in his hand where she'd got the fork from.

—But this, it's got paint on it, he said waving the stick in the air.

—Old old paint, years and years old and hard and dry and it was white, she said sounding weary, speaking dry and low in no effort to make herself heard but giving him anyway the satisfaction of seeing her lips move. Then she turned away, stooped, cumbered with much serving.

He bent absorbed over the other pot; from it he raised a steaming length on the end of the stick. —There now, he muttered, let it drop back and stirred it a bit. —A month of underwear can't come clean in a minute.

—Four days it's been there, Janet said absently, —four days in the year, lamenting the daughter of Jephthah four days in the year . . .

He continued to stir at his pot. —You were late this morning, he interrupted finally, as she drew breath to go on and fight the battles of Ammon and Gilead, to follow the daughter of Jephthah bewailing her virginity in the mountains. She did not answer but with three sharp raps of the spoon on the rim of the saucepan.

—Three minutes late when I heard your press commence this morning, the Town Carpenter went on, to the square of her back. —How many pages did you print, tell me.

—You don't print them one two three four five, she answered not turning, —six seven eight nine ten eleven . . .

—How many? He tried to see her lips as she reached a bowl down.

—Eight one five four at a time, Janet said in the same dull tone, —two seven three six at a time . . .

—There now, he mumbled, shaking his head and looking back into his own pot on the stove. —We all have our work to do.

—The Lord keep us, until we finish it, Janet said.

The shape of those first two syllables on her lips seemed to strike him, familiar; and the Town Carpenter drew his own lips close, bridling the argument which lay impatient behind them, not, however, before its

invitation had escaped. —A man . . .

—The Lord . . .

—A man takes his own chances, he got out quickly. Janet looked at him, her brow and lip drawn up, troubled.

—There now, I meant nothing. No disrespect to you, he said, twice her age but no more serious for all that even now, turning slow with his arms hung down and the top button of his underwear standing out like a creased stud against his informal attire. —After it all, he brought out soberly, —after your healing miracle then, restoring me the use of my legs, well, there now, I couldn't be disrespectful to you after that.

—Not to me, but to our Lord He healed you.

—There now, he mumbled in assent, —not after that.

—You must not talk so about these things, she said. —You must not, he must not, they must not . . .

—Do you recall the queer little salesman selling brushes, the Town Carpenter began, opening a new conversation since he'd lost track of the old one, —and told Reverend he was a Manichee . . .

Janet carried a bowl of oatmeal away through the door. Directly she was out he got the fork she'd taken from him and came back to his pot on the stove. He leaned down to blow off the steam, and then speared twice, each time coming up with a boiled potato. He quick wiped the fork on his trouser knee, then looked at it, and at the spot on his trouser knee, with a look near guilt, and thrust the tines of the fork under his shirt to wipe them clean there. When Janet came back, the fork was where she'd laid it; but she took no notice of him eating the one or the dog standing over the other boiled potato waiting for it to cool. She stood, wringing one hand in the other, and her eyes were very wide.

—There now, what is it? the Town Carpenter demanded, watching.

—He's come.

—What is it, now?

—He's here. As he said he would come.

The Town Carpenter hung there, imbibing Janet's excitement. She sought another bowl.

—Another bowl? he demanded, confused. —Someone's here?

—He's come back.

—So it's not the weightless show of a priest was here, him or the Manichee brush salesman. Is it . . . is it . . .

—He . . .

—Prester John?

—Prester John! Janet repeated. —If Prester John is young and old, and warm and cold, and breathes and does not breathe alive, wears blood on the hand, and sees with eyes not open. Maran-atha!

—He's come! There now, the Town Carpenter said. —Feed him. Feed him well, it's a long journey. Here, a potato, take a potato . . . But she was gone, with another bowl of oatmeal. —There now, no disrespect after that, the Town Carpenter muttered going toward the outside door. —He'll come down. I'll wait for him there, he said to himself; but he paused in the door till Janet returned to the kitchen. —There, he murmured to her, —no disrespect, you know. "I am but a lump of clay, but I was placed beside a rose and caught its fragrance . . ." He stood a minute looking at Janet busy over the metal sink, squinting his eyes up with looking at her. Then the dog followed him out the door and down the lawn toward the carriage barn, carrying its hot potato.

He'd only got halfway down there when her voice on the air stopped him, and he turned. —And he, has he eaten? she cried.

—That one, he won't come near, the Town Carpenter called back to her, and he motioned toward the fence below which led away from the carriage barn and coursed the pasture's bounds. Title to that piece of land, long disputed with a neighbor, fell to his bull who spent the days there and had gradually become a familiar, encouraged by the girl and the old man with a feed box and even, finally, a stall in the carriage barn. Now Janet came out unwrapped in the cold morning and down the slope with long strides to the fence, where she made a moaning sound that brought the bull from out of sight immediately. The bull was all black, the weight well up in its forequarters sustaining those swells of muscle mounting in the great swell of the neck. Its approach was effortless, not a movement wasted, because every bit of it was in movement, movement which absorbed the weight of it and became motion coming forth here on legs as slender they looked as a man's wrists swinging beneath. It came on at an angle to its path, which gave it a sense of drift as though suffering the wind to carry it along from behind; and the great weight of it was not apparent until it came close by, when even its breath dashed on the cold air fell with weight, and a hoof no longer adrift, but exerted to break the crust of the winter ground, made its force volitive, standing still.

Janet had watched its advance with a look of familiar wonder which almost broke her face into a smile. Now it was before her she stirred the feed in the box there with a square hand of hers and gazed with two

eyes into one; and which of them made the gentle sound that rose between them wasn't clear as she caught a finger in a curl above the eye, and then left the bull at the feed box, sobering her face as she turned back for the house, and the bull raised its head, and watched her go.

The Town Carpenter raised a two-by-four, and nailed it carefully slightly out of line. —O pirate ships of the drunken main! O monster cruisers of wicked gain! . . . there now. He's finally got here.

Once in, Janet made across the kitchen for the dining room, there picked up the empty oatmeal bowl from the empty place at the head of the table, and stood staring at the figure across. —He's come, she murmured, and advanced an empty hand in the air. Then her gaze shortened to her hand there, which she squared round to meet it, to look at the palm, and return to the kitchen. She put the empty bowl in the sink. Then she slipped on a pair of gloves, took a slip of emery cloth from her skirt pocket and knelt rubbing her chin, her cheek, and her upper lip.

The sun was high enough now to fill the dining room with its light, over the dark dining table, and the low table under the window, and warm on the back of his neck when he woke moving nothing but his eyelids, opened upon the bowl of cold oatmeal before him, and nothing there else but a spoon. He did stare at the bowl and the spoon for a moment, or a minute, in that waking suspension of time when co-ordination is impossible, when every fragment of reality intrudes on its own terms, separately, clattering in and the mind tries to grasp each one as it passes, sensing that these things could be understood one by one and unrelated, if the stream could be stopped before it grows into a torrent, and the mind is engulfed in the totality of consciousness. Al-Shira-al-jamânija, consider the Dog Star: death? or Islam. Then perfect diamonds, and so across that brink of unbearable loneliness, and fully awake, startled only with the quiet, and the sunlight bearing flecks of silent motion. If there had been a dream, it was gone back where it came from, to refurbish its props, to be recast probably, possibly rewritten, given a new twist to put it across, make it memorable to the audience and acceptable to the censor, all that, but the same old director, same producer, waiting to dissemble the same obscenities before the same captive audience, waiting, again, the first curtain of sleep. He smiled, looking at the oatmeal, and as he did so reached up a hand as though to feel the smile on his face, and fix it there; it was gone when he looked up to the end of the table and saw it empty, and as immediately occupied it from memory but memory which, so suddenly assailed, leaped too far back, and brought forth the Emperor Valerian blinded, in taut agony, flayed under the hand of Sapor, the Persian emperor who battled Christianity in the name of the sun prophet Zoroaster, whose god, Ormazd, lord of light and goodness, wars ceaselessly against Ahriman, and the hosts of evil.

This house had a sense of bereavement about it; though no one had come or gone in a long time. The corridors rang with oppressive familiarity and, perhaps it was the distance that each step covered, the sense of diffusion persisted, diffusion from essential childhood, moving too fast too slowly, rested physically, arriving too soon without expenditure or the pulsations of effort, filling too much space and thus less instead of more powerful, less capable of hiding.

He was inclined to pause, passing the maimed hand upraised of the noseless Olalla, with his hand upon things, affirming their mass; and each weighed enough in return, resisting his touch, to affirm its reality, to belie, that is, the realities which had taken its place.

Suffer barbaric childhood to give and receive remorselessly; civilized age learns to protect what it has, to neither give nor accept freely, to trust its own mistrust above faith, and intriguing others above the innocent. Intrigue, after all, is rational, something the mind can sink its teeth into, and defeat it with the good digestion of reason, a hopeless prospect for the toothless heart, and God only knows what innocence will do next. So prudence rescues the emotions, and exiles them out of reach, countenancing only anxious glances from what another hero came forth from the desert to call "the hesitating retinue of finer shades."

In the unilluminated hallway where Olalla stood in her niche, he paused the ball of a thumb on the saint's broken nose, and smiled, the same involuntary smile of recognition that had lightened his face, and left it and come back, remaining each time a little longer and more fully extended, trying the unfamiliar terrain, since his arrival.

Childhood, the plain-dealer: nothing approached it but upon intimate terms. It's the shades of experience that afford shadows of fear, but the black-and-white of childhood discovers the intimacy of terror. Here, benign Olalla suffers the plunder of her face with wistful gravity in her stone eyes, empty now of the vengeful malice with which they had threatened blind justice upon unwary passers-by; and the hand, once poised to smash a passing skull, now lay flat up in benediction. What greater comfort does time afford, than the objects of terror re-encountered, and their fraudulence exposed in the flash of reason? Triumph! as though it were any cleaner, or happier, or more bare of disappointment, than the deadening shock of re-encounter with the object of love.

Songs of innocence and experience fill the head so empty of aching that the ache is forgotten, a brawl, but an orderly one, a sequence of decorous violence as neatly carried forth as the fight between the Pleasant

and the Unpleasant Thoughts in Handel's *Almira*.

There were no clocks anywhere in sight or hearing.

—And hmmm . . . he did, did he? And he took away the horses that the kings of Judah had given to the sun, at the entering in of the house of the Lord, by the Chamber of Nathan-melech . . . hmm, Melech? Melich? the chamberlain, which was in the suburbs, and burned the chariots of the sun with fire . . .

This came, borne from behind the study door on the pungent vehicle of caraway, into the hall where he stood about to knock.

—And he put down the idolatrous priests, and hmmm whom the kings of Judah had ordained to burn incense in the high places in the cities of Judah, and in the places round about Jerusalem; them also that burned incense hmmm hmmmph unto Baal, to the sun, and to the moon, and to the planets, and to all the host of heaven . . .

Though the words stopped, the caraway came on, unladen but maintaining a belligerent calm out into the hall where he lowered his hand without knocking. Then as he turned from the door he said to himself aloud,

—How safe I am from accident here.

—In the precious blood of . . .

—Janet!

—Yes, she answered in a loud clear whisper, —I knew you would return. She stood before him with her gloved hands clasped, and her eyes shining with what light there was in the hall. He started past her, saying —My father . . .

—Still awaits you, she assented, eager. —Our Father . . .

—Janet, he said getting by her, and smiling to her, to calm the great agitation which threatened, as she came after him close as could be without touching him, to break out in some more vehement expression of welcome, —yes, I have come back.

—Rabboni, they doubted, she said. —I did not.

—Yes, seeing you here, and . . . he faltered, —I . . . my father . . . backing from her, —back . . .

—From the tomb! she whispered clear.

—Yes, it . . . in a way, he mumbled, reaching the door, —recovering from . . . good God, I . . . He fumbled with the handle behind him; and she held off, reflecting the vigilant angles of woodwork beyond her.

—The . . . reassuring feeling . . . he went on, figuring his hand in the air between them, —being home again . . . though the scraping of the door obscured his words to her, —here, to feel myself again, here . . .

—They will not know you.

—The reason I came back . . .

—Shall I tell them, it is you, come back?

The chill of outdoors embraced him from behind. —I . . . I . . . He commenced to shiver against it.

—Or will you tell them, in your own time? she asked with a step toward him.

—Yes, yes, he said, getting the door closed between them, and shutting her intensively submissive, conspiratory affirmation into the dim hall with her.

The scraps of cloud which the dawn had found out, drifting with no apparent purpose, met here and there now the sky was light. A delegation of them moved round to east, toward the sun; and others, darkly separate in the west, conspired together over Mount Lamentation, where he raised his eyes. It was the most prominent of an ascendance of rolling hills, drawn up against the only clear horizon; and that simply, it had been the horizon beyond which lay destiny. Again, the cold air stabbed with each breath. No matter the direction on a map, it was beyond Mount Lamentation Lapland lay, waiting for the Gospel. From one step to the next he dropped his weight, jarring, as his feet hit, restraining him down the hard slope toward the carriage barn; and remarkable here, as indoors, the distance a few steps covered, each one a familiar measurement of compulsion, but without the sense of motion, of the dash which this precipitous decline had once insisted down.

The Town Carpenter stood on his platform, with a slightly vacant but still expectant expression on his face. Much, perhaps, like good King Wenceslaus of Bohemia looking out on his still capital, prostrated before him by papal interdict, the Town Carpenter looked upon the town laid out here under the still cold, provoked by its sedulous silence; and here, as there, to the approach of the pale thin man in mean attire.

But however the shade of John Huss may have leaped here from beyond Lamentation to find itself animate, teeth a-clatter, shoulders hunched forward, and even the hands thrust down seeking warmth in empty pockets colder against hard shivering limbs of the moving frame within the cloth: too hard, perhaps, and worse, too familiar, a prospect too mean for even that most mettlesome martyr, on such a cold day, ahead one expression effaced another (the Town Carpenter leaned back to spit off the platform), and

Wenceslaus IV, “the vacillating,” abdicated and was gone, and the shade of the martyr gone with him.

—Here, don’t bark at him, by God don’t you bark at him! the Town Carpenter shouted, as the dog leaped forward over a heap of bull dung, barking. —Don’t pick her up, he went on, coming down from the platform. —She’ll pee all over you. There now, he finished, and standing over his visitor he looked at him with frank and eager curiosity. —There now, he repeated, —that you look tired, it’s not surprising to me. Here from Ethiopia and the three Indies.

—Ethiopia! Good God yes, I feel like I’d come that far.

The Town Carpenter’s eyes glistened, as he listened and pretended to hear. —Sooner or later, of course, I knew you’d arrive, he said. —And are you alone? He bent close, intent for the nod he received. —I knew you would be, of course, he went on at that. —To voyage today with ten thousand knights, and one hundred thousand footmen, it might clutter things up.

Nevertheless, the Town Carpenter looked slightly disappointed.

—Being back, I . . . well, thank God I’m back.

The Town Carpenter watched him draw a hand across his chin, and smile. —Back, the Town Carpenter repeated, standing off to look above them at the sky, —when we get back, of course, we can take up such proper customs again. But here . . . he swept a hand out before him, —here, of course, they’ve no idea of a hero. I live surrounded by people who’ve no idea what a hero is. And do you know why? Why, because they’ve no idea of what they’re doing themselves. None! Not an idea in this world or the next of what they’re doing on God’s green earth. Oh, it’s a strange land you’ve come visiting to see me here. With no idea of a hero, you see, but they need them so badly that they make up special games, hitting a ball with a stick and all kinds of nonsense, and the men who win the games are their heroes. And then, he went on, warming to what was apparently a severe preoccupation of his, —when that gets stale, they arrange whole wars which have no more reason for existing than the people who fight in them, and a boy may become a hero fighting for a life that’s worth something for the first time, threatened with loss of it, that or dying to save the lives of people who’ve no idea what to do with them. Fortunately, he went on, and inclined his head nearer, —there’s a way out for most of them. They make money, the Town Carpenter whispered hoarsely. —And a good thing such a recourse lies open, it gives them something to do, keeps them out of our way. He straightened up, looking at his balloon ascension stand, his arms still folded, and dingy underwear elbows protruding from his sleeves. He drew his lips tight together over the gums, and nodded. —Fortunately men like you and myself appear every century or so, to keep the way open. But, he called as he walked to the corner of the barn and stood there undoing the front of his clothes, —we must watch out for them, you know, trying to intrude. Here, he said, waving his free hand at the balloon stand, —they try to intrude. Traveling in their trains and their airplanes they try to intrude on the greatest career of the hero. Why, travel’s become the great occupation of people with nothing to do, you find second-hand kings and all sorts of useless people at it. There now, it’s always the heroic places you find them intruding, trying to have a share in the work of great men, looking at fine paintings and talking as though they knew more of the thing than the man who painted it, and the same thing listening to fine music, because they suspect the truth but they won’t pay the price, they all suspect that a man needs something to do, he finished, standing over the light cloud of steam he left rising from the gray boards of the barn.

—Something to do? Most of the trouble in the world is made by people finding something to do.

—There now, the Town Carpenter said, buttoning himself up as he straightened round, and nodding as though he had heard. —Of course they misuse things, every fine thing we have and make and discover, and the finest things get the most abuse. The generals and the missionaries and . . . but we cannot waste time on them, he said raising his eyes from the balloon stand to the sky, —there’s but one thing you can do with a balloon.

—Going up? There’s only one thing to do when you get up there.

—Danger? They don’t know the meaning of it, sitting up there in their airplanes, and surprised when they drop out of the sky. Why, they haven’t time to be frightened, they’re so surprised, brought up so carefully, insured against accident. Why, their heads are smashed like melons before they know what’s happened to them, sitting up there in their business suits at sixty miles an hour wondering if their fountain pens will leak, and then there they are spread all over twenty acres of somebody else’s land. No, not the danger. The loneliness. It’s the loneliness, the price they won’t pay. The Town Carpenter remained abstracted for a minute or so; and the wind which had just come up sounded around the corner of the barn. He gazed up at the sun, which had become involved with a cloud much the shape of a camel, an odd-legged one to be sure, but as the Town Carpenter was quick to point out, —Bactrian. They watched it. The sun entered almost between the two humps and then, from the speed of things up there, looked to be attempting an escape, its body visible along the fleeting edge, as though every instant it would break away. —See him go, see him go, the Town Carpenter said, standing there lopsided. Then he turned and said in a tone of confidence, and

commiseration, —The great misfortune of the sun, it has no history. That's why it never gets lonely up there.

Then with a surprising agility he had gone round behind the balloon stand, and from there he called, —This? did you see it? I keep it inconspicuous, they're all very interested in it, the American Legion . . . He swung about a length of two-inch pipe mounted on a swivel. —I've seen them sneaking around to look through it, but when they find no lenses in it, they think I've dismantled it. Of course there's no lenses in it in the first place, they'd only confuse things.

—Then, what is it?

—Yes, since they don't know what they're looking for, of course they don't see anything, wandering around in the daylight. There's so much daylight you can't see anything up there, unless you cut a path through it. Why, in good weather, one afternoon I saw Aldebaran, the red Eye of the Bull, keeping watch on the Pleiades, you know. That means it's a very old star, being red like that. Yes, the red Eye of Taurus, he muttered coming back, —keeping a watch on them. They bear some watching, the Pleiades . . . Do you know? One night I was assailed in the darkness. A man struck me, square across the eyes, and do you know, from that blow? the force of it brought light to my eyes? and I identified him afterward, I saw him plain as could be. His American Legion cap showed as plain as could be. Then he looked round evasively. —Tell me, he said, close by again, —did you bring your great Mirror?

—Mirror . . . ?

—There now, it's not easy to transport, I imagine. The great mirror in which you can see all that goes on in your kingdoms. But . . . we need it here, he said bending closer, and with another quick look round, —the American Legion. They watch me all the time, you know. Very interested, very interested in this of course. He included the balloon stand in a gesture. —Though it's no secret. Why, more than one night they've come and picketed the house here. With your great mirror, we could keep an eye on them, the Town Carpenter finished, and watched intently the pockets searched before him until the gold cigarette case was brought out, empty. —For the messages! he exclaimed, taking it. —And with the secret inscription. There now, later you will explain it to me, he said, running his thumb over the words; then in a sudden feat of conjuring the gold case was gone inside the frontal folds of his clothing, and he stood with a large watch snapped open in his hand. —Of course I'd have known you anywhere, he said raising his brilliant eyes from the watch face. —There now, eleven-thirty. Later on we shall simplify things. Why, all the others are drowning in details. That's what happens to them, you know. That's where we'll outwit them. We must simplify . . .

His words were caught on the wind. The dog followed him. Before he was out of sight, there was the sound of thunder, rolling like a body to rest in the south. The Town Carpenter shook his fist at it, but did not diminish his step.

The wind had come up quite sudden. It commenced to blow with that terrible quality peculiar to the winter wind, pointless, and the more bitter. March winds make a boisterous kind of sense, blowing seeds and seed-pods, blowing off the white pustular symptoms of winter, awakening, preparing for growth; and a vengeful sense in the fall, so long as a leaf remains where it grew, but the winter wind blows nothing, and blows that nowhere, blows with destructive violence where there is nothing left to destroy, vindictive and viciously fingered to leave no crevice untouched. Looking up, even the balloon stand is testament to something, erect with the stupid patience of objects so violated, testimony found futile as the wind itself in the envy as quickly rejected as it is longed after. The clouds conspired over Mount Lamentation had lost their distinct edges, and mounted in a dark mass as though what lay beyond there were already suffering what the wind, if simply to justify itself, threatened to bring closer. It blew round the corners of the carriage barn, over the snow clotted against the mound of what had been the kitchen midden for as long as he could remember, over the snow crusted on the ground behind the barn, showing its surface here and there as though that ground had never been disturbed, as though the surface were all of it that existed.

He drew his shoulders closer together still, and almost lost his balance as he turned away from this desolation where something moved with the sudden effortless ease of an apparition, unconcerned with inertia, unrestricted by the ingenious arrangement of muscle and tendon, weight and intention whose failure to coincide threatened to upset him now. He made the gesture he might have made if he had had a stick in his hand, and expected it to support him; and then twisted like a man menaced on one hand by the very thing he has turned to escape on the other. Whether the empty carriage barn had put forth the shade of Heracles, caroling a missionary jaunt beyond the mountains, or John Huss had approached from that distant direction to urge those already baptized against false miracles, ecclesiastical greed, and seeking tangible evidence of Christ's presence instead of in His enduring word; and whether the two met on the horizon to merge, to vie, or simply compare wares, there was no time to consider, for he looked up to see the bull, its great head thrown up against the wind and the storm it threatened, the great rounds of the eyes

wide open, fixed on webs of red veins. Where it had come from, or to what purpose, its casual properties and the questions which might have been asked on a day in June, none of that was provoked by the bull's appearance. Its back end wheeled as it came to the fence and stopped there, in a halt of defiance which challenged the wind and left it to be consumed in its own violence.

—That day is a day of wrath, a day of trouble and distress, a day of wasteness and desolation, a day of darkness and gloominess, a day of clouds and thick darkness . . . Janet read, alone in her room, the prophet Zephaniah, as any passing her closed door might have heard. None did. —And I will bring distress upon men, that they shall walk like blind men, because they have sinned against the Lord: and their blood shall be poured out as dust, and their flesh as the dung . . . The paranoid wind shivered the pane at her back. —Gather yourselves together, yea, gather together, O nation not desired . . . The unwavering quality of her voice sustained the relish of the prophet whose benisons she followed here, near breathless with being a step ahead of him, far and away from the New Testament wail down these same halls which had catechized and left her to work out her own excursions among the alarms of the Old. —The Lord will be terrible unto them: for he will famish all the gods of the earth; and men shall worship him, every one from his place, even all the isles of the heathen.

Zephaniah gets his business done quickly. Three chapters suffice; and he makes way for Haggai, whose nose is just as out of joint. In spite of her absorption, Janet read with the assurance of the Old Testament reader who knows that the New will follow, is, in fact, in hand with its more temperate prospects; just as she could read the New Testament without trepidation, knowing that any insinuations of wavering charity on the part of its engineers were bolstered by a Figure Who brooked no nonsense, lurking, "ravin in tooth and claw," at the ready, among the unalterable jots and tittles of His seventy-two-letter masquerade in the Old. Haggai anticipates Him shaking the earth, the heavens, the sea, the dry land, the nations, phenomenal antics still dignified as acts of God set forth with such strenuous diligence that the tenth minor prophet is drained in two chapters; but Janet had for the moment enough of a good thing with —when I turn back your captivity before your eyes, saith the Lord. Her blue lips finished, they repeated while she stood and gazed through that glass, a window tucked high on the house looking down to the carriage barn.

The wind had reached a height of delusion. Now, right before her eyes, it was given something to do: particles of snow appeared, conjured by the wind's own madness. Janet drew closer to the window. Standing with both palms flattened against the glass, her upper lip rose slowly as she stared below, to see the figure between the carriage barn and the bull's enclosure reel as though attacked on both sides, gain his balance and pause, steadying himself, and set out with what at first appeared extreme difficulty walking, until he broke into a run, up toward the house and out of her sight. —He is come, her blue lips made out; but the upper one was drawn down to the line of her bite, giving her a slightly perplexed look, as she turned to emerge, leaving two irregular near-translucent blots on the glass behind her.

Down on the porch, Reverend Gwyon stood staring at the sky, reflecting in his attitude and expression the bull's disdain for what was going on up there. In Gwyon's case, however, the simple grandeur of the bull's impersonal contempt for the storm was impaired by lines of fierce indignation, as though to indicate that this celestial turmoil had been got up as a personal affront to him, or one for whose honor he was jealous. Gwyon did not lower his eyes to the figure approaching up the lawn until the porch steps clattered immediately beneath him; at that, he broke off his engagement, muttering, and turned hastily to open the front door.

—There! . . . I mean, here! sounded behind him, teeth a-clatter.

—Whoo . . . what is it? Gwyon got out, looking wide-eyed over his shoulder, with the door open.

—Terror coming both ways . . . like being a child again. Yes, there, get the door closed . . .

Reverend Gwyon got the front door closed with a bang, rattling the bell in it. Then he started to turn down the hall, but his way was blocked. Though neither of them moved, a regular creaking had been set up in the hallway and sounded all around them.

—Why, it's . . . this whole house is saturated with priesthood, with . . .

—Priesthood? Gwyon repeated, looking for an opening.

—Ministry, the ministry then, eh? Yes, here we are, no exception, except I'm late. Late coming. Here, every creak, do you hear them? Every creak one of doubt, generations of it, so I'm no exception, except I'm late. But I . . . that's what I was trained for, after all, isn't it. Here, it's so familiar, all so familiar here . . .

Reverend Gwyon found an opening and got through it. Immediately he started to talk, striding down the hall. —Familiar, yes, he commenced, gauging his words to the distance ahead of him. —Science, science has a fool theory about recognition. Half the forepart of the brain receives an impression, they say, an instant before the other half. When it reaches the second half the brain recognizes it! A lot of bosh, of course, he paused a step to confide, —but it gives these fool scientists something to do, keeps them from meddling in important matters that don't concern them.

Reverend Gwyon had timed this observation perfectly; for as he reached the last phrases he had turned the corner to his study. The still surfaces of the mirrors in the cruz-con-espejos were alerted by his passage, but too late to hinder it, for with the last word he was inside, leaving them empty but vigilant now. Alone among books and papers in precarious piles, Reverend Gwyon sat down. There were books open and closed, some with twenty bits of paper between their pages; passages underlined, written in, crossed out. There were periodicals, and ribbons of newspaper littered everywhere. Near one knee a headline said, *Science Shows There's a God, Pope Declares*. Gwyon rested an elbow on *Osservatore Romano*. ("Who is capable of fixing his eyes on the shining sun?" It was that issue in which Cardinal Tedeschini testified to the Papal vision: "But he was able to do so, and during those days could witness the life of the sun under the hand of Mary.") Gwyon reached Saint John of the Cross down from a shelf. ("The agitated sun was convulsed and transformed in a picture of life, in a spectacle of heavenly movements, and it transmitted silent but eloquent messages to the Vicar of Christ.") This caught the corner of Gwyon's eye, which narrowed, and he grunted impatiently and covered it with another paper, the *Scientific American* for 11 April 1891. There, for a moment, he stared at a picture of Doctor Variot and a colleague consulting beside a baby skewered on an electrode in an electro-metallurgic bath. " . . . Rather than to rescue our cadavers from the worms of the grave," he read half aloud, with idle satisfaction, and sat back, staring at the door.

The gold figure of the bull lay on its side among some papers on his desk. Beyond, through the windows, the wind whipped the branches of yew with snow. But Reverend Gwyon's was not an empty stare, arrested by that blank surface. He looked as though he saw straight through the door, and was fully aware of the two eyes which, at that instant, were looking square on a line with his own from the dark hallway, where the clear mirrors of the cruz-con-espejos on the wall behind had seized, and held, dim fragments of the arm raised to knock.

Gwyon waited for a moment; then he opened the book in his lap, and thrust his hand into the cavity cut ruthlessly out of *The Dark Night of the Soul*.

—Drink, drink! Drain, drain!
Another link for the Devil's Chain,

sang the Town Carpenter into the white teeth of violation. He left off, for an anxious moment, as he approached the Civil War monument, which he never passed in bad weather without a look of uneasy solicitude, though near half a century had passed since his mother's last obstinate bivouac there.

The wind was pursuing its career with extravagant glee, now it had one. The snow was driven to places which only this paranoid force could care to oppress so; though, to be striding forth in it was to assume the delusions of the storm itself, becoming the object of its hostility, and thus abruptly render a validifying dimension to this manic phase of a reality which would, left to itself, blow itself out in senselessness. Therefore, to redeem these absurd extravaganzas, which is after all the way of a hero, requires a worthy goal; then the gratuitous violence threatens only that path, and as the wind rises, the more worthy the goal then, and the more heroic the journey.

The Depot Tavern was presided over by the head of a twelve-point buck, whose look of resignation implied understanding of the fact that his antlers would never again be shed and renewed, a fate tempered by a festoon of Christmas tree bulbs which were, momentarily, seasonal, though he wore them with great forbearance whatever the solstice. Otium cum dignitate, the chipped lips posed up there, and with great dignity, considering his circumstances, the buck gazed down through dust-filmed eyeballs upon the present.

Just now this present was being cajoled toward a disfigurated future by a man with a woman tattooed on his left arm. She reposed there so long as he talked or listened; but when he interrupted to raise his glass, she was strangled. Though she had been suffering this treatment for many years, she bore it with the same surprise contorting her blue face whenever it was repeated; and when it was done, she returned to the same pose of unsuspecting tranquillity. (True, she was not entirely innocent: turned at another angle, and a portion of her covered up, she was capable of a pose which none who did not know her might have suspected from her placid countenance.) —The Resurrectionists! said he; and she was strangled.

—The Resurrectionists? What would it have to do with grave-robbers? It was the sermon on medicine made from mummies. Mummies ground up in a powder for medicine, said a man as far from the weather as possible, at the far end of the bar.

—Not that any of you have ever heard one of his sermons, said a small man in the middle. —Relying on what your wives repeat to you.

—And you was there, I suppose, imperson?

—I was. It was the sermon in which the Swiss rooster is condemned to burn to death for laying an egg.

—Fourteen seventy-four. I know that one myself.

There was an air of grudging conspiracy over all this; and if voices rose in argument the overtones were

slightly quelled, suggesting, as in any totalitarian society, walls with ears, the ubiquitous dictator long in residence hic, et ubique, disputing no passage, for He was going nowhere. —But that little man selling brushes . . .

—A manic . . .

—Manichee . . .

—He was sent here, but Reverend saved us from that. If good and evil was absolutes, we would all of us be Manichean heretics, says the Reverend. I was there, you see. If it wasn't for evil being a depraved qualification of good, says the Reverend, we should all be Manicheans like the little brush salesman.

—Selling unchristian brushes to honest people . . .

—Ha! there you're wrong, for Manichees was Christian. For them, says the Reverend, the sun itself was the visible symbol of Christ.

—They was not.

—It was so. How could you have the sun . . .

—They was not, and what's more . . .

—Here is the sexton coming now, he was there.

—They was not, and what if he was, he goes to church and makes up his own sermon, and afterward he'll tell you such and such was the Reverend's sermon which nobody heard but himself. Like the sermon on the American Legion . . . him, he's as deaf as that coconut.

Every head but the buck turned to see the door thrown open, shaking the plate of glass and the configuration DEPOT TAVERN between the men and the storm. The Town Carpenter entered, pursued by a distant peal of thunder. —That damned racket, he said, shutting it out.

—It's rare, that you have thunder with snow, said the small man in the middle, appeasing.

—May it roll away and take my curse with it, the Town Carpenter growled, arrived at the bar. He squared his shoulders, reared his head, and looked round him. —Now do you know, after the Great Deluge there was no God? Well, there was not. With the world wet for a hundred years, there was no thunder, and men went around with their heads up, alone and unafraid they went, like heroes should, you know. Then it all dried off and the atmosphere up there recovered. He paused to kick the snow from his feet against the bar; and the dog waited till that was done to lie at his feet. —And then that damned thunder started, and scared them all so much, looking up to see nothing, that they took the images of terror right out of their own minds and hung them up there in the empty space above their empty heads. He drank down his glass. —There now, he said, putting it empty on the bar, and he reared his head, as though the buck's were the only face he would countenance. —I have a very important visitor, finally he brought out.

—Tom Swift, it must be, the strangler muttered, watching the Town Carpenter narrowly.

—To see him, you might not guess at the hero he is. Of course I recognized him immediately.

—A strange fellow got off the morning train, said the man in the middle. —Neither hat nor coat. Oh, you never know, you never know. Drunk perhaps. You never know.

Stealthily, the Town Carpenter looked at these two, his expression one of cunning. It was a look with which they were all familiar; and for its astute divining quality (that and the subsequent logical parallel of his conversation) he was often accused of perfect hearing. —There now, he said, pulling a filled glass to him, —you'd be surprised to see him perhaps, a man waited on by seven kings at a time, sixty dukes and a count for every day in the year, so modest and quiet as him.

—That train come in from the city, said the small man with beer.

—I've seen them, city people in the country, said the strangler. —I know them, terrified when they see things move without ticking or smoking.

—A man who sits with twelve archbishops on his right hand and twenty bishops on his left.

—They live in cities where nothing grows. Did you know that? Nothing grows in the city. Even their minds they keep steam-heated. Their horizons are dirty windowsills.

—Drunk, perhaps. You never know.

—Whose chamberlain is a bishop and king, and his chief cook a king and an abbot, he couldn't stoop to taking such titles as those.

—Do you know what happens to people in cities? I'll tell you what happens to people in cities. They lose the seasons, that's what happens. They lose the extremes, the winter and summer. They lose the means, the spring and the fall. They lose the beginning and end of the day, and nothing grows but their bank accounts. Life in the city is just all middle, nothing is born and nothing dies. Things appear, and things are killed, but nothing begins and nothing ends.

—His domains lay from the three Indies to the ruins of Babylon, from Farther India to the tower of Babel. That's the voyage we're going to make. Waited on hand and foot by kings, from his humble looks you wouldn't believe it, from his quiet ways you'd never know. Of course I knew him immediately.

—You don't get heroes out of the cities. A city man is spread out too much.

—If you've ever watched the ground for a mole, tried to follow the silent movement of the course of his burrow and nothing moves, nothing but separate blades of grass, each of them moving for no good reason, and then the ground moves, and moves again, why that's the kind of a face he has.

—A simple man who is up against it, a man who knows what he's up against. You have to go to the country to find him. Out to the country or out to sea.

—In his dominions there are no poor, no thieves or robbers, and no dissension. Where he has come from there are no vices, no misers or flatterers, and no lies.

Snow whirled against the glass. The blue woman was held contorted for full half a minute. The Town Carpenter licked his lips, and gazed up at the movement on the cracked lips of the twelve-point buck who remained, unperturbed by the fly, looking down through glazed convexities of dust.

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Streaks of sound pierced the woodwork, from the cavetto molding to stab through the stained ribs strained tongue-in-groove wainscoting the hallway, as though there were movement there.

—So, he burnt the throne of the sun with fire, did he? The throne of the sun! . . . nine . . . six, Reverend Gwyon muttered, standing over his littered desk, flinging over the pages of Job with the flat of three fingers. —Which shaketh the earth out of her place, and the pillars thereof tremble. Tremble, do they? Which commandeth the sun, and it riseth not; and sealed up the stars. Riseth not, does it? Which maketh Arcturus, Orion, Pleiades, and the chambers of the south, does he! Gwyon looked up impatiently, no more than to take his eyes from the book laid open on top of the *Letters* of the Emperor Flavius Claudius Julianus. His clear eyes struck the door, and held there a moment, waiting. Then he returned to the pages before him. —Nineteen . . . four . . . In them hath he set a tabernacle for the sun, which is a bridegroom coming out of his chamber, and rejoiceth as a strong man to run a race. His going forth is from the end of the heaven, and his circuit unto the ends of it: and there is nothing hid from the heat thereof . . . that's better, now, he muttered, turning pages. —Seven . . . eleven . . . and by it there is profit to them that see the sun . . . uhm . . . eleven . . . seven . . . Truly the light is sweet, and a pleasant thing it is for the eyes to behold the sun . . . yes . . . hmmmm . . . Truly the light is sweet, he repeated, raising his eyes now straight before him to the window, and the encumbered sky.

That impregnable meter of silence enveloped him directly he stopped speaking, and stood there erect and alone. There was nothing in his face to betray, or even suggest doubt; but his hands were not, as they might at first appear, resting their own weight and no more on the pages before him. As he stood unmoving so, the faint carnation under his nails became evenly fainter, draining away from the rims until they were, all together, blanched with the strain they sustained, streaked with the life that sustained them.

—One more day's dying, Gwyon murmured looking out at the sky. Would there be time? His fingertips regained their color. Even as they did, the lower part of his face drained of its fullness, as though the two were connected, or as though it were not two but one process, a continuous seepage down, and he caught his lower lip with concern. Would there be time? to make full proof of his ministry; and he searched the sky as though for answer. —One more day's dying, he repeated, searching the sky for the sun.

The parsonage was near a century old, and it was not strange that the wind should set it creaking so. Inside, however, and well in, beyond other evidences, the wind provided an arbitrary explanation and no more: as well say that the sharp angles of wall and wainscot, molding and baseboard complained so at the relentless obtrusion of one another's extremities where they were forced to meet; or that they creaked with effort, supporting the cross, and with vigilance for its prey, suspended there in the near darkness before the small mirrors which looked shined with work as though, leaving Sor Patrocinio stigmatized, they had begun again here. How John Huss would have vilipended the thing! as Aunt May had ruefully noted; but she had not prevailed against it, and inclined to avoid it. Gwyon, passing it many times a day, shocked it and banged the study door in its face before a fragment of his motion could be isolated and fixed. (True, more than once he had surprised Janet there; and often, when he thought of it, attempted stealthy glances at her ungloved palms, but in vain.) The creaking continued; still nothing moved in the dark hallway until the thin lips cracked apart, but still silent, —What was it? What am I supposed to ask? Am I the . . . Homoousian or Homoiousian? Am I the man that . . . What holds me back? . . . for whom . . . for whom . . . What was it? . . .

Reverend Gwyon gripped the lapels of his coat and peered at the inside of the door. —Damnation, he muttered, —what holds me back? And he commenced to rummage among the books and papers before him. The Old Testament and the *Letters* of Julian the Apostate were thrust aside, Origen's *Contra Celsum*, one after another he pushed the books back until they mounted in an unsteady pile about the gold bull figure. —Volume eighteen, he muttered, —PLANTS to RAYM . . . where . . . He paused, holding Tertullian's *De*

Coronâ. Then he started through the discarded pile, muttering —*Cathemerinon*, but when he found it, and stood with it open, he spoke without looking at the page.

—Kindly Guide, Reverend Gwyon said to the sky without, —creator of the radiant light, who controllest the seasons in their fixed courses, if thy sun is hidden, grim chaos encompasses us, restore thy light O Christ to thy faithful followers . . . Gwyon paused, as though he had heard a sound. The sky before him darkened as he watched it; and as he watched, the book in his hand closed slowly, and the nails of his hand went white against the covers.

The knocks on the door were faint. Reverend Gwyon planted Prudentius firmly on the desk and turned; but when he reached the door he paused with a hand to the knob and stood that way, listening, the more intently, for something he had not heard.

On either side of the door they stood, a hand raised and a hand held forth, their extended arms abscissa and ordinate for the point of ordination where their eyes met on the inordinate curve of doubt.

There was a crash in the hallway. Reverend Gwyon threw the study door open. The cruz-con-espejos lay on the floor. Streaks of light pierced him from the sharp silvered fragments around it, and held him, blinded for a moment.

Rounding the corner from the kitchen, Janet collided with the figure coming in the other direction. She drew back aghast. —Has it begun? she managed to say, clutching one gloved hand in the other.

—Begun? Good God, I . . . I didn't . . .

—Is it time? she asked eagerly. —Time to tell them . . . you have come back?

—Yes, tell them, he said, getting round her with the speed of a shadow when a light is moved, —I came back to preach, but I . . .

—They doubted, she said drawing her upper lip down with the sudden modesty of veiling, —but I . . .

—Janet! Reverend Gwyon emerged, and pushed the cross aside with his foot. —Lunch, he said, advancing.

—Father . . . father, I . . .

Janet was gone. Reverend Gwyon, coming forth from the dark hallway, seemed to become larger as he approached the light, and the figure dancing backwards, still like a shadow retreating, went on, —Something I have to ask you, I . . . what was it? . . . you . . .

In this fashion they reached the dining room. With expletive —Thank God, once or twice, the voice had risen and went on more rapidly, drawing Gwyon on with the expression on his face of a man tormented by a question to which everyone else in the room knows the answer.

—You look like Valerian, very much, yes very much like the Emperor Valerian . . . the words came on, every syllable expletive and the more rapid, the sound sustaining itself in nimble surprise, alert for the right words, the right question when it came out to be rescued and repeated.

Reverend Gwyon reached the head of the table, and stood at his place. His nostrils worked for an instant. There did, in fact, issue from the kitchen the smell of frying fish.

—In the painting by Memlinc you know, the painting by Memling, Valerian in the painting by Memlinc . . .

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—How many kings are there left in the world, then? Right now, today, how many kings are there left? The blue woman was drawn to full length, as her master extended an empty glass across the bar.

—I'd rather work for a living, said the small man with beer, staring up at the sign *Law forbids cashing welfare checks on these premises*.

—Counting the Pope of Rome? asked the man furthest from the storm, at the end of the bar.

—I said kings. He's no more king than that coconut, the Pope isn't.

—He's a kind of a king, the Pope is. Anyone who holds a temporal sway is a king, so the Reverend said.

—And when did he say that?

—In his sermon speaking on the Druids. That is why the Druids made the oak tree the king of trees, because it was so often struck by lightning, and that was a sign of divine favor.

—And when was the Pope of Rome struck by lightning?

—The divine right of kings, have you never heard tell of that? You may ask the sexton.

The Town Carpenter, who had been silent for some minutes, snared the word *kings* from somewhere, and lowered his eyes from the buck to find other, less dusty, glances directed toward him. —Kings, he responded, —second-hand kings and all sorts of useless people you find at it today. There now, just look at the way people travel today, they've no sense of voyages at all. I set off on a voyage myself a while ago, a voyage of discovery, you might say. The train was going a good sixty miles an hour and I got to my feet and pulled the emergency cord. You could see nothing at that speed. And do you know, they put me in prison?

Yes they did, without a word of apology. It was in prison I lost these, he went on, motioning to his empty mouth. —I went to sleep, and the man in the prison with me, a dangerous man you could see in his eyes, he stole my teeth while I slept. Let him choke on them!

—Do you know how he holds his temporal power, the Pope of Rome? the strangler demanded, having choked the blue lady dry while the Town Carpenter spoke, taking advantage, now, of the gap while the Town Carpenter drank. —Money from right here in America, money from right here in the United States is what keeps him in power.

—Donations . . .

—Donations! Do you think he heats his fine Vatican palace, all the eleven hundred rooms of it, with donations? For one thing, he's sponsored by an American bread company, I know for a fact.

—Go to a train station yourself, the Town Carpenter continued, pushing forward his empty glass, —or a bus station. Go to an airport and look at them, the miserable lot of them with their empty eyes and their empty faces, and no idea what they're doing but getting out of one pot into another, weary and worried only for the comforts of the body, frightened only that they may discover something between now and the minute they get where they think they are going. There now, I've been to the airport myself, where the airplanes leave for Cairo and Damascus, and would you believe it to look at the people who go to Cairo and Damascus, the washed-out faces, and you see them come in from Cairo and Damascus and do they look any different? They might have been around to the corner grocer and no more, from the look of them. What they can tell of Cairo and Damascus is no more than I can tell of my train trip, sixty miles an hour and no toilet in sight, that is what they know of Cairo and Damascus. He recovered his glass, full, and raised it.

—Have you ever had trench mouth? asked the small man with beer. —At first I thought it was only a sore throat . . .

—He signed a contract for fifty thousand dollars a year, I know for a fact. When he gives the Lord's Prayer, now, every time he comes to the part about "give us this day our daily bread" he says, "Give us this day our daily slo-baked enriched oven-crust thin-sliced . . ."

—Ah, that's a joke, an old joke, said the man farthest from the storm.

—A joke! A joke, is it!

—Trench mouth can be fatal, they say, if it gets into your throat and the glands you have in there . . .

—I'll tell you the truth now, the Town Carpenter went on, his voice resonant with this confidence, —they've never been to Cairo and Damascus. With all their tickets and their passports, and their fine luggage all stuck up with advertising, they've never been out of their own bathrooms. It's so easy to go anywhere today, he said, and paused to look round, to see if any lips other than his own were moving, —that a fool can go anywhere, and it's the fools who do. There are men who have been around the world a dozen times, and they've never discovered anything but one inconvenience and one belly upset after another. Voyages have lost their meaning, it's so easy today, he finished, looking out over the top of the head of the small man with beer, whose eyes were on a level with the top button of his underwear, who said, —I should be in bed like the doctor told me, and no alcohol.

Beyond the glass three figures, who had crossed the street to avoid the Depot Tavern, passed in the storm. —The Ladies, someone said.

The Town Carpenter saw them too. —There they go, he said. —I offered to sing at their Christmas supper tonight at the church, a nice temperance song. *The Toast*. Do you know that one?

> *—By the woes of the drunkard's mother,*
> *By his children who beg for bread . . .*

he began in a low voice.

—I wouldn't dare go home now, said the small man with beer, gazing through the glass. —I'd catch my death.

—A joke? said the man farthest from the storm, studying the blue woman upside down. —Do you know the one about the little nigger boy meets the Catholic priest on the street and he says, Hello Father. So the priest says, Did you call me Father? The little nigger boy says Yes Father and the priest says, Are you a Catholic? So the boy says, I'm a nigger, ain't that bad enough?

Everyone laughed but the Town Carpenter. He'd gone to the men's room.

—You're carrying a dead body, the strangler retaliated, —and you ask him how much you owe him, and he says nothing. Is he dead?

—I'm the kind of a man that likes to be a poodle, said the small man with beer, watching the Town Carpenter return with the dog which had followed him in there, and waited.

—A poodle?

—If I'm going to be a dog I want to be something I like. He took a temperate sip of his small beer, and

turned to the plate glass. The wind had gone down, and the snow continued to fall. —Do you think the sun will ever shine again? he asked no one.

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The wind had gone down; and without its driving force the snow came on in residual particles, remnants of violence left moving loosely in the air, with no apparent direction. It had not settled heavily round the parsonage, because of the slight and exposed elevation, but every crevice and corner was packed as though the wind had come from every quarter in its brief paranoid career. The snow was packed round the dining-room window where, well inside, Reverend Gwyon's face reflected the slight clearing of the sky with raised eyebrows. The dining table, where he sat resting both hands before him, was an oval to which leaves might be added to accommodate a dozen people, though no such need had risen in years. Just the reverse, in fact, might better have served the interests of economy implicit everywhere, not a penurious economy but "sensible," sensible that is to waste, superfluity, extravagance, which might here have dictated that the table contract its surface even further, to the strict necessity of one man's setting: and for another man than this, it might well have done so (considering the withering glances of most of Gwyon's forebears, many of whom ate in the kitchen when alone, one of whom, long before the coming of the incandescent lamp, took his meals to a small upstairs closet, as its floor still showed, or the dour John H. (whose picture was nowhere to be seen) who, after he had reached his majority, was never known to eat indoors again). Not that Gwyon ever sat down to a groaning board, or ate with smörgasbord perambulation: there was seldom more than one monochrome dish at a time before him. But so much did his presence require this large open surface before him, that when he was joined at a meal he glanced up incessantly as though aware that the table was crowded, and, when his guest sat on his right hand, each time Gwyon turned his attention in that direction he would grip the edge of the table in the other, supporting the balance which this alien presence threatened, or sit staring straight ahead, steadying the thing with both hands planted flat upon it. So he sat now, muttering a steadying, —Hmmm, every few moments, and raising his glance like an eccentric weight, unsure where it would drop.

The expletive outburst which had issued in a tone of alternate expectation of the right thing, whatever it was, and surprise, when it did not come forth, had stopped as suddenly as it began. Now only breaks and brief beginnings came from one part of the room and then another, from the corner where all Good works were conceived, to the low table under the window. —Superbia . . . Ira . . . Invidia . . . Avaritia, yes, there . . . "I would desire that this house and all the people in it were turned to gold, that I might lock you up in my good chest: O my sweet gold!" . . . do you remember that? I . . . well never mind, no matter. Covetousness, no matter . . . And the voice trailed off again.

Reverend Gwyon exhaled, sniffed caraway.

—Now, the priesthood . . . the ministry, I mean . . . yes, I heard about you, some time ago, John . . . John . . . what was it? He'd seen you, stopped in to see you, I mean hear you and then see you. A priest. John . . .

Their eyes met across the room for an instant. —Yes, yes, Gwyon said dropping his eyes quickly, speaking in a tone of dismissal. —No weight to him at all. Claimed to be a priest. No weight to him at all. He paused, holding the table down. —No mystery at all, he added in a mutter. But movement brought his eyes up again, he watched the hands embrace one another, break, reach out, a small pitcher picked up, juggled between them and almost lost, put down with one hand as the other caught up a streamer of newspaper, with —What's this?

The newspaper clipping slid across the table. —Yes, that's something I've been looking for, Gwyon said, reaching for it. —Some . . . figuring, a calculation.

Written in the margin, in pencil, was this:

Μείθρας = 40 + 5 + 10 + 9 + 100 + 1 + 200 = 365
Αβραξάς = 1 + 2 + 100 + 1 + 60 + 1 + 200 = 365

—Yes, there, Reverend Gwyon said, getting hold of it. He put it face down on the table, and covered it with his forearm. His lips were working. He stared straight ahead through the window at the sky.

Janet entered, to place two dishes on the table.

—Here, what's this? what's this? Gwyon demanded, looking at them.

—This is bread; and this is fish, said Janet, and raised her eyes across the table.

—Fish? Gwyon repeated.

—And bread, she confirmed, standing over the meager portion as though waiting for something to happen. Her upper gum lay exposed, forgotten.

—Bring me some eggs, Gwyon said curtly. She stood there. Reverend Gwyon brought his head up sharply.

A quick baffled look at the food on the table, and the figure standing over it, and Janet was gone. A bell's tinkle followed, from the kitchen, and Gwyon clicked his lips at this signal of delay, fixing his elbows on the table as though to steady it while the figure beside him sat down.

—Fish! . . .

Gwyon shipped his oars; or sat, at any rate, as though he had done so, his hands drawn up before his face. There the fingers continued in agitated movement, dissembling the single persistent element in the variety of expressions passing over his face. Each expression embraced his features familiarly: each one was familiar to his face, but seldom had they followed one upon another in such swift succession, as the rate of his commutation between one past and another, the distant past and that more recent, increased; and the shocks of the present, those intervals when he was interrupted as he might have been changing vehicles, came more frequently. A gleam, however, persisted in Gwyon's eyes, a look of keen attention which commenced to glitter with something near cunning each time he turned it surreptitiously on his obstreperous passenger, now hunched over the plate of fish, eating ravenously.

Janet entered, bearing a single plate in her gloved hands. She was not looking where she put it down but straight across the table. The fish was almost gone. Reverend Gwyon lowered a hand and pushed the newspaper clipping aside to make room for the plate being lowered before him, noticing the clipping as he did so, recalling, —That food package, Janet? She said nothing; and Gwyon had to look up at her face to see her faint nod. Her face looked more blue than it did usually, for Janet had gone quite pale in the past few minutes. She went out saying, —There is no egg, over her shoulder, and left Gwyon staring into a plate of white navy beans.

The fish was gone, and the outburst commenced abruptly with, —That cross, you know, that cross, I've always . . . but I mean just now I didn't . . . The hand stopped in the middle of gesturing to the hall, where the cruz-con-espejos still lay on the floor.

Gripping the table edge with one hand, Gwyon snatched at the newspaper clipping with the other. He was too late; and could do no more than watch it picked up as though the wind had got it, and spread it out on the air between them. On one side a little girl in long white stockings stared out obliquely from an indistinct picture, on the other, the sharp eyes of a man from under the even division of a shiny widow's peak.

—This . . .

—That, said Gwyon, planting a hand on the paper as it fell back to the table, —is Señor Hermoso Hermoso. I don't understand it. I don't understand it at all. Confession of her attacker, it says here. Why, this is Señor Hermoso Hermoso. And this picture? taken when he was young of course, why this is Señor Hermoso Hermoso, a very respectable man in San Zwingli. I knew him there, Reverend Gwyon went on muttering, —years after the crime. Years after. His hand held the paper down flat on the table between them. —Years after, Gwyon repeated, hiding the marginal calculations with his sleeve.

—Yes, but she . . . she . . .

—She? . . . Gwyon looked up anxiously when he did not go on, to see him stopped, confused and preoccupied. It was a bone, in the last mouthful of fishmeat, and Gwyon's own face twitched, watching him remove it.

—But now, he went on more evenly, rid of the fishbone, —now I feel recovered. A lot recovered. Yes, here I am, he said, and though their eyes had caught one another's at a number of angles, he now looked Reverend Gwyon full in the face for the first time. —And I . . . you must wonder what I've been doing, all this time?

Gwyon lowered his eyes. He started to make a steadying sound, but was interrupted as soon as his voice broke in his throat; and so he began to eat the navy beans.

—Yes, now here we are, and . . . because down there, things got confused down there, dreadfully confused. I couldn't begin to tell you everything that happened, everything . . . I hardly know myself, except . . . I hardly believe it now, I hardly believe they actually did happen. And so I . . . well there, so I just left it all there, it was getting to be so unreal anyhow that it . . . and I . . . well here, here to go on from where reality left off, to recover myself, and . . . After all, it's what I was trained for, and I . . . the ministry, a career with the times, in keeping with the times. He took a hand from the edge of the table to rub it over his face. —And all that . . . fabrication, there's no reason to believe it ever existed, and she . . . that city? If I fell among thieves? Why, there are places more real, there are places in books, there are people in plays more real than . . . all that. It was turning into a . . . a regular carnival. With a quick look up from his plate, Gwyon saw him shake his head slightly, four fingers pressed to a temple, then he broke out with the same constricted laugh. —Yes, a carnival, remember? O flesh, farewell! and he jumped up so suddenly that Gwyon dropped his fork and got hold of the table with both hands, like a man grabbing for the gunwales in fear of capsizing.

—But here, I feel like I'm being watched here. I always felt that way, but . . . secure, being watched. He paused in the corner where all Good works were conceived. —You're watching me, aren't you! He caught Gwyon's glittering eye, and then turned toward the window, but did not reach it, he was stopped by the low table there and stared down at it. —It . . . you see? he said turning, and his whole face was softened in a sickly smile, —this . . . "in hell is all manner of delight" . . . he coughed, —when the Seven Sins pay a call? But no matter, his features drew tight again and he looked away. —Not now, he whispered.

Gwyon, seated firmly, feet planted wide apart on the floor as though the hull were rolling, watched him standing there looking out through the glass. Outside the window, the snow fell in heavier smaller particles, at different angles to the earth, here in foreground from right to left, and beyond from left to right, not swirling but apparently on separate planes. There was a long pause before he spoke, more quietly, without turning from the glass, —And when the seed began to grow, 'twas like a garden full of snow . . . do you remember that?

Attentive as he was, Reverend Gwyon did not seem to be listening: all of his attention was in his eyes which, narrow and widen as they might with the expressions of his face, had not lost their gleam. Since the moment he had, as it were, almost tumbled into the tailsheets, he sat erect and more firm at the head of the table. His face, which had reflected coming forth from his own memory to the present, and then retreating to extreme confines of memory lying centuries beyond his years, now seemed to embrace them all in sudden intensity as he leaned forward.

At that moment Janet came in with a sail of wrapping paper. —If Reverend will write their name on this, she said, reefing it, —for I cannot write foreign, and she handed over the stub of a black crayon. Subdued, with a quick look at the fishbones and not elsewhere, she took that plate in a square gloved hand and went out, leaving Gwyon staring at the wrapping paper, the concentration in his face gone as suddenly as it had come there. Then his hand came up slowly and plotted the words of address to Estremadura. His lips moved, and seemed to draw the clear even whisper across the smooth table to themselves.

—And if beauty did provoke thieves, sooner than gold? The path I've come on, and you'd remember, here, how as an . . . ape to nature, I excelled. The path the foul spirits kept clean, but it's over. By all that's ugly, it's done.

Real Monasterio, Gwyon wrote, his lips moving, *de Nuestra Señora de la Otra Vez*, as the whisper came closer, and broke out in a voice over his head,

—What's this? Spain?

—Spain? Gwyon repeated. He dropped the crayon stub, looking up, and his large hand trembled over the newspaper clipping.

—Going to Spain?

—It doesn't snow there, Gwyon said lowering his eyes, until they fixed on the little girl in long white stockings. —But the cold, on the hill where . . . He shuddered. —That land! he broke out. —Damned, empty land, you're part of it when you're there. Part of it, that self-continent land, and when you're out, outside, shut out, and look back on it, you look back on its emptiness from your own, look over its ragged edges to its . . . its hard face, refuses to admit you've ever touched it. He was staring blankly at the newspaper clipping.

—But this isn't . . . you can't go now?

Gwyon looked him full in the face for the first time. —Spain is a land to flee across, he said, motionless, forcing the other face to lower in chagrin at the sight of his own undetermined features, as loss spread from his eyes out to the edges of his face, the emptiness in the eyepiece of a telescope where a point of light expands into a field of space and a worldless universe.

—She . . . They ejaculated at the same instant.

—She came to me there, Gwyon went on with somniloquent evenness, —in this monastery. I was almost asleep, and I felt her hand. I got up, I got to the window as fast as I could, and there, the moon had sent a stream of light in, across the room, right across the room to me. There it was in the sky. The moon . . . warm, like the moon . . .

—Yes but you can't . . . I'm not a child any more! and you can't . . . you used to tell me the Thessalian witches tried to draw it down . . . Gwyon watched him vacantly as he turned away, abrupt movements round the far end of the table as though evading the image, or a mock image of the figure Gwyon had conjured. —And if it's she standing over us . . . ?

—"The moon is always in motion," says Arnobius.

—To hell with Arnobius.

—"According to your representation she is a woman, with a countenance that does not alter, though her daily variation carries her through a thousand forms," Gwyon finished, and his querulous voice failed.

—That . . . that, never mind all that! The words were harsh and uneven as he shook his head, shaking

away the paraselene. —I came for you! he cried out at Gwyon.

—Yes . . . ? Gwyon whispered, his hands finding one another before him on the table, as his features reformed and his eyes recovered their glitter.

—If I've come for the priesthood, and you . . .

—Yes, you . . . You brought the bull, the gold bull, Reverend Gwyon said leaning forward.

—The what? Yes, that, but listen . . .

—And you've come for the priesthood, Gwyon went on tensely.

—Yes I've come back, I've come to you, because you can tell me . . . what I must know. He lowered his eyes, then raised them gleaming before Gwyon could interrupt again. —Though why you, better than someone else, because I . . . then I'll be a minister, I'll know what I'm doing . . . I'll out-preach Saint Bernard. Mothers will hide their sons, wives will hide their husbands for fear my preaching will tempt them away. Yes, he broke up so many homes the deserted wives formed a nunnery. I'll form seventy-two nunneries. Yes, "And the brother shall deliver up the brother unto death, and the father the child: and the children shall rise up against their parents, and cause them to be put to death . . ." Why, I'll go to Laodicea, and I . . . I'll be God's Fool Himself, he finished, swinging round to the windows again so abruptly that his hand cracked against the frame. He clutched it quickly in the other, then threw it out again. —Look! Look, the wren, do you see? he cried out.

A wren fluttered to an evergreen outside, its weight not enough to dislodge the snow on the spray where it landed.

—I'll go out like the early Christian missionaries did at Christmas, to hunt down the wren and kill him, yes, when the wren was king, do you remember, you told me . . . When the wren was king, he repeated, getting breath again, —at Christmas.

The wren had flown, as he turned from the window and approached with burning green eyes fixed on Gwyon. —King, yes, he repeated, —when the king was slain and eaten, there's sacrament. There's sacrament. Then at the side of the table he paused and lowered his head, a closed wrist couched in the back of his neck, mumbling, —Homo . . . homoi . . . what I mean is, Did He really suffer? And . . . no, that's not it, I mean . . . He stopped; and clinging to the edge, sank into his chair.

Reverend Gwyon sat high at the helm, steadying, hands stretched forth to the edge of the sail of wrapping paper, looking down at him as though he were trying to clamber aboard. Then, —Are you prepared? Gwyon brought out, his eyes gleaming with the challenge.

—Prepared?

—The priesthood. The trials before you, for the priesthood.

—Trials?

—There must be priests, strong and passionless, able to renounce the things of this world . . . Gwyon reached out and took his wrist, as though to pull him aboard. —To preach Him Who offers rest from sin, and hope beyond the grave. Born of the Rock, He comes forth to offer Remission of sins, and Everlasting Life.

—Yes . . .

—Priests to administer Baptism, the Oath, and the Sign on the Brow, and the Communion of Bread and Cup. To preach Redemption, Sacramentary Grace, and Salvation, through the Lord of Hosts, the God of Truth who rewards for acts of piety . . .

—Yes, yes . . . Gwyon's grip was tight as a closed vise on his wrist. It became tighter.

—To be his priest, are you prepared? Gwyon repeated. —To be inured to hardship? strengthened against temptation? and your body rendered passionless?

—But I . . . yes, good God, there's no passion left in me now.

—To renounce the things of this world?

—There's nothing here I want . . . Nothing.

—And when the crown is offered you . . . Gwyon came on, straining with intensity.

—Yes, the third temptation, "All these things will I give thee . . ." No, I'm through with that. He twisted in Gwyon's grip. —He offered me all that, and he's behind me. He gave me all that, and he's behind me. Just being here I've renounced him, just coming here, I've renounced all he gave me. He paused, and when Gwyon did not speak but continued to grip his wrist and fix all his attention, as he had before, with his eye, went on, —Do you think he didn't take me up on a high mountain, and show me all the kingdoms of the world? and the glory of them? and offer them to me? and give them to me? And here . . . now . . . if this is not Renunciation . . .

—Could you face fifty days of fasting? Gwyon demanded suddenly.

—Why . . . why yes, if . . .

—Could you stand two days exposed to extreme heat?

—But . . .

—And twenty days in the snow?

—But I . . .

—There are twelve trials of fortitude, Gwyon went on in a voice of intense confidence, —you must face heat and cold, hunger, thirst, and the terrors of drowning, before you take the sacramentum and be sealed on the forehead as his priest.

—But all this . . .

—You cannot be his priest without passing through all the disciplines, Gwyon said, relaxing his grip a little, speaking with an admonishing tone. —You must give proof of self-control and chastity, as Nonnus says in his *In Sancta Lumina*. To be rendered strong and passionless, in order to convert the army first, Gwyon went on, looking toward the window, his voice sinking to a reflective note.

—But Father . . . Father . . .

—Yes, Gwyon said closing his grip again, bringing his eyes back to the eyes which stared at him. —I have passed through all the grades, of course, to be the Pater Patrum. And then, he went on intent again, —after your death . . .

—My death? . . .

—After the cruciati you must die, of course, after the torments, when you have passed through all the disciplines, when you have attained Cryphius, and Miles, and Leo, and Perses, and Heliodromus . . .

—Die? . . .

—How else may the soul be relieved of the dread necessity of its lower nature? Gwyon demanded bending toward him.

—Father! . . .

—Yes, at my hands, Gwyon said looking at him steadily, —you must die at the hands of the Pater Patratus, like all initiates.

Gwyon's face was suffused with a flush which deepened as they sat locked rigidly hand and wrist together; and as it did the face that Gwyon looked into drained of all color until the skin was near translucent, so that it might have been not two processes but one continuous seepage of life. —No one can teach Resurrection without first suffering death himself. No one can be reborn without dying. No one can be Mithras' priest without being reborn . . . to teach them to observe Sunday, and keep sacred the twenty-fifth of December as the birthday of the sun. Natalis invicti, the Unconquered Sun, Gwyon finished, turning his face to the window.

—But I . . . you . . . to worship the sun?

Gwyon let go his wrist abruptly, and he drew it back.

—Nonsense, said Gwyon, brisk now. —We let them think so, he confided, —those outside the mysteries. But our own votaries know Mithras as the deity superior to it, in fact the power behind the sun. Here, his name you see . . . Gwyon revealed the marginal notes on the newspaper clipping. —Abraxas and Mithras have the same numerical value, the cycle of the year as the sun's orbit describes it. Abraxas, you know, the resident of the highest Gnostic heaven . . .

The scuffling of feet sounded on the porch outside. Janet passed through the room hurriedly, behind them. Gwyon reached for his wrist again. It was not there, and Gwyon's hand gripped the edge of the table. —"The gods are benevolent and regardful of the human race," says Elisæus, Gwyon said almost in a whisper. —"If only men acknowledge the greatness of the gods and their own insignificance, and take pleasure in the gifts of the earth distributed by the hands of the king . . ."

Janet's footsteps sounded in the front hall, and the door banged open, spilling voices into the house. Gwyon paused. His hand shook on the edge of the table, and his lip quivered. —Mithras means friend, he said, —mediator. Mithras is mediator between the gods and the lower world. He waited anxiously, as though for confirmation, as footsteps approached in the hall.

—Hell? the lower world, hell? came in distracted query.

—Our own earth, Reverend Gwyon answered, and was silent until Janet's voice broke in upon them from the doorway, and he leaped up.

—It's the Use-Me Ladies to see you, Reverend, said she.

Reverend Gwyon was through the doorway in the other direction before she'd finished her sentence, muttering —I'll . . . be a minute, as he passed her. The study door banged, and from inside the sound of a book hurled to the floor a moment later.

Janet fled to the kitchen, as footsteps sounded straight down the front hall to the dining room. Three ladies came in. The cold came in with them; it clung round them as they came to a stop.

—Reverend . . .

—Reverend . . .

—I beg your pardon. We have come to see Reverend Gwyon.
—Oh, I . . . I . . . He just went out.
—Went out?
—Went out?
—But in this kind of weather he never goes out. Reverend Gwyon is always irritable when the sky clouds over and we have bad weather.
—No, I mean . . . just out of the room. He'll be right back.
—I see.
—We'll wait. And are you visiting here?
—I? Why, you might say . . .
—It may have surprised you, when we mistook you for Reverend Gwyon.
—But there is a re*sem*blance.
—There *is* a resemblance. Of course Reverend Gwyon is a good deal bigger.
—A good deal older. But as you're dressed, you may see where we make our mistake. Are you in the Lord's work?
—I? why I . . . Yes, I'm . . .
—I can't see where I saw the resemblance.
— . . . the Reverend Gilbert Sullivan.
—But just for a minute . . .
—Just for a minute I saw it too. It may be that only this morning we were speaking of Reverend Gwyon's son.
—Who has been away a very long time.
—The prodigal son.
—But he has no brothers.
—Yes, the poor boy.
—Poor Camilla.
—May was really a mother to him.
—Poor May.
—It was a severe trial for everyone.
—He wasn't a strong boy.
—But then Camilla . . .
—Poor Camilla . . .
—Poor Camilla never was strong.
—Taken and left in foreign lands. Left to lie among Roman Catholics.
—I trust the Reverend Gilbert Sullivan is not a Roman Catholic priest? The name . . .
—The name . . .
—Me? Good God, no. I mean . . .
—The name suggests Irish extraction. Perhaps his forebears are *north* of Ireland?
—Perhaps we may ask Reverend Gilbert Sullivan to attend our Christmas supper tonight?
—Of course we may.
—Of course he may.
Hurraaaph! . . . —Look out, or by God I'll split your skull. Shake the snow off before you come inside. Oh, good day, ladies. I didn't see you, ladies. Don't mind us, the dog and me. We've been outdoors, as you can see. We've been working, both very tired. Up the stairs, now! Up the stairs!
—Working, indeed.
—Indeed!
—Indeed!
—Why I could smell him across the room.
—He wanted to sing at the supper tonight. One of his songs from the saloon.
—It is a disgrace to have him our sexton.
—It is a disgrace to have him living right here under the roof of the parsonage.
—But Reverend Gwyon . . .
—Reverend Gwyon . . .
—Reverend Gwyon always smells so *fresh*.
—Even his charity is stretched too far.
—Indeed it is. But I've been thinking . . .
—I've been thinking, don't misunderstand me, the very same thing. After all, the sexton is getting older.
—The Lord will deliver him.

—The Lord will release him.
—The Lord will have pity on the poor man.
—Why, Reverend Gwyon.
—Reverend Gwyon . . .
—We've come to ask you about our supper, the Christmas supper in the church tonight.
—Mrs. Dorman is going to sing. My sister is going to play the piano.
—And we've arranged for a visiting lecturer.
—A former Y.M.C.A. official. He is going to give a humorous talk.
—Nothing flighty. Nothing frivolous.
—Oh dear no, his talk will have some meat in it.
—I understand he has been in Africa. Not just traveling, wasting time. He was fully occupied with the Lord's work.
—And your guest will come.
—Yes, he is coming. We shall see both of you there tonight.
—Reverend Gwyon might like to hear our poem.
—Reverend Gilbert might like to hear our poem.
—Both of them might like to hear the poem we've written for the Christmas supper tonight.
—The last two verses. The rest will have to be a surprise!

So as members of the Use-Me
So as members of the Use-Me
So as members of the Use-Me

We hope to conquer all
We hope to conquer all
We hope to conquer all

Offering the fellowship of Jesus
Offering the fellowship of Jesus
Offering the fellowship of Jesus

To those who need him most of all
To those who need him most of all
To those who need him most of all

For when we get to heaven
For when we get to heaven
For when we get to heaven

A reward there will be in store
A reward there will be in store
A reward there will be in store

For those whose daily living
For those whose daily living
For those whose daily living

Has been "Use-Me evermore."
Has been "Use-Me evermore."
Has been "Use-Me evermore."

When they looked round, they were alone in the room. When they left, seeking their footprints, those were gone under the snow; and the prints of departure so quickly obliterated as to leave no witness that their visit had ever been made at all.

Though Reverend Gwyon, alone again in his study, found time to mutter, —There was a woman's grade in the Mysteries. Porphyry mentions it . . . hummn . . . He turned up open books on his desk. —Hyena. That was it. Hyena.

His gaze fell upon the Bible. —Near Christmas! Christmas! he said almost viciously, as his eye followed lines on the open page. —Then the moon shall be confounded and the sun ashamed . . . His hand flung over the pages of Isaiah. —The sun shall be no more thy light by day; neither for brightness shall the moon give

light unto thee: but the Lord shall be unto thee an everlasting light, and thy God thy glory. Thy sun shall no more go down; neither shall the moon withdraw itself: for the Lord shall be . . .

Suddenly Gwyon's hand swept the Bible to the floor. He stood there quivering the length of his frame. Then he crumpled the newspaper clipping from *Osservatore Romano;* and after it, one by one, the books went to the floor, Tertullian's *De Præscriptione Hæreticorum*, Arnobius' *Adversus Nationes, De Errore Profanarum Religionum* of Firmicus Maternus . . . He did not stop until he came to Saint John of the Cross, which he opened, removed the contents, and dropped the hollow *Dark Night of the Soul* after the rest of them. Then he straightened the gold bull figure to its feet on his desk, and stood with his hands on its horns looking out at the darkening sky.

—Cannot they see, it is exhausted? he whispered. Thunder sounded, beyond Mount Lamentation, and it sounded again.

Then he broke out,

—Herakles star-adorned, king of fire, ruler of the universe, thou sun, who with thy far-flung rays art the guardian of mortal life, with thy gleaming car revolving the wide circuit of thy course . . . Belus thou art named on the Euphrates, Ammon in Libya, Apis of the Nile art thou by birth, Arabian Kronos, Assyrian Zeus . . . but whether thou art Serapis, or the cloudless Zeus of Egypt, or Kronos, or Phaëthon, many-titled Mithra, Sun of Babylon, or in Greece Apollo of Delphi, or Wedlock, whom Love begat in the shadowy land of dreams . . . whether thou art known as Paieon, healer of pain, or Æther with its varied garb, or star-bespangled Night—for the starry robes of night illuminate the heaven—lend a propitious ear to my prayer. He paused, then went on more loudly,

—O king, greatest of the gods, thou sun, the lord of heaven and earth, god of gods, thy breath is potent, if it seem good to thee, forward me on my way to the supreme deity who begat thee and formed thee, for I am the man Gwyon.

—I invoke thee, O Zeus the Sun-god Mithra Serapis, invincible, giver of mead, Melikertes, lord of the mead, abraalbabachaebechi . . .

He stood, his hand on the bull's horns, and the expression on his face of a man waiting for something which has happened long before.

•

Each time Janet's eyes reached the foot of the page, she returned them to the top, to verse eight of chapter twenty-four of the Gospel according to Saint Matthew, —All these are the beginning of sorrows, and read the column down again. She stood and bore this repetition silent for some time, until at last, after hanging for a moment on verse twenty-four, her gaze shortened to her bare hands clasped before her, and under the care of her eyes they opened, sustaining the shock of her pupils in two dark scars on the palms. The palms were clean, but the rest of her hands as she turned them, from the nails down along the ridges and jointures of the fingers, were not. Suddenly her left hand closed, and she dug the firm flesh on the back of it with her forefinger.

Through the window the snow fell fast and heavily, the leisured dignity of perfect flakes lost in bitter water-soaked streaks to earth, each moment passing in more frantic declivity until the artifice of its identity had entirely disappeared, and it was rain.

The sound of thunder drew her to the glass. She stood looking out. Then she raised her hands and tried to rub away the two blots on the windowpanes she had left earlier, but she could not, and her hands moved more and more slowly until they stopped, and left her staring down at the carriage barn, barely discernible below. As she looked, a hand came back to her face and commenced moving over it, not in caress along its surface, nor excitedly, but deliberately resting on her features in one position after another; until that hand stopped, the thumb along the ridge of her nose and the palm over her mouth, and she drew her left hand back to grasp the empty folds at her breast.

A minute later and she'd pulled the frame of type from the flatbed hand press in the corner, unlocked it and spilled the letters all over the floor, banged the Bible closed, hesitated a moment over it and then pushed it off into the pile of metal spellingless letters and come out her door. Her steps creaked in the hallway, but the Town Carpenter's voice came on from behind his door as she passed, evenly absorbed in reading aloud to the dog, —"While we go now to bring the Wanderer up, it should not be forgotten that the house, completely furnished, is awaiting him, and he has only to knock at the door, enter, and be at home" . . . (They were in volume I of Lew Wallace's *The Prince of India, or, Why Constantinople Fell*.)

At the other end of the hall Janet reached the empty sewing room and went straight in among the roses upside-down, the green-capped pink-faced dogs faded on the west wall behind the chaise longue where she suddenly saw him sitting rigidly erect, his drawn fist plunged into his neck so that his arm stood out like a wing, and his brows noticeable for being contracted so forcefully that they seemed to have seized the face

and held it in this stifling grasp. Apparently he was asleep. Janet bent close, studying the thin face, the slightly crooked nose, the rough chin and bare throat. The left hand lay in his lap as rigid as the rest of him, the fingers doubled in upon themselves and the veins standing out around the clotted blood, where Janet reached and prodded the torn place with her forefinger. Not a muscle moved in his face, nor anywhere else about him; and Janet turned and ran out, down the hall, and the stairs, and out of the house, leaving him there in the darkening room, where he slept in this same tense numb position until the roses had faded to stripes, and the walls themselves had lost their boundaries.

He waked staring straight ahead to that full consciousness which only sheer horror attains: his blood stopped. For a prolonged instant everything stopped and the blood, without motion, was cast as a solid of unbearable weight and impenetrable density.

—*No one knows who I am*.

It was a full minute before he moved; and when he did he burst to his feet, as though to shatter this irregular surface of space enclosed by merciless solids. —No one in this house knows me, he brought out; but his mouth was so dry that the words came to pieces before he got them out where his own ear could resolve them, and he stood sucking the inside of his mouth in upon itself, plying the barren, abruptly unfamiliar hollow with his insensible tongue until its features dissolved, and he could repeat, —None of them knows who I am.

But even before these words were out, something else had assailed him. He began looking wildly round the room, where shapes refused to identify themselves, and endured only in terms of the others, each a presence made possible only by what everything else was not, each suffering the space it filled to bear it only as a part of a whole which, with a part standing forth to identify itself, would perish.

—Who was here? he whispered. Already the inside of his mouth was afloat with saliva, so that he swallowed, raised the pool on his tongue and exhausted its surface on the roof of his mouth and swallowed again. —She was here, he said, gripping his chin in his hand.

Starting again, the blood on its course had set every interior surface of his body stingingly aflame with the thrill of its own existence; and he stamped his feet, and shook his hands in the air. —This . . . this . . . he whispered hoarsely. Then he grabbed one hand with the other and gripped it tight as he could, until the balance of that was out and he exchanged them, gripping the second with the first, and finally got out of the room with his hands interlocked before him, the fingertips of each one straining in upon the bones of the other.

There had been a good deal of noise in this last hour or so, books thrown and dropped, the type-metal words smashed into their meaningless components, doors banging, and all these fragments were recapitulated now in the thunder, as he broke out into the hall and down the stairs repeating, —Don't you know me? Don't you know who I am? You know who I am. Don't you know who I am? . . . , words which broke the surface, and followed one another as discordant articulations of his heavy breathing.

Reverend Gwyon had gone out a minute before, hatless, across the bare boards of the porch so heavily that they seemed not yet to have recovered silence, when he reached them and made out Gwyon's great figure striding down the slope toward the carriage barn. He followed precipitously, sliding and slipping on the soaked pores of the snow as though it were the headlong incline of twenty-five years past; and before he'd reached the bottom he did fall, headlong, so that the crust of the snow gashed his cheekbone and, for the moment he lay there, smothered his rehearsal, —You know who I am. Don't you know who I am? Don't you know me? . . .

The rain was coming down the more heavily for the saturated surface which awaited it; and he was drenched when he gained his feet. Just then there was a crash of thunder.

Gwyon had already made the carriage barn and thrown the door open. There was electricity there, and Gwyon stood just inside, his great hand on the switch and his thumb jamming it back and forth, back and forth, with no consequence but a *snap*. —Damnation, Gwyon muttered; and then, aware of someone behind him, said, —The bull. I came down to make sure of the bull . . . But Gwyon had hardly got the words out of his mouth before his upraised arm was grasped in the dark so heavily that it almost pulled him over; and the lightning followed so fast on the words that followed, that both were gone, and the transformation was complete, when Gwyon heard,

—Father . . . *Am I the man for whom Christ died?*

Louder than laughter, the crash raised and sundered them in a blinding agony of light in which nothing existed until it was done, and the tablet of darkness betrayed the vivid, motionless, extinct and enduring image of the bull in his stall and Janet bent open beneath him.

Then it seemed full minutes before the cry, pursuing them with its lashing end, flailed through darkness and stung them to earth. Water fell between them, from a hole in the roof. The smell of smoke reached them in the dark.

With no warning uncertain flicker, the light came on. Before them, a metal wash-tub lay on the floor with a square hole riven through its bottom. The door was charred and smoking around the hinges and the lock.

Then the shadows round the walls were set dancing in duplication, each steady dark shape mocked by a distorted image leaping round it, as the Town Carpenter appeared with a lantern and stood swinging it in the door. —There now! he said; and though his voice was not loud it rang with confirmation, as he entered and walked over toward the bull's stall. —There! he said, swinging round, and the lantern with him, —There's a masterful pizzle for you!

The bull shifted on its feet, sounding its weight on the board floor, and turned its head from them and withdrew.

Gwyon was gone. They both turned to the door at the same moment to look; and by the time they reached the door together, Gwyon's figure showed halfway up the slope toward the house.

—There now, said the Town Carpenter, nodding and swinging the lantern out. His coat had come open to show long-underwear buttons to the waist. He'd pulled on his trousers and galoshes to come out, and the trousers were on backwards. —It's that I came down to look at, he said, swinging the lantern toward the balloon stand, which was as good as he'd left it. Then he held the lantern aloft, over the figure poised in the doorway of the carriage barn.

—There, he's fallen!

The Town Carpenter reached out and seized his arm. They could both see Gwyon on the ground up near the house.

—He's fallen. Will you let me go help him?!

—And would you humble him, the Town Carpenter answered without relaxing his grip, —by helping him back to his feet?

He hung there in the Town Carpenter's hand until Gwyon had recovered and mounted the porch steps. Then the Town Carpenter opened his hand slowly, eyes fixed on him, until he suddenly wrenched away and ran up the hill laughing.

The Town Carpenter lowered the lantern and looked into the barn again, murmuring. Then he snapped off the electric light, pulled the door closed, and trudged up the slope hitching the binding front of his pants as he went. At the kitchen door he raised the glass chimney, blew out the lantern and went in, pulling a light cord as he passed, straight over to his pot on the cold stove. There were voices, or a voice, in the dining room, or down the hall, he did not know and did not listen.

—"Away, to hell, to hell!" Do you remember that?

The Town Carpenter rolled up his sleeves, took a piece of yellow soap from the metal sink, and dipped his hands into the pot.

—"Oh, might I see hell, and return again, How happy were I then!" Yes, yes, that's it! Back there!

The Town Carpenter found the soap among folds in the bottom of the pot, lifted it out, and dried his hands. —Something amiss, he murmured as he pulled out the light, —we must simplify, as he tramped toward the back stairs.

Janet came from behind the door of the butler's pantry. She stopped when she heard the voice down the hall, or in the dining room, she could not tell, but stood for a moment listening, thoroughly wet, her skirt torn, her hair matted down. Then she came on.

—Yes, back there, that's the place! They're waiting! Yes, the harrowing of hell. That's it. Then wood splintered, in the dining room.

Janet found him alone there. He had just split the top of the low table under the window down the middle. —What is it? Janet asked calmly, coming closer.

—Damnation, he answered, backing round the table.

—Damnation? she repeated, clearly and quietly, as he got round and backed through the door.

—Damnation? he repeated questioning, and stopping as she came close, holding to the door frame.

—That is life without love, Janet said. —Who weeps for you?

He turned and broke down the hall.

—Whom do you weep for? she pursued him. He reached the front door and turned to stare at her, advancing in her torn blood-streaked skirt. —Do you not know that luxury, that most exquisite luxury we have? she kept on until she reached him.

—You . . . he burst out, holding a quivering hand before him, —were you . . . you down in the . . . barn? . . .

Janet was up beside him, so close that their rough cheeks almost touched. —No love is lost, she said, and kissed him on the cheek where the snow had torn it.

He stared at her an instant longer, and bolted out the front door.

The Town Carpenter had found a note under his door when he entered his room. He read it aloud to the

dog, who raised her head from the pillow to listen. —Dawn tomorrow, a great deal of work to be done in the church. It was on an outsize piece of paper, and signed *Gw*. At the foot it said, "Return vol. 18 Plants to Raym Britannica." All this was written in very large letters.

The Town Carpenter held it up to the light, and finding no other message he started to file it in a drawer which jingled with bottles when he opened it. But he turned with the paper still in his hand, took out his huge gold watch, weighed it for a moment without opening the case, and laid it on the dresser. Next he brought out a flat gold case and stood running his thumb over the inscription.

The dog whined; and a minute later the light was out, and the Town Carpenter's voice sounded weary in the darkness. —Move over, you're taking too much room. Did I brush your teeth? Here. Move over. Go to sleep. We have a lot of work to do tomorrow.

•

The Depot Tavern showed one of the few lights in that end of town.

—I wouldn't dare go out in this, said the small man with beer, staring through the glass into the clear night. —I'd go in over my head somewhere.

The man with the blue woman tattooed on his arm was about to comment when the door banged open, and the draggled figure who arrived demanded cognac before he reached the bar.

—No cognac, I got only some brandy here.

—All right, brandy. A glass of brandy. Here wait, I said a glass, not a . . . not that thing.

A tumbler half-filled was put before him, and he took out a twenty-dollar bill.

The small man sipped his beer, and looked wonderingly at this extravagant diversion.

—Here, what's that? What's that?

—What? . . .

—Right there behind you. In the glass.

—This here? This coconut?

—Good God . . . it's a griffin's egg. Let me see it.

—This here's a coconut.

—Let me see it. Where did it come from?

—Some guy sent it to me, he was in the service . . .

—Let me see it.

—You shake it, you can hear the milk inside rattling. Hear it?

—Yes, yes, I hear it. Good God . . . will you sell it to me?

—Sell it?

—Here. Do you want more?

—Well, I . . . for a coconut I couldn't hardly ask you . . .

—Here, twenty more. Is this enough?

The small man's hand shook as he put his beer on the bar, silently, not to interrupt. The glass was almost opaque, spotted with fingermarks, for he had been holding it all the afternoon.

Further up the bar, the blue woman who had been reclining for some time was suddenly snapped up and strangled until her forehead almost met her knees.

—When's the next train?

—Where you going?

—Down.

—Down where?

—All the way.

—In a minute, in three or four minutes there's one, the small man brought out, greatly excited to hear himself speak. —In three or four minutes there's one, he repeated. —There's one in three or four minutes.

They held their breath until the door banged again, shivering the pane between them and the night. Then they stared at the empty glass, and the two twenty-dollar bills on the counter. Even the twelve-point buck seemed to have a dusty eye on it.

•

The train arrived in New York at eleven that night.

The cab slipped on the wet pavement, in and out of the slush in the gutters, thrusting itself ahead of everything else in the frenzied motion of the streets, tearing open the half-darkness of side streets with its lights and its noise.

When it pulled in at the curb he leaped out, thrusting uncounted bills into the driver's hand, and dropped

his weight against the door as he reached for the bell. But the door was not locked, and he got into the downstairs hall. There he was stopped by a voice shouting in a fury from above,

—I tell you I goin to do it, Mister Brown . . . There was a heavy thud, and three more. —I tell you, I tell you I goin to kill you, and now I doin so . . . Mister Brown, and the sound of hitting, again and again, as he got through the vast living room, up the stairs past the polychrome wood saint in the niche extending the scar of the arm offered in benediction.

He switched on the light on the balcony, and there was silence. He looked into Recktall Brown's bedroom. It was empty. Then he ran down the hall, round the corner and on to the last doorway.

Fuller was alone. He was standing over his bed in his underwear with his broken umbrella in his hand, and the spread on the sagging bed rumpled and torn where he'd been beating it. —I caution him I goin to do it, Fuller said hardly looking round, the gold of his teeth a quick glitter in the light from the hall.

Two suitcases stood packed at the foot of the bed, both cardboard and tied with heavy twine. The high-crowned straw lay on top of them. On the table, among a number of cigar stubs, and the razor blade which Fuller used to pare them with, was the cigar whose wrapper had peeled when Recktall Brown had bitten off the end, now wrapped in a cologne-scented handkerchief. Under the table, all over the floor, bits of paper were scattered: RECKTIL BROWN, REKTELL BROWN, RECKTILL BROWNE . . . covering the pile of crucifixes stacked against the wall.

—Where is he?

—Mister Brown take a short trip, say he will return tomorrow. Sometime when he vexed he become very unpredictable.

—What was it?

—He taken a ticket from me, Fuller answered, his chest shaking under the buttoned front of his underwear, yellowed by his life in it.

—But that smell? What's that awful smell? Like hair burning.

—That's what it is, an evil smell, Fuller said. —That's what evil smell like.

IV

> "I've had a good dream, gentlemen," he said in a strange voice, with a new light, as of joy, in his face.
>
> —Dostoevski, *The Brothers Karamazov*

——Sempre con fè sincera . . . la mia preghiera . . . ai santi tabernacoli salì . . .

No sound but this, the radio, behind Esme's door. Otto raised his clenched hand to knock again; and as his knuckles hit the door it came open an abrupt four inches. His smile warped into surprise, every line in his face converted to its contradiction.

Chaby faced him over the chain. Chaby had on a suède jacket, the collar turned up in back; and his hair looked like a pastry-cook's triumph.

——Nell'ora del dolore . . . perchè, Signore,
perchè me ne rimuneri così?

—Is Esme here?

—No.

—Do you know where she is?

—Jesis how should I know. She went to get some coffee.

—Do you know where?

—Jesis how should I know where. Chaby did not slam the door until Otto had reached the stairs.

Esme was sitting at a counter eating toast. She wore no make-up but faint sharp lines on her eyebrows. She smiled, and held out her hand to Otto, who realized, as he sat beside her, that she was breakfasting with the heavy-necked person on her right. He was showing her pictures of snapshot size. —They came out nice, he said. —Much better than most of the girls we get, innocent-looking like. But look at these, look at these of me. The photographs showed him in theatrical attitudes. In one he held a knife. In another, a pistol. In another, a cord, ready for garroting. In all, he wore a hat (as he did now), and a cigarette stub stuck in the corner of his mouth (as one was now). —Whadda you say?

—It's very kind of you, Esme said smiling to him.

—I'll come see you Friday, huh?

—Who was *that?* Otto asked when the man left.

—He's a nice man who is going to act in movies, Esme said.

—What did he want from you?

—I think he wanted me to act in the mo-vies.

They had both smiled, and for a moment they were together. Then Otto said, —I just called at your apartment, and he withdrew his hand.

—And did you see Mister Sinis-ter-ra? she asked, still with her smile.

—Yes. What's he doing up there?

—He came to see me.

—So I gather. When, last night?

—Otto, that isn't nice, she said, sobered, disappointed.

—I'm sorry. Otto, suddenly, could not afford to be left so: he had withdrawn as a woman withdraws, to be followed. There was no pursuit in Esme's eyes, as she turned them from him. —Esme, I'm sorry.

—You're not sorry, Otto. You only say that. It is a habit. There was no admonition and no feeling of hurt in Esme's voice, she spoke to him simply.

—Esme . . . Oh look, that isn't what I meant . . .

—Why do you say he slept with me?

—That isn't what I meant at all, said Otto (and in that instant almost retorted, —Well did he?). Then Esme was smiling happily again. She was smiling at someone behind him.

—Hello Stanley, she said gently. —And do you know Otto?

Stanley nodded and said, —Hello, putting the book he carried from his right to his left hand, so that he could shake hands; but he got no further. His right hand dropped empty to his side.

—Poor Stanley. Why are you so dole-ful?

—I'm all right, Stanley said. He stood there, his only motion a slight weaving toward them, as though his mustache weighed him in their direction. Finally he said, —Did you hear about Charles?

—No, what?

—He's in Bellevue. They took him there last night.

Max came in. He was smiling. He greeted them, and ordered coffee. —How's your play, Otto? he said.

—Well as a matter of fact I'm sort of upset, Otto said. —I misplaced a copy or two of it. In a dispatch case. A pigskin dispatch case. You haven't heard anything? . . .

—No, I haven't heard a thing, Max said agreeably.

—I heard about your play, Stanley said.

—You *found* it?

—No, I mean I just heard about it.

—What did you hear, that it's plagiarized?

—No, I didn't mean that. I'd like to read it.

Otto murmured, —You would, would you . . . Esme said, —Otto has a guilty conscience, and Max raised his coffee cup and said nothing.

—I think I'd better get back uptown, Otto said in a strained tone, casual with great effort.

—Really, Otto? Esme said, surprised, as he took her breakfast check. —Then thank you for my breakfast.

—Did you have bacon and eggs and fruit and pastry?

—No, that was the gentleman from the movies, said Esme.

—All right, he said, crumpling the check in his hand.

—Thank you, Otto.

—Do you want me to go?

—But Otto why should I want you to go?

He lit a fresh cigarette and ordered another cup of coffee. They looked up and Stanley was gone. Esme turned to see him standing undecided outside, on the street corner. —Poor Stanley, she said gently, and smiled.

—He just needs a woman, Max said.

—He needs money, said Esme.

—Money is simply a substitute for the mother in Stanley's case. He has guilt feelings about her being in the hospital, and anyone who gave him money would be filling the mother's place, the nourishment substitute.

—I guess Hannah gives him what he needs, Otto said in morose confidence.

—She'd like to.

—Well she was sleeping with him a couple of nights ago.

—Where'd you hear that?

—She was there undressed at five in the morning. I don't know what else she was doing.

—Was Stanley there?

—Sure he was there, Otto said defiantly.

—Well, so she finally made him, said Max. He smiled and finished his coffee. —You haven't seen my pictures yet, have you Otto. The show opened two days ago. I'm going up to the gallery later, come along?

—Not now, Max. Otto looked at Esme.

—They've sold seven of them, Max said as he left.

—I hate him, Otto said when he was out the door.

—Otto, what a silly thing to say.

—I do, I . . . I just mistrust him so much. When he's around I'd like to have a gun in my pocket. Not to do anything with, just to have it there, he added, and brandished the sling.

—Yes, Esme said, suddenly putting her forehead in her hand and running her fingers into her hair. —Because he will survive.

—Esme, I want to talk to you. Esme . . . She looked up, surprised, and she looked frightened. —I want to talk to you.

—Talk to me, she said, and smiled.

—But not here, not in this place, I . . . We're liable to be . . . Someone's liable to . . . Will you go for a walk with me.

Otto paid for five breakfasts, and they went out. They walked toward Washington Square.

—What, Otto? she asked him, seated on a bench.

—I don't know. I mean, look.

—What did you do to yourself? she asked, pointing to his cheek.

—I cut myself with a lousy razor blade. Look, Esme. I mean, are you really with me? I mean, are you and I, well, together? I mean I always feel like I'm sharing you with everyone in sight.

—Otto, you make everything so difficult for yourself.

—*I* do?

—Yes, Otto. You push something and push it until it breaks.

—I don't want to do that, Esme. I don't mean to.

—And then you do all the more, Otto.

—I love you, Esme. I've kept telling you that. I love you.

—No you don't, Otto.

—I do. I love you.

—No you don't, Otto. You don't even know who I am.

Esme spoke to him calmly, explaining, as though to a child, an adult truth.

—But I do. And even if I don't, is that my fault?

—You had me all filled in before you met me, Otto. There was no room for me at all.

—Esme, don't be ridiculous.

—It is not ridic-ulous, Otto. It is only true, you do not know who I am.

—But I've . . . you've . . . and I don't even know if you've been faithful to me, he burst out.

—You can only be faithful to people one at a time, Otto.

He sat staring at her face turned half from him. Then he reached up and turned it to him with one hand. Esme looked frightened. —Why are you beautiful? he demanded. Her eyes opened more widely, and she tried to lower her face. —Why are you? he repeated, looking at her. She did pull her chin back, and lower her face, silent. —Because you . . . I look at your face, this flesh and bone so many inches high and wide, and the nose sticking out and the . . . the punctures of nostrils, and your lips and I . . . and those two things that are eyes, and I . . . why should that be beautiful, anyhow. What is it? . . . and Otto's voice was suddenly constricted, —What is beauty . . . He cleared his throat, —that your face should be beautiful? . . .

—If it is not beautiful for someone, it does not exist, she said.

—Yes, well . . . well . . . he muttered, lowering his eyes. —Look, he said when he raised them again. —Is it my fault if you haven't even let me know who you are?

—But you never tried, Otto. No part of you ever tried.

—Look, I've done everything I ever could for you, haven't I? I . . . I'm sick and tired of all this foolishness, this . . . I apologize for behaving the way I have with some of your friends but . . .

—You are the only one you make unhappy when you behave badly, Otto. You become the victim of your own observations.

—Do you love me?

—It is not so simple, Otto.

—But you've said you did. She was silent. —I . . . damn it, I get all mixed up with other people, he broke out finally, clenching his free hand over the hand protruding from the sling. —I . . . it's like trying to tie a

knot before a mirror, I know just what to do and then do everything backwards. He sat looking down. Then suddenly he raised his eyes and said, —Do you . . . do I look like Chaby?

Esme looked up at him. She did not smile, but her face cleared and it was lightened, as a smile would have lightened it. —Otto, she said. —No. Why did you ask me that?

—I don't know. Never mind, he said lowering his eyes again. —It's just that I . . . sometimes I feel my face and . . . or I feel myself moving or looking at something in a way that I . . . well never mind, never mind that. Never mind it then.

Suggestion of the smile she had not smiled faded from her face, and quietly she said, —All right.

—But no, I mean, I don't know. Sometimes I do, sometimes I almost do, and then I lose it. Like a story I heard once, a friend of mine told me, somebody I used to know, a story about a forged painting. It was a forged Titian that somebody had painted over another old painting, when they scraped the forged Titian away they found some worthless old painting underneath it, the forger had used it because it was an old canvas. But then there was something under that worthless painting, and they scraped it off and underneath that they found a Titian, a real Titian that had been there all the time. It was as though when the forger was working, and he didn't know the original was underneath, I mean he didn't know he knew it, but it knew, I mean something knew. I mean, do you see what I mean? That underneath that the original is there, that the real . . . thing is there, and on the surface you . . . if you can only . . . see what I mean?

She had rested her head back and closed her eyes. He put his arm over her shoulders, and she sat forward.

—Esme . . . The brief strokes of anxiety and sharp strokes of detail broke the fragments of expression on his face, and he seemed able to catch none of them and fix it congruent upon that image of original honesty which he clutched at so desperately beneath the surface, and the second surface, with each instant more confused in the succession of mocking streaks of parody which he could not control. A moment came when he might have thought, and even understood; but he had not time to embrace it, and it passed. —It's just . . . damn it, Esme . . .

—Please don't swear at me, she said dully, her lowered eyes on a pigeon passing before them.

—I'm sorry, but I . . . Then he laughed with abrupt hoarseness. —Do you remember once when . . . Look, don't you see? I mean, you can't just live this way, you can't . . . wait, where are you going?

—I have to go now, Otto.

—But don't, Esme please don't go, I want to talk to you.

—We have talked, she said, looking him in the face; and Otto reached up and drew an alterant stroke on his mustache.

—I want to marry you, Esme. I, you can't go on this way, I mean so insecure, the way you live, and I want to, if I can save you from . . .

—Save me from! she broke in, mocking. —It is always saving from, she said lowering her eyes, —and never saving for. Everyone fights against things, but people do not fight for things.

Otto stood unsteadily beside her, as though ready to curb her if she turned away. —And I . . . even if you don't love me now, I . . . like Saint John of the Cross said, "Where there is no love, put love, and take out love," and I . . .

She looked up at him, surprised, at that. Then she said, —Is that how he meant it? Before Otto could answer she went on, lowering her eyes again, —No, how did he know what he meant. When people tell a truth they do not understand what they mean, they say it by accident, it goes through them and they do not recognize it until someone accuses them of telling the truth, then they try to recover it as their own and it escapes. The saints were very mean people.

—Yes, I . . . yes that's it, and I . . . I want to marry you.

She looked up and smiled at him. —How could I marry you, if I haven't got any stomach?

—Esme, stop it, I really mean it. I mean, you know I'm sincere. I've always been sincere with you.

She put her hand on his. —Otto, she said. —Sincerity becomes the honesty of people who cannot be honest with themselves.

—Esme . . .

—I have to go away.

—All right then, damn it, go.

She turned and walked away from him. Then he was beside her again.

—Esme . . .

—What is it, Otto? she asked in a quiet voice, looking at him like a stranger whom she did not know.

—Esme, I . . . look, please . . .

—Goodbye, Otto, she said gently.

—Esme . . .

She walked away from him easily. It was only eleven o'clock in the morning.

•

Gazing wistfully into a shop window filled with ladies' lingerie, including a brassière in black lace with black satin hands cupping the mannequin's composition bosom, Anselm stood with a six-year-old girl by the hand. In his other hand, Anselm had Tolstoy's *Kingdom of God*, but it was folded in a magazine with a girl and an umbrella, and nothing else, on the cover, so that all that showed of the small book was the spine. The little girl was looking up the street, in the direction of Stanley's approach, and she pulled her escort in that direction, but he hung back, rubbing the rough inflammations on his chin, and staring into the shop window.

Stanley might have gone on without disturbing that reverie, and so home to work (he was carrying his cardboard practice keyboard and a book), but Max was approaching from the other corner, pausing now to greet Otto, who came from the direction of the park.

Without a word Anselm took Stanley's book from his hand, looked at it and handed it back, muttering something. Then he said abruptly, —I dreamt about you last night. Stanley looked anxious. —I know it was you, it must have been you, Anselm went on, before the others came near. —I was crossing the street in this dream and somebody, somebody I knew well, it must have been you, was coming across the other way with something cradled up in his arms like a baby. It was wrapped in a black shawl, I just took for granted it's a baby, and then he said, then you said, I want you to meet my mother. I look and it was a tiny little old woman, this tiny little old woman was in the shawl . . .

—Yes, but . . . all right, but . . .

—What's the matter? Anselm was looking at him with intense curiosity.

—I just wish you wouldn't . . . Stanley looked one way and the other and down. —It's sort of . . .

—It was, it was strange, it was kind of a nightmare.

Stanley raised his eyes, and they looked at each other intently until Max was upon them. Then Anselm laughed suddenly, pulling the little girl round between them, and spoke as though carrying on the same conversation. —Come on, play us something. Look, Stanley brought his instrument, he said, brandishing his magazine at the practice keyboard which Stanley held defensively in front of him. —He's going to play us something by Vivaldi. Come on, Stanley, for Christ sake don't be so bashful, some of that nice Jesuit baroque music, be-do-be-boo, be-be, boody doody boo . . . did you hear the one about the boy who sat up on the rock? and fitted fiddle strings . . .

—Please . . . Stanley began.

—Here comes Otto, Max said.

—And with every erection he played a selection from Johann Sebastian Bach.

—I have to get home, Stanley said.

—To what, your five-fingered honeymoon?

—To . . . to work, Stanley said, as Anselm turned to look across the street, where a tall man hunched in a green wool shirt gave a nod of recognition slight enough to be disavowed if it were not returned. Max nodded back agreeably. —Who is that? Stanley asked Max.

—Some half-ass critic, Anselm said, —a three time psychoanaloser. He spat into the gutter. —With his fake conversion to the Church. You remember that little tiny girl that used to be around? she came about up to his waist. He used to take her home and dress her in little girl's clothes and rape her.

—Too much Dostoevski, Max said.

—The stupid bastard with his half-ass conversion, Anselm muttered, looking from the child who held his hand, glazedly at the sidewalk. —Christ, he said, rubbing his chin, —that's what kills me, a guy like that . . . as a colored girl, in a plaid skirt which Max identified from behind as the Stuart tartan, passed saying —Reading Proust isn't just reading a *book*, it's an ex*peri*ence and you can't reject an experience . . . to the boy she was with.

—It's the Black Watch, said Anselm, and turning to Stanley, —Why don't you change your luck, Stanley. You . . . God damn it what are you looking at me that way for? . . .

—I . . . I'm cold, Stanley said lowering his eyes. His jaw was shaking.

—Cold! You . . . you . . . What did you do to your face, anyway? What's the matter with your chin, anyway? Anselm burst out suddenly.

—I got mixed up this morning, Stanley said handling his chin, —and I shaved with the toothpaste instead of . . .

—With the toothpaste! Anselm said, withdrawing with a quick shock of a laugh. —You ought to try a cored apple filled with cold cream, you . . .

—And last night I had a terrible experience, Stanley went on, agitated, looking up at both of them. —I

went into a delicatessen to get a can of soup and some bread, and the man behind the money . . . I mean behind the cash register was counting up the money and there was some in a paper bag on the counter, and I picked up the wrong bag and almost went out with the money, and when I went back with it and said I was sorry they . . . they weren't nice about it at all.

A blond boy in tight-fitted dungarees passed saying, —Zheeed . . .

—Well what the hell would you go back with it for?

—They almost called the police.

—Stanley's Christian spirit will undo us all, said Max, who had been standing back.

—Yeah, we'd make him a saint if it wasn't so God damn expensive, Anselm retorted, looking at Stanley. —Three million lire for a lousy canonization, he muttered.

—No, he won't do. Max stepped back and looked Stanley up and down. —He eats meat. His body would putrefy before they could get the halo on. Poor peasant girls from southern Europe make the best ones, brought up on beans.

—That's true, said Anselm, musing, looking down. Then he looked up querulously at Max.

From the drugstore behind them came a fat youth who looked, at this distance, to have his beard painted on. It dripped to a point at his chin. —If *she* won't pray for me, I don't know who *will*, he was saying animatedly, tossing the words about before him with plump fluttering hands. The boy with him took his arm as they crossed the street.

Max had nodded. —He gave my show a good write-up, Max explained.

—Do you know him? Stanley asked.

—You can't go to a single vernissage without seeing him. He says stupid things with a manner, you know, he has a certain style, so that people remember him as clever.

—People like that make me nervous, Stanley said.

—People like what.

—When they're so . . . queer.

—Queer! Anselm burst out, and continued to watch them cross the street. —That one, queer? He's not a homosexual, he's a Lesbian. Max laughed; and Anselm went on, —And that boy poet with him, for Christ sake. Poet! . . . these limp flabby-assed little . . . boy poets who sit around waiting for somebody to give them the business in their . . . Jesus Christ, these boy poets and their common asphodel. Anselm laughed again, a tight constrained laugh looking across the street at the receding couple. —Their common asphodel, he laughed, taking the magazine from under Max's arm, and recovering the fit of abstraction he'd sunk into a moment before as he turned the pages.

—I liked your poem, Stanley said to Max. —The one they just published? That line about Beauty, serenely disdains to destroy us?

—Yes, you . . . almost dropped this, Max interrupted quickly, righting the practice keyboard which was gripped in Stanley's hands, with a quick glance at Anselm. But Anselm had apparently not heard. He looked up from the magazine to nod over his shoulder at the approaching figure, and said,

—Otto? He's the guy who's been laying Esme?

—She's been laying him, said Max.

Otto approached with his head down, as though it were weighed so by the rampage going on inside, and his features declined to the edges of his face, the look of one seeking something, or perhaps someone, a person he could talk this over with, someone who had suffered good intentions put to bad use by others, and would understand (by which Otto, talking to himself, meant sympathize); someone sensitive (he meant weak) enough to appreciate, and experienced (he meant bitter) enough to justify his dilemma. Stanley appeared in the interior rampage, bowed, understanding, sensitive, experienced: he raised his eyes and Stanley appeared, talking with (untrustworthy) Max and (odious) Anselm.

—What does he wear that stupid sling around for? Anselm asked; but Otto did not look affronted, for as he crossed into hearing they were talking of Charles. —I saw him this morning, Anselm was saying. —Who was the old bag with him?

—That was his mother, Max said. —She came from Grand Rapids to get him out of Bellevue.

Stanley had stepped back looking pained, and as always, about to depart but unable to do so. Otto and Max exchanged sounds, and Max reached for the magazine sconced under Otto's slung arm, leaving a newspaper rolled there. —I just picked that up, Otto said for no apparent reason, as Max opened *Collectors Quarterly*.

—You had it this morning when I saw you, Max said, looking up to smile.

—Oh yes I . . . I saw you earlier, didn't I, Otto said discountenanced immediately, and sought a cigarette as though reaching for a shoulder holster.

—Christ! Look at this, will you look at this? Anselm brought out, holding up the magazine he'd taken

from Max. It was large, on heavy coated paper, full of pictures, the most popular weekly in the country. The page Anselm exhibited was a fashion photograph. —Will you look at her? Can you imagine putting the boots to that? What man would want to lay her? He rolled the magazine and thrust it under Otto's arm, exchanging it for the newspaper. —Skinny, flat-chested, no hair on her head and no more in her pants than a ten-year-old boy, that's what they're trying to make women look like, these queer . . . what's that smell? He stopped and sniffed. He looked at his own shoes, then at Stanley's. —Did you step in it, Stanley?

—In what? Stanley asked helplessly.

—In what! Christ! . . . you wouldn't say shit if you had a mouthful. Then he glanced up to see that Otto had detached himself from them, and stood scraping his shoe on the curb. He started to say something more, but his eye caught the reproduction in *Collectors Quarterly* which Max held open. It was Velasquez, *Venus and Cupid*. A sound of admiration escaped Anselm. —Jesus, how'd you like to hang that on the wall and play hide-the-baloney every night? The little girl pulled his hand. He yanked her back, almost dropping the book folded in the magazine under his arm, and opened the newspaper to the front-page story. It was a vice probe, and he broke out again, —Look at this. In a city of eight million they find a half-dozen girls peddling their ass and it's the greatest clean-up in history. That kills me. Here, I don't want to look at the God damn thing, he finished, pushing it back under the slung arm as Otto returned, muttering to himself.

—I have to go, Stanley said.

—They did a great thing when they cleaned up the whorehouses out of New York City, a great thing for the high-school girls, Anselm said as the newspaper fell to the sidewalk. —If a nice girl isn't clapped up now before she's sixteen it's her own lousy fault. Then he turned on Otto, who attempted to raise his eyebrows as he straightened up, knocking the dirt from his newspaper. —How'd you like to go in business with me and Stanley? Anselm demanded abruptly.

—It hardly sounds . . .

—Artificial insemination, Anselm went on more loudly. —We bootleg the stuff. We're going to advertise in the movie magazines. Girls! Have a baby by your favorite movie star. I fill the barrels and Stanley peddles it . . .

Stanley had stepped back, looking down at the little girl whom Anselm pulled forward as he waved the nude with the umbrella in the air. —Which end of the business do you want to go in?

Otto muttered something, looking at his newspaper.

—Come on. I've got some nice pictures, Anselm went on more excitedly, —nice bodies with movie stars' heads montaged . . .

—Come off it, Max interrupted him.

Anselm turned to Max. —What's the matter, he said. The spots on his face had become inflamed by the wind blowing down from the north, and his hair was standing up. —You've never had it look up and spit at you?

—Come off it, for Christ sake. You're crazy.

—Who wouldn't be, in all . . . this, Anselm said breathlessly, waving the magazine so that the book folded inside it flew out. It slid along the sidewalk and went into the gutter. —Isn't any madness preferable to . . . all this?

Anselm stood there shaking. Then he saw Stanley going to pick his book from the gutter. —Leave it alone! he cried. —Leave it alone! Leave it alone! Leave it alone!

Stanley stopped and stood back, not before he had seen the title of the book. Anselm stooped before him to pick it up, hawking and spitting into the street as he straightened before Stanley. He wiped the book on his trousers, covering it with his hand as he did so. —For Christ sake, he muttered, getting his breath.

Stanley put his hand out with the palm up, and took a step toward him.

—And stop . . . stop being so . . . Anselm took a step back. —Stop being so God damn *h*umble, he said, as the little girl got his hand and drew him back another step. Max had taken Stanley's arm.

—You know God damn well that . . . that humility is defiance, Anselm went on disjointedly. —And you . . . that simplicity . . . simplicity today is sophisticated . . . that simplicity is the ultimate sophistication today . . .

They had turned their backs and stepped into the street. Max was guiding Stanley by the arm.

—Hey, what did the chicken say when she laid the square egg? Hey Stanley, I'll dream about you again tonight. Hey Stanley, I'll dream about you again tonight. What did the chicken say when she laid the square egg? . . . Anselm cried after them.

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None of them spoke as they walked together, until Otto, after an apprehensive look over his shoulder, said —God, he is crazy, isn't he. He reached up to stroke his mustache, which was quivering, and asked,

—Who's that little girl?

—Don Bildow's daughter, Anselm takes care of her sometimes.

—I wouldn't let a daughter near him if she was five. I wouldn't even if she was one, I wouldn't even trust him as a baby-sitter, you know? I'm not kidding, I wouldn't.

Max glanced up from *Collectors Quarterly* smiling. —That story he told about that fellow, dressing that girl up in child's clothes, that was him.

—Who? Stanley asked quickly, and stopped short.

—Anselm. He's the one who did it, himself.

Stanley came on with his head lowered, staring at the pavement, walking carefully. —Do you think it's true, that he lives on dog food? he asked finally.

Otto laughed unpleasantly. —Where'd you hear that?

—From him, he told me himself. Canned dog food, he said it isn't bad if you have enough catsup.

—Somebody ought to shoot him, Anselm, said Otto, —his crazy yammering about God.

—But have you ever read any of his poems? Stanley asked across Max, who walked between them with the magazine open. —There was one that was a beautiful poem, it was about Averroes, the Arab thinker in the Middle Ages, and should we understand in order to believe, or if we should believe in order to understand . . .

—Look at this, Max said holding up *Collectors Quarterly* open to a picture of a piece of sculpture by Lipchitz, titled *Mother and Child II*. —Who do you think writes these program notes? Listen, "It was some time after the sculptor began a series of studies of a woman's torso that he suddenly recognized in them a resemblance to the head of a bull. He developed the bull's head further until he achieved . . ."

—But there's more, Stanley broke in, —when he says . . . when Anselm says that God has become a sentimental theatrical figure in our literature, that God is a melodramatic device used to throw people in novels into a turmoil . . .

—Fairly obvious guilt feelings, Max murmured, lowering the magazine to look up as they approached the curb. On either side of him, they walked watching their way carefully; though Max, who scarcely glanced up from the pages, was the only one of them who knew where they were going.

—But it isn't that simple. Don't you wonder why . . . why everything is negative? Stanley craned round to look up at both of them. —Why just exactly the things that used to be the aspirations of life, those are just the things that have become the tolls? I mean, like . . . well like girls having babies? They used to be the fruit of love, the thing people prayed for above everything, and now, now they're the price of . . . Everything's sort of contraceptive, everything wherever you look is against conceiving, until finally you can't conceive any more. Then the time comes when you want something to work for you, the thing you've been denying all your life, and then it won't work . . .

And Stanley's voice fell behind them, as they crossed the street and he waited for a cab which turned in front of him. He caught up again saying, —Everything is so transient, everything in America is so temporary . . . But Max was talking to Otto, who stopped at that moment wide-eyed on the opposite curb to demand,

—Her? I didn't even know you knew her. She needs a doctor? You mean, some man . . . ?

—What do you think I mean, a duck? Max laughed. —That's what I've heard, anyhow, he added, walking on with the magazine open again. —I guess we were just lucky.

—Lucky? Otto repeated, pausing, then hurrying up beside Max. —You mean you . . . you've slept with her?

—Not for years, Max answered; and with a sidelong glance at Otto, went on in the same casual tone, holding up a two-page reproduction in *Collectors Quarterly*, —Look at this, they describe it as the "algebra of suffering," this Flemish painting. Hugo van der Goes. Otto muttered something, and looked at the picture if only because it was something to take his attention. But the confusion did not leave his face, and the lines round his eyes, gathered in a wince, became fixed so staring at the *Descent from the Cross* until Max turned the page.

—But . . . he murmured, commencing to raise a hand, commencing to speak (for though he had been seen carrying this magazine, which had cost a dollar, he'd only had it open once, and then, with chance venery, upon the Velasquez).

—This Dierick Bouts is remarkable, isn't it, Max went on of the reproduction on the next page, paraphrasing the caption, —the canniness, the control. Even in black and white, the rigid lines and the constrained attitudes, there is a sort of "algebra of suffering," isn't there.

—That van . . . the one on the page before, Otto commenced again.

—Van der Goes, there was an overwhelming uncertain passion about it, wasn't there, Max commented, turning a page, not back, but over to a portrait, —Van der Weyden, it's rather saccharine . . .

—Saccharine . . . ? Stanley stayed his hand, with the first evidence that he was looking at the pictures over the other shoulder.

Max shrugged. —Ingratiating then, he said, lowering the magazine from Stanley's hand, to turn another page. —there's nothing like the perfect control . . . Max added and, having turned the page whose caption he was paraphrasing, went on, —There is a great sense of lucency and multiple perspective about these early Flemish . . .

—The separate multiple consciousnesses of the . . . things in these Flemish primitives, that is really the force and the flaw in these paintings, Otto said, —you might say, he added.

—What do you mean?

—Well, you might say that the thoroughness with which they feel obliged to recreate the atmosphere, and the . . . these painters who aren't long on suggestion, but pile up perfection layer on layer, and the detail, it's . . . it becomes both the force and the flaw . . .

—Where'd you get that? Max asked him; and when he got no immediate answer, looked up. Otto looked down immediately, but his expression did not change: it was fixed, like the dull compulsive tone in his voice which had come to it when he interrupted. —Like a writer who can't help devoting as much care to a moment as to an hour . . . he went on, now slightly more hurriedly, his voice, like the anxiety mounting with slight stabs in his face, straining an automatic effort of memory whose fullness he could not grasp, but only repeat its thrusts. —The perfection . . . Then he silenced, staring down ahead of him.

—There is an illusion of increased powers of eyesight, looking at these, even in reproduction. They're almost perfect, Max commented, flicking over pages. He glanced at Otto's averted profile, and turned to Stanley. —Isn't there, Stanley?

—Yes, but, Stanley began, faltering, —these men, these painters who were creating right out of themselves, and all of this, all this harmony with everything around them, with all the things, all the spiritual things around them that supported them, that they knew would be there tomorrow, and, in the Guild, why in the Guild it was the opinion of your fellow artists that mattered, not competition before a lot of people who didn't know anything but the price. The Guild even took care of your burial, he added plaintively.

Max laughed, his brief cordial mockery. —I'll bury you myself, Stanley. You can go home and make up all the music you want to now.

—But it isn't making it up, inventing music, it's like . . . remembering, and like, well van Gogh says about painting, when he would take a drawing of Delacroix as a subject and improvise with colors, not as himself, he says, but searching for memories of their pictures, the "vague consonance of colors," the memory that was himself, his own interpretation.

They stopped together at another curb. A store loudspeaker poured out upon them a vacuous tenor straining, —I'm dreaming of a white Christmas . . . with insipid mourning hope. And Stanley, escaping, abandoning his companions to that lugubrious assault, moved from the curb as though called forth by Cherubini: trumpets and the clash of brass: the horn sounded, and he leaped away from the immense and silent automobile guided by a brittle dame hung like some florid gothic tracery behind the steering wheel, her chin jutting just above it, sweeping round from Washington Square.

Max picked up the practice keyboard from the street and brought it up to him on the curb opposite, where he stood quivering. —What happened? he asked. —That moving Christmas music?

—Well it isn't . . . they have no right to . . . Stanley tried to speak, out of breath, accepting the cardboard keyboard like a delicate instrument.

—What do you want on Sixth Avenue, *The Messiah*?

—They have no right to . . . cheapen . . .

—Ask them to play, *Yes We Have No Bananas*, Max said, smiling. —That's from *The Messiah*, and it's more their line.

—What do you mean? Stanley was trying to wipe the tire marks from the length of the white keys.

—I mean *Yes We Have No Bananas* was lifted right out of Handel's *Messiah*. Come on, Max said taking his arm, and looking round for Otto. —What's the matter with both of you today?

—You don't have to . . . tell me things like that, Stanley said, pulling away.

A man standing with his back to a shop window said, —It won't snow, it's too warm to snow. And Otto, looking where the man was looking, over the buildings at the northern sky, realized that he was not shivering with cold, but simply shivering. And he heard Max say,

—You want everybody to be like you, that's your trouble Stanley.

—I want everyone to be like I want to be, Stanley answered.

Otto met Stanley's eyes. And though the sky was dull, and there was no such color in sight, they appeared green, brilliant, burning into green in that prolonged moment as Otto stood bound and apparently unable to

mount the curb between them. But it was only a moment, the passage of a shadow, and Max's voice, breaking between them, brought Otto up.

—You might say that the man who wrote *Yes We Have No Bananas* was searching for memories? a vague consonance of sounds? . . . Max began good-humoredly. Then looking at Otto he said, —What's the matter, you look all disjointed.

—I don't know, but . . . yes, disjointed, Otto said mounting the curb, speaking unevenly as he fell in beside them. —Like . . . do you know what I feel like? Like when a clay reproduction is made of an original statue, and then they take the copy and cut it behind the head with fine wire, and behind the arms and the legs, and those are all moved and it's cast again.

—Why? Where'd you hear that?

—To be sold as part of a series, a series of the original, a series that never existed, I . . . I read about it in a book a friend of mine had, a friend a long time ago, he . . . listen . . . Otto groped.

As though spurred by his faltering confusion, Max interrupted, —I knew there was something I meant to tell you. That story you sent to Edna, for a magazine that publisher she works for owns, they're bringing out my book you know.

—What about the story, I sent it in for some guy I met at your party.

—She thinks you wrote it, Max told him. —That you wrote it and sent it under another name.

—She thinks *I* wrote it? But why would I have written it? I didn't even read it, I . . . why would I do a thing like that.

—I guess she thought you were playing it safe.

—But she . . . but God damn it . . . Otto brandished the sling.

—She says you used to be clever when you were in college, writing, but you sort of faded out, Max went on agreeably. —She says the reason you were clever was because you didn't know how to be honest.

—Well the only reason she's honest is because she's too God damn dumb to be clever, I mean if she was honest, but she . . . why the hell should she go around saying a thing like that about me? for no reason?

—No reason? Max repeated, and put a hand on Otto's shoulder. —Nobody resents you more than somebody who's loved you.

Otto twisted away from him, but unsteadily as though trying to retain the hand on his shoulder but turn his face to hide the trembling lip. —Why do I . . . why do people have to be so . . . so . . . he mumbled brokenly as detailed fragments of expressions broke over his face one after another until he grabbed with a whole hand round the eyes and drew the hand down, as though to wipe away these abrupt strokes on the surface which mocked the clear image of his anger beneath. Then he brought out a cigarette, and caught both lips round it.

—Forget it, Max said, and patting his shoulder before he removed his hand went on as cordially, —Say, I've meant to tell you again how much I liked your play, Otto . . . Otto mumbled something without looking up. —Because when other people have said they didn't like it, I've told them . . .

—You've told them what! Otto broke out. He looked up to see Max smiling at him.

—Don't be so touchy, Max said to him.

—It's just . . . all this . . . damned . . . Otto hunched again, looking down before him. —And when people say I stole it, that I plagiarized.

—Somebody, I can't think, who was it, Max appeared sympathetically thoughtful, —said they thought you'd lifted parts of *The Sound and the Fury*.

—The what?

—Faulkner's novel, *The Sound and the Fury*, that you'd plagiarized . . .

—I've never even read it, I've never read *The Sound and the Fury* damn it, so how the hell . . . Otto looked over to see Stanley look troubled and start to speak. —I mean, damn it . . .

—What's the difference? Max laughed. —I noticed a couple of little things you'd picked up, but what's the difference.

—What do you mean, what little things?

—Little things, lines here and there. That line of Ben Shahn's, "You cannot invent the shape of a stone" for instance.

—But . . . who the hell is Ben Shahn? That line, a friend of mine, a long time ago, somebody I used to know, said . . .

—What's the difference. Max smiled. —As Stevenson says, we all live by selling something. He raised a hand to Otto's shoulder again. —What's the difference. The money? You have a real complex about money don't you Otto, a real castration complex without it.

—Yes, the money, Otto muttered, —but, damn it . . .

—It doesn't have to be money, just money, Stanley broke in, —if he . . . if it's his work, if it's his own,

and he wants . . .

—His own! Max repeated, and his laugh this time was sharper, more unkind, edged with contempt. —Look, he said to Otto, —that magazine of mine you've got there, open it. Max made no gesture of surrendering *Collectors Quarterly*, and taking the other magazine himself. —Just open it to . . . there, here it is, this thing on Sherlock Holmes, "the first authorized Sherlock Holmes story to appear" since Arthur Conan Doyle died. See? Authorized. It "was written after exhaustive study of Sir Arthur's literary methods . . ." he read, as Otto held the magazine before them. —See? these two men who wrote it, "They studied such minutiae as Doyle's sentence rhythms, his use of the comma, the number of words in the average Holmes sentence . . . The authors have felt no temptation to vary the pattern which Doyle usually observed . . . Special pains have been taken to reproduce certain Doylean literary tricks . . ."

—But what do you mean? Otto asked him.

—What's the difference? Max asked in return, bringing *Collectors Quarterly* up. —Authorized paintings by Dierick Bouts? van der Goes? Who authorizes them? Somebody says, One wishes there were more stories by Conan Doyle, somebody else wishes there were more paintings by Hugo van der Goes. So, after a careful study of the early Flemish painter's technique . . . such minutiae as his brush-stroke rhythms, his use of perspective, the number of figures in the average van der Goes canvas . . . What's the difference? You fake a Dürer by taking the face from one and turning it around, the beard from another, the hat from another, you've got a Dürer, haven't you?

—But only on the surface, Stanley said.

—On the surface! How much deeper do people go? the people who buy them?

—But this, this isn't a . . . forgery, Otto said holding out the large picture magazine. —It's no secret, they tell you right here . . .

—That's just what I mean, Max said impatiently. —What's the difference now? In our times? He laughed again, and folded *Collectors Quarterly* under his arm. —As long as it's "authorized." Isn't that right, Stanley?

Stanley answered immediately, —No.

—No? He studied Stanley's face with mock interest and shock. —Is there something diabolic about bringing Sherlock Holmes back to life?

—The devil is the father of false art, Stanley said quietly. He was walking carefully on the pavement along the edge, his face expressing a concentration which Otto's echoed, but a vague echo, as Otto walked staring at the pavement, not listening to them.

—Stanley believes in sin, don't you, Stanley? Max persisted.

—If we believe that love is weakness? Stanley brought out, —and people resent it, because they think it's an admission of weakness, and they draw away from it . . . and that's why you kill the thing you love, because it's your weakness personified. If you kill it, you kill your weakness before it kills you.

—I said sin, Max cajoled him.

—But, was there love? before sin, a sense of sin, made it possible? Stanley said in the same low tone, without looking up. —Before there was sin, to be suffered and forgiven?

—Love! You in love? Max laughed.

—Art is the work of love.

—Art is a work of necessity, Max said.

—Was it a good story? Otto asked finally.

—The Sherlock Holmes thing? It was lousy.

—No I mean, I mean, the one that I . . . that was sent up to . . . her.

—It was lousy too, Max answered.

—But isn't there a moment . . . Stanley went on, —a moment when love and necessity become the same thing?

They reached an open square where the sky was almost black, looking north, as most people were doing. Shops were lighted, and the lighted windows of the buildings stood out against the sky, holding it off, and themselves to earth.

—Where are we going, anyhow? Otto asked.

—I'm going right up here, Max said, nodding ahead. Then, noticing Stanley's careful walk again, he said, —Step on a crack, Break your mother's back . . . and Stanley stopped. —Come on, Max laughed, and when Stanley came on, now obviously avoiding cracks in the pavement, Max said to him, —I can believe you'd really believe that, Stanley. What an unspotted soul for the devil to bid for. What do you think he'd give me, if I sold you to him?

—You couldn't, Stanley said.

—All right, we'll sell Otto. You wouldn't mind, would you Otto?

—Christ no, not at this point.

—You couldn't, Stanley said again.

—Well Faust did, damn it, Otto broke out morosely, —Faust sold his soul to the devil.

—No. That's a fallacy, Stanley said looking round at him soberly. —That evil can take entire possession of the soul like that. Evil is self-limited.

—Damn it, it was his soul, Otto said defiantly, —and he sold it to the devil.

—No. It was not his to dispose of. We belong to our souls, not our souls to us.

—Ontological dialectics, said Max, as they approached a subway entrance.

Otto stood unsteadily, as though afloat, away from them, as Max clapped Stanley jovially on the shoulder and said, —Stanley's fired by a divine spark. The words seemed to come from the great distance of sounds over water before a storm. He turned to Otto without breaking his smile. —But you and me . . . ?

Otto stood there, his arm shivering in the sling, the wind blowing his hair up from behind. —Yes, he said, raising his eyebrows, —sometimes it's difficult . . . he curled his lip slightly against its tendency to tremble, —it's difficult to shed our human nature. Then he turned away quickly and stepped back to the curb, where he stood with his back to them, scraping the edge of his shoe. He heard Max laugh, and call to him, —A little always sticks . . . And when he turned, Max was disappearing into the pit of the subway. There was only Stanley, frail against the dark sky.

—What's the matter? Stanley asked him as he approached slowly.

—There was something . . . Otto said, looking him in the face again, in the eyes, which were dull with the sky beyond. —Something . . .

—What? . . . Stanley looked at him anxiously.

—I don't know, earlier, that moment . . . Otto said, looking more confused. —For a moment, a feeling that you . . . that you and I . . . It was as though you were someone who had been . . . He faltered, broke off, and looked up, recovering. —Damn it. He's gone, Max?

—Yes, he's gone, down there, Stanley pointed.

—And this damned thing, he left me this and took *Collectors Quarterly*, it cost a dollar.

—Do you want it back? Stanley commenced helpfully. —If I see him . . .

—That painting, Otto murmured, looking down again. He rubbed his free hand over his face. —The Christ in that painting, I wanted to look at it, I wanted to look at it again, there was something . . . familiar . . . he went on vaguely, mumbling, —and the Virgin . . .

After a pause, Stanley said, —But there should be, Christ . . .

—Not that, not that, Otto waved him back, and stood gripping his temples in an open hand. Then he dropped his hand and shook his head. —Never mind, he said. Looking at Stanley, he tried a strained smile. —The divine spark . . . he muttered, at the anxious face being weighed toward him by the uneven mustache. —And what are you going to do with it, anyhow? he brought out in sudden derision.

—But that, Stanley said, coming a step nearer him, —that is what undoes us all. He stood before Otto looking into Otto's eyes, waiting; but saw them narrow.

—I hate him, Otto said, changing again as abruptly.

—Who?

—Him. Max.

—But, why?

—Yes . . . because he'll survive.

•

Every street she crossed, the black sky showed to her right, as though these were tunnels through to the "chilly hell" of the poet's *Elegy on the Thousand Children*, through to Boreas, and beyond the north wind. And so every time she stepped from the curb, going west, she tried not to look; and always had looked before she stepped up on the curb ahead.

As she came nearer the river, the pavement and the walks were wet with the light snow which had commenced since she started. She passed an empty baby carriage, and stopped, a step beyond it, to look back and make sure it was empty. Then she looked up and smiled at the woman who had been shaking a mop from the window above, and that woman only stared at her until she went on; and even then looked up, and a minute later stopped shaking the mop again, seeing her pause down the block and kneel on the wet walk to help a child with an entangled mitten-string, kneeling there, the narrow eyes of the woman in the window had it, a moment too long.

On a trestle at the far end of the street an engine smashed a coupling closed with a shattering sound which was gone immediately, leaving a wail from the river beyond suspended on the particles of silt in the air, to be exhausted slowly as they were borne to earth by the scales of snow shed from above.

Where a crate lay broken on the sidewalk she turned in at the doorway in this last block of Horatio

Street. She sought the bell with no name and then, leaning against the door it came open before her finger found the bell, and his door was just inside. In front of it stood a wastebasket full: some bottles and tubes, electric-light bulbs, and that door was not tight closed.

—Asleep? she whispered, entering. And she closed the door behind her silently, a hand on the knob and her back against it, slowly, as she looked round. Then she coughed, and covered her mouth quickly, for the room was full of a bitter cluster of smells from the smoldering pile in the fireplace. In fact some of it had burned on the hearth and lay smoking spilled out on the floor, and she hurried over and kicked the burning pieces back up on the bricks seeing, as she did so, the blackened edges of photographs, details of brushwork highly enlarged.

There were torn bits of paper, torn pieces of canvas and splinters of wood, a few books, some eggshells, a small squirrel-hair brush, strewn among the bright pigmented spots on the floor. Beside the low bed, where she went and sat on the edge, was a broken glass, a box of Dutch cigars unopened, a coconut, and a leather box filled with cuff links, collar buttons, paper clips, two penknives, another knife, bladeless, and a knifeless blade, buttons, pen points, studs, a number of keys, some brass wood-screws, a single pearl earring, and prominently, two large archaically studded hoops of gold. She leant down and wiped her wet cheeks with the end of a blanket that trailed from the welter on the floor. Then she straightened, on the very edge of the bed, and turned putting a hand forth, gently. —You . . . she whispered.

She sat like that a minute more, seeming not to breathe, then she whispered again, —You . . . but more tartly, —if you keep your eyes closed, then where are you now without me?

The bare bulb glared on her standing up, and she said, —It is very warm in here, taking two, and three, and four steps, taking off her coat. She laid it on a high stool and looked round her again, stood singly beneath the bare bulb and casting no shadow until she turned and walked toward the only whole canvas in the room, turned face-to-wall, where her shadow fell on it and on a single plane expanded over the rough and soiled back of it. She got hold of the frame and turned it from the wall.

—Do you reproach me? she said, after a time of looking at it though their eyes did not meet, and then she extended her hand and traced its features. Then she whispered something and abruptly turned her back.

Frank, Bishop of Zanzibar, lay on the floor at her foot; and she kicked the book away. Then she walked over to where the hinged mirrors stood against another wall, turned them open and closed them again quickly.

—You . . . she said again looking back to the bed, for she'd turned quickly.

There on the floor at her feet was a drawing, it was a meticulous self-portrait, and she took a step before she saw it, saw it was not a detail of brushwork that is, and leaned down to pick it up. —You, she said, —all upside-down. Then she righted it and repeated, —all upside-down.

She stood there staring somewhere between the bed and the drawing as though a hand were on her; and then turned and pulled the mirrors again. She cocked one leaf open with the toe of her right foot, holding the picture up with effort as though it were a great weight, and looked at the prompt emergences, settling her eyes on the even image, the same that she held in her hands; then raised her eyes to the second image of her own face, and let the leaf go closed with a clap, so that a part of it broke out and fell to the floor separating as soon as it sounded, to reflect the glare of the bulb in the ceiling back, in shapes of breakage, to the ceiling.

The room was filled with the odor of destruction: as though there might arise on the smoke a difference, when a storehouse of chemicals burned: here in the squat fireplace were chemicals, some of them inorganic, and the organic transmutations suffering oxidation with the immediacy of a chain reaction on the page of a chemistry text; but where, in this consummation, the law of the conservation of energy? Could brush strokes make the difference, then? Science in magnitude, biology and chemistry as triumphantly articulate as subordinates are always, offer no choice but abjure it in frantic effort to perfect a system without alternatives, the very fact of their science based on measurement; and measurement, designed to predicate finalities, refusing the truth which shelters in possibility: in the weight of the smell of the smoke there was more than the death of the body, the cellular sucking construction, hunger of tissues unconscious of any end but identical reproduction. But if strokes of creation fed the flames, strokes in whose every instant possibility had been explored for the finality which is perfection, torn apart in the attempt to free it into the delineation of that baffled enclosure of its own medium, here were brush strokes whose future had been dictated by the thwarting enclosure of the past, a past whose future was struck dying with every instant of the delineation of its everlasting life.

—You, she whispered, back seated on the edge of the bed, and then kicking out, —Go away egg . . . in a mocking voice as the coconut rolled away from her foot. She raised her eyes across the room again to the picture she'd turned from the wall; and faint under a single thin coat the Byzantine earrings showed through. —But . . .

—with your eyes closed, she whispered, turning back to the bed there. —I dream and wake up. The love I have from others is not love of me, but where they try to find themselves, loving me. I dream and I wake up, and then at that moment you are somewhere being real to other people; and they are a part of your reality; and I am not . . . But you are the only person I am real with . . .

She sat staring down.

—If you are the only person I am real with . . .

Her eyes strayed; and suddenly she had the leather box, spilling everything but the archaic hoops of gold which she held in a hand and was up, raising and dropping her shadow across the room in an instant as she crossed and went into the bathroom.

When she came out, wearing the Byzantine earrings, there was blood on them and on her shoulders, running down in singular unpaired lines over her bared breasts, breaking where they broke away from her, mocking their slightness by assailing it, respecting their fullness by parting above the two swollen stains whose color they ridiculed in passing, down, to delineate the unbroken rising below along the sharply broken lines that her walking so quickly forced with each step, to come apart and disappear where that rising fell away in the white hollow of her thighs.

—Then with your eyes closed, she whispered, pulling a blanket from the welter of blankets over her.

The fire had died under the steady censure of the electric glare, and its emanations contended bitterly until, one by one, their poisonous violence was exhausted by such severe emergency, and left only lavender to rise and spread in a diffusion which penetrated without edge, which cut without sharpness, impetuous without haste, filling without distending as a color deepens in saturation and exalts in brilliance at once.

—Oh yes . . . she whispered fiercely, —Oh yes, oh yes, oh yes . . .

As the fire died even the lavender became indistinct, and lay in with the smell of Venice turpentine, and stand oil, burnt photographic prints, burnt canvas and tortured gesso until, when she woke, there was neither triumph nor dissension in the air she breathed, standing, looking round her, back to the bed suddenly, and round her again.

She put on her coat, and sat on the stool where she'd got it from. She sat there for some time, almost under the light, so that her shadow lay steady and small over an irregular blow of verdigris on the floor, confining its elation within the clear and casual bounds of her retreat.

—Why did you not write to me? she said, still unmoving, not even to look toward the bed.

Then the green she had retired leaped out under the light as she stood, and began searching everywhere, pushing aside *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* with her foot, picking up a piece of paper, kicking Thoreau and a crumpled twenty-dollar bill, stepping on an eggshell, stooping again in a distracted pause to pick up an unopened container of indigo, kicking, again, *Frank, Bishop of Zanzibar*, and the broken glass, finding more paper, slipping, and almost falling in a pool of stand oil, picking up, with the same distracted pause, an unopened container of rose madder, and another piece of paper which she threw down because it was smeared on one side with blue paint, and on the other had written in large characters, *semper aliquid haeret*, and going on so until she had a number of pieces of paper in her hand, which she laid out on a drawing board and commenced to write with a broken penholder, and a point she got from the leather box.

—Here is the letter, she said sitting over it, and turning to look across the room. —Because you must not close your eyes now because you cannot, she said. —Because now you are alone, she said. Still looking over there she put down the broken penholder and picked up the rose madder, running her thumbnail to open it. —Because you cannot, she said, as the rose madder spilled into her hand, and she looked down at it, and shivered in the open coat.

Then she began to write. She wrote there for some time; and when she broke, between words, or in the middle of words, seldom between sentences or paragraphs, she would look over across the room, all the while, with the fingers of her left hand, applying the coarse rose madder to her lips, and the indigo around her eyes. She wrote for some time, and before she was done the rose madder was half gone, and the indigo had caked wetly round her eyes.

When the letter was finished she laid it in the middle of the floor, and looking round for something to weigh it down, found the coconut and stationed it there. Then going to the door she closed her coat, twice, each time after stooping and straightening from the floor, and went out. The crumpled twenty-dollar bill, which had stuck to her shoe with the stand oil she'd stepped in, came off before she reached the street.

Here is the letter she wrote, and left there.

You:

The demands of painting have the most astonishing consequences In my life at this moment you are one of them

Perspective since De Chirico manipulated it plastically; resolved it in his painting paradigms, now exists in the mind; a nostalgia; a co-relative isolation; a plenary; a playa, where, one must, to see the water, go immediately after the rain, and to see the broad level ground, must visit before. Painting is exquisite as the punishment for the thinker: denied the thoughts of his grave-diggers, his

own death-face and his final curiosity, a vision of his bones—the skeleton: of which he was always aware, moment by moment emerging to that static release he, the thinker, cannot joyfully sit, a separated thing, shaking his bones Perhaps a heart petrified, or a brain, an eye, an unborn child, would roll deliciously inside it, to rattle there, the way a dead man rattles in the sea nor find a solution to deny all this, a solving, nor a solvent, to disappear those bones, make it an improbability the other's joy, nor to deny the priceless departure into death.

Since paintings are in the service of my desires, I can disdain no ruse to accomplish them.

To paint to intensify, to remember but what could I remember here, in this place, where, in truth, I have never been before? a street of accidents all designed to happen to me?

Chroniclers, replacing instinct, become us more and more to lose our sensibilities, but, how can I refuse this slan-derous name when I shall paint, and then insist upon it?

It would doubtlessly, be kinder not to insist so, or investigate less directly, more discreetly: ask my mother, not my brain; "what sort of little girl I was?" and lover: "what woman I became" in order to define the strange significance of the avowal of these episodes of paint, like circumstance divorced from motivation

This, though, would place it, in sum, upon another level of being, every delusion of my energetic brain engages itself alone, then, in this enterprise, this demonstration of itself.

The mere coincident of materials at one's disposal cannot make a painting, nor, even a journey where nothing had been selected, nor lost by traveling, a journey, indeed, that might as well never had been taken.

To paint without means, desire or justification—a dubious use, habit sloughed away from reason or, in an indecisive moment, "wasn't it good of it to rain?" or "who was it, came to see me at three in the afternoon?"

A law-maker, unable to formulate laws, can be a painter, or a land, where, laws when broken, punish, not the offender, but the law-makers, can produce painters. A painter in any other place must struggle to be what he is.

Rooted within us, basic laws, forgotten gladly, as an undesirable appointment made under embarrassing pressures, are a difficult work to find. The painter, speaking without tongue, is quite absurdly mad in his attempt to do so, yet he is inescapably bound toward this.

To recognize, not to *establish* but to *intervene*. A remarkable illusion?

Painting, a sign whose reality is actually, I, never to be abandoned, a painting *is* myself, ever attentive to me, mimicking what I never changed, modified, or compromised. Whether I, myself, am object or image, they at once, are both, real or fancied, they are both, concrete or abstract, they are both, exactly and in proportion to this disproportionate I, being knowingly or unknowingly neither one nor the other, yet to be capable of creating it, welded as one, perhaps not even welded but actually from the beginning one, am also both and what I must, without changing, modifying, or compromising, be.

The painter concerned for his mortal safety, indifferent because he fears to scrutinize, paradoxically sacrifices that very safety, for he will not be allowed to escape painting.

He will make paintings or they will revolt and make him, unhappy being in the grasp of them. He compulsively must, then, live them cold as they are, static, perversely with warmth and movement he cannot know but feel painfully, a bird with broken eggs inside.

On the other hand, a no-painter—resourceful as he may be, cannot paint. He cannot say, well, "I did not get the job but I shall say I got it anyhow"—by this distortion of fact he deludes, not himself, but other persons, until, that moment arrives to receive the reimbursement. With nothing of value to show the fact will disappear. There is no fact but value.

The painter knows, sadly enough, that experience does not suffice unto itself, has no proportion, dimension, perspective, mournfully he eats his life but is not allowed to digest it, this being reserved for others, not knowing, but who must somehow, at any sacrifice be made to know, then punished for the sight of this knowledge, by aiding it on its journey from brain to brain.

It does not seem unreasonable that we invent colors, lines, shapes, capable of being, representative of existence, therefore it is not unreasonable that they, in turn, later, invent us, our ideas, directions, motivations, with great audacity, since we, ourselves having them upon our walls. What rude guests they prove to be, indeed: although paintings differ from life by energy a painter can never be a substitute for his paintings, so complete so independent as reality are they. Imagine the pleasure they enjoy at this.

They by conversion into an idea of the person, do, instantaneously destroy him. A tragic gesture that actually leads to tragedy but diabolically exists only in an absence of tragedy, nevertheless procreating it, however, they are unreasonably enough, insufficient, because they are not made of ideas, they are made of paint, all else is really us.

Paintings are metaphors for reality, but instead of being an aid to realization obscure the reality which is far more profound. The only way to circumvent painting is by *absolute* death.

——Close your eyes for the next sixty seconds and try to walk around the room . . .

The man behind the bar reached up and turned it off.

—I got a friend he's got a glass eye with the American flag on it, said the man on the outside.

The man behind the bar poured whisky until it ran over his fingers. —This'll put lead in your pencil. He pushed it in a wet trail across the bar. —Now if you got somebody to write to you're all set.

—Here's Rose.

At the far end of the bar Otto stepped aside for the dumpy woman who came in the door. Her nose was red, so were her eyes.

—What's the matter, Rose? Cold enough for you?

Otto joined the cold coin on the bar with a warm one from his pocket, signaled with his empty beer glass, and put it back down beside the newspaper, folded there on the bar across one of the girls in the vice probe, whose dark glasses he had been staring at.

To his left, the mirror and the window conjoined at such an angle that vehicles on the street outside appeared to come into one another head-on. A bus telescoped and disappeared. He withdrew his bloodshot eyes and turned them straight before him; but he did not see his face for the sign FRANKS AND KRAUT *20¢* was pasted on the mirror just above his collar. Below, where his hands met sensitively on the empty beer glass, twitching somewhat, touching at the fingertips, frankfurters turned on hot rollers, slowly, receding and

coming forward, passing each other forward and back with dull nudges like fat jointless fingers in meditation. He withdrew his left hand back into the loose sling.

—Here, pussy pussy pussy, said the dumpy woman.

—We got three of them.

—I lost mine, said the dumpy woman. —I raised him from this big. He had blood in his kidney.

—Human beings has to go too.

—I lost two husbands that way. Overnight.

Otto signaled with his empty glass. Then a tall blonde, in a fur cape, wearing dark glasses, walked to meet herself in the glass. Otto turned and looked out the window. He could not see her. He looked in the mirrored pillar behind him, and saw her coat-sleeve disappear. He looked before him, and saw her merge into herself. He looked out of the window again, and saw a man in a Santa Claus suit.

—Could I have a beer here? he said. He waited. Then he put down his empty glass and walked toward the back, taking out his wallet.

In the telephone booth a moment later he sat with the receiver to his ear, listening to a clock ticking in the Sun Style Film office. Finally a voice came through.

—Hello? Otto said, and named the man and himself in introductory greeting. —I'm sorry I've been so long calling you, but I . . . Yes, but . . . What? No, about Central America. You remember, I . . . When can we get together for a . . . No, it was Peru and northern Bolivia, you remember . . . Yes, I . . . What? But I . . . you . . . Well that bastard, he repeated to himself, leaning back against the wall of the booth. —"We have nothing to discuss." Well that bastard. That bastard. Then the sling gave way.

He came out with his wrist pressed against his wallet. He had forty-one dollars. —And why I gave a five-dollar bill to that Harlem nigger yesterday, to keep an eye out for that damn dispatch case. Damn it. That black bastard too.

The dumpy woman was drinking a manhattan. —I can feel it down to my toes, she said. Her stockings sagged over her broken shoe backs.

—Who you saving the cherry for, Rose?

The man behind the bar turned the radio on again, and left it while it warmed to strains of Mozart. Otto's glass was still empty, but he stood there as though unable to call and command, staring at the man's striped necktie, the signal of another final club which had not invited him to join.

—What's the matter, Rose? You blushing?

Otto waited a moment longer. Mozart continued, rising and gathering to exquisite pauses: and each of these apertures was obligingly filled by a saxophone. Otto picked up the two cold coins, and left the newspaper on the bar. Mozart measured a subtle withdrawal; and a voice from the saxophone world heralded,

——Here's an oldie, friends, Rudy Vallee singing, *Love Made a Gypsy Out of Me*.

—Hey Jack, you want your newspaper? the man behind the bar called after him.

—Never mind, Otto answered over his shoulder. —It's yesterday's.

•

The tropic breeze ruffled Otto's linen, boarding that banana boat, then standing on deck gazing out over the Caribbean, a whisky-soda in his free left hand, skin warm with memory of the sun: so he stood, serene and unapproachable, in the memory of the unsteady figure appearing now (wearing a new green muffler which enhanced the yellowness of his skin), an old friend whom Otto only now fully appreciated, and would like to see again. He passed the steamed windows lowering a handkerchief, where two black rings witnessed what desperate barriers are the fine hairs of the nostrils, and pulling open the door of the Viareggio, interrupted this with his entrance:

—Philogyny? I thought you said phylogeny.

—I said, misogyny recapitulates philogyny.

—Misogamy . . . ?

—Never mind.

—What's the name of this book you're writing?

—Baedeker's *Babel*.

Noting only the striped tie on the taller of these two, Otto brought the handkerchief up again, and got by them.

—And you say you've become a misologist?

—Whisky-soda, Otto ordered at the bar, slurring his tone in casual rudeness as he imagined one used to command.

—Where's the head in this place? Someone bumped him. —Right through that door, it's called Tiffany's

here.

—But I ordered whisky-and-soda.

—You said whisky sour. Sixty-five cents.

Max's back was turned to him at a near table, where a battered copy of *Collectors Quarterly* lay open to *Mother and Child II*, under the elbow of a man hunched in a green wool shirt who was saying to Max, —You had some work at the New School, well look. Would I have to prepare my lectures? or could I just bullshit. Otto took a step toward the table. He was blocked by a haggardly alert face, speaking to someone behind him, —She would have drownded herself if she could have found something to drownd herself in. And the response over Otto's shoulder, —She's been way out for a long time, man. You can't fool with horse without getting hooked.

—That magazine, Otto said to a girl standing behind the table, —do you know what happened . . . where it . . .

—A bear chewed it.

—What? I mean that . . .

—Oh I thought you meant this *Vogue*. She held up a tattered copy of *Vogue*. —A bear chewed this in Yellowstone Park, the craziest bear . . . She turned her back and went on with her conversation, —Oh very very very very *very* much . . .

—Hello. Can you buy me a beer?

—Hello Hannah, of course, I'd be glad to. Otto ordered it, handed her the dripping glass, and said, —Really, I've just had the most maddening . . .

—Thanks, said Hannah, and returned to the tall colored boy she'd been talking to, and shared her glass with him in the corner. At Otto's side a blond boy in dungarees said, —I tell you I felt just for all the world like Archimedes in his crwazy bathtub . . . But how could I? I tell you I was *stuck*. And at the near table, a green wool elbow knocked a glass of beer over *Mother and Child II*.

Otto winced, saw Stanley seated staring at a cup of coffee, started to approach, saw it was Anselm seated with him staring at nothing, and stopped. The haggard boy came up to their table and dropped into a chair with neither invitation nor greeting.

—You know how I made her the first time I made her? Anselm went on. —I described a wet dream to her, one I'd had about her, she listened as though it had really happened, and then before she knew it I was in again. He laughed, but sounded weary, not really interested in what he was talking about, and sat drumming blunt nail-bitten finger-ends on the table.

—She was probably high then, the haggard boy commented dully.

—You shouldn't . . . Stanley commenced.

—What are you pretending you're worried about her now for? Christ, she didn't make it, did she?

—She could never make anything real, man. The gas was on all right, but there was air coming in all over the place.

—Just the same, Stanley appealed, —if her intention . . .

—Her intention! what's that to you? Christ, wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners? She ought to get her ass into a nunnery.

Stanley said nothing. He lowered his eyes, sipped his coffee, and opened a newspaper.

—What does Saint Jerome say about women? Anselm persisted. —She's the gate of Hell. "A foe to friendship, an inescapable punishment, a necessary evil," says Chrysostom . . . And he broke off, watching Otto's approach without recognition.

Otto got round the two young men whom he had interrupted with his entrance. —I'm doing for writing what Bruckner did for music, said one. —So what did Bruckner do for music? —Well put it this way, I'm doing *in* writing . . .

—Freud! . . . came borne in a pleasing Boston-bred voice from a tall girl. —Hahaha . . . Freud my ahss.

—You know what the trouble is, like Pascal says, all the malheurs in this world come from a man's inability to sit alone in a small room, said the taller of them. —Can I buy you a drink? He was wearing a tie from the first crossing of the *Queen Elizabeth*.

—But why . . . ? why? Stanley repeated, plaintive and incredulous. —Why would Max say a thing like that? He'd know it's not true, that Hannah and I were . . . sleeping together . . . ? He looked up and included Otto in his appeal. Anselm was laughing. He shrugged.

—I am one to tell you, my lord, Stanley and a palindrome are making the beast with two backs, he said, and took Stanley's newspaper.

—But why do they . . . people have to . . . say such things?

—People? You sound like it's the first time in history somebody got laid, Anselm said, his tone musing and vague. —Das Unbeschreibliche, hier wird's getan . . . He did not look up, from the paper, whose pages

he turned without apparent pauses to read. —Das ewig-Weibliche, for Christ sake, he mumbled.

Otto stood unable to turn away, bound by the hurt accusal in Stanley's eyes, which lowered uncertainly back to the table.

—The last time I saw her, the haggard boy said, —she had to have somebody around her all the time, so she could ask if she'd really done something or gone somewheres. She looked like she was going to flip then.

Anselm tore something out of the paper and pushed it across the table. —This ought to cheer you up, Stanley, he said. —The bell tower at Saint Mark's is ready to flip too.

—She told me once the reason her eyes bug out like that is some doctor gave her henbane, did you know that? She said she can even see the stars in the daytime. If she'd really wanted to make it she would have sliced her wrists like Charles . . .

—For Christ sake! will you . . . stop talking about it? Anselm broke out at the haggard boy suddenly, then looked at Stanley who was staring dumbly at the headline. —You better get over there before the whole thing falls down, Anselm said to him.

—Hannah . . . Otto interrupted, —tried to kill herself? I just saw her.

—Hannah! Anselm looked up and laughed at him.

—It was Esme, Stanley said quietly. —Last night.

—But what happened?

—You're spilling your drink. What are you drinking whisky sours for anyhow? Anselm demanded.

—She flipped, man. Chaby found her with the gas on. Then the haggard boy returned to Anselm. —Did you hear about Charles? His old lady came from Grand Rapids to take him back there, she's a Christian Science.

Otto put his glass on the table. He looked back as though minutes were hours, and the hours had been days since he'd seen her: he had driven her to it. His chest expanded as he got his breath and turned away.

—She came on all sweetness and light, you know man. She thought she could turn him on with Mary Baker Eddy, but she won't give him a penny unless he comes home with her. I don't blame him for flipping.

Anselm reached for Otto's glass as Otto hurried toward the door, pressing on between the two young men, interrupting

—Scatological?

—Eschatological, the doctrine of last things . . .

—Good lord, Willie, you are drunk. Either that or you're writing for a very small audience.

—So . . . ? how many people were there in Plato's Republic?

•

Otto passed through the streets in a great hurry, but he was moving almost mechanically, one foot before the other and the load of the sling pounding against him, so that his excitement did not show until he passed the head of her stairs and stood breathless at her door. All the way his lips had been moving, and slight single sounds escaped them, chirps of forgiveness which he was trying to draw together.

Chaby opened the door. His sleeves were rolled up, and his shirt, the back of the collar turned up, was unbuttoned to the waist, showing a blue tattoo line which came, apparently, from the shoulder. Otto stared at the miraculous medal swinging from his throat, and then looked up at Chaby's small good teeth. —Is she . . .

Chaby nodded over his shoulder and turned away, leaving the door ajar. Otto pushed it open.

She came out to him from the other end of the double room. She wore a clean red cotton dress, and had a spotted blue coat on over it. She greeted him with almost a smile, her tranquil face looking as though she were going to smile, and then not.

—But you . . . are you all right? he asked going in to her.

—No. She must go to the doctor, she said to him. In her hand she held the book she had been reading, finger still between the closed pages. It was *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

It was only as he came close that he realized how heavily made-up she was. From the door, there was an almost bluish look to her face, but this proved to be a reflection of the careful make-up on her eyes, which seemed to be diffused over her face by the paleness of her skin. Her lips were as carefully made-up, with a slightly softened but still brilliant red. On the wall where she had just come from hung a mirror, rather an unsquared piece of mirror going off to a sharp point at one side.

—There, Otto said, holding out an empty hand which he let fall slowly. —I'm sorry about . . . I can . . . She waited, with this same unachieved smile. —Are you all right? . . . he repeated, noticing the great hoops of earrings for themselves for the first time. Until that moment they simply served to complete her figure.

—She must go for a long walk, for today she has had nothing to eat, she said to Otto, —and the doctor

put barium sul-phate in her stomach so that he can X-ray her and find out if she has a stomach. Isn't that silly? she added after a pause.

—Yes, but you . . . I mean I heard that you . . . that something happened to you last night . . .

—Last night, she repeated, looking away from him, —last night she did a very foolish thing, turning on the gas . . . She swung round to him suddenly, her tone mocking laughter and her eyes bright open: he looked from one to the other, saw in both his own distended reflection. —Turning on the gas, when the bill was so high already . . . ! And she allowed him a moment longer to stare at the image on the surface of her eyes, before she turned away to say, —But then Chaby came and everything was all right.

Otto rubbed his hand over his face and muttered something without turning round to Chaby (where she looked then, over his shoulder) who was seated smoking a cigarette in the room behind him. —Oh yes . . . he said and took a step away from her, dropping his hand, looking down to where the rug painted on the floor came to an end between them.

She went over to a drawer, looking for something, a handkerchief, and left him standing there looking round, but keeping his eyes from the room behind him. —I see you've finally got a mirror up, he said, rather distastefully, glancing into it to see his face shorn off at the jaw. When she said nothing he added, —You must need it, to get all that paint on your face.

—Oh no, the paint is not for the mirror, she said looking at him, half turned from the opened drawer and clinging to it. —But now a ghost lives here who is not happy. And when it comes she hides in front of the mirror where it cannot find her.

Otto muttered —Oh . . . , glanced in at the other room, and took a cigarette out. He lit it and tapped his foot on the floor, looking for a place to throw the match. —What's this? he said suddenly, over near the bookcase, turning a drawing round with his toe on the floor where he'd found it. —Why . . . who is this? he asked, and stooped over to pick it up and look at it close.

—Some one, she said.

—But where did you . . . how do you know him?

—It is just some one, she said.

—But it's . . . what's wrong with this? He stared at the face: it stared back, exactly like, but exactly unlike he remembered, faithfully precise but every honest line translated into its perfect lie, as a face seen from behind.

—It's a funny joke, she said suddenly, speaking more loudly, and she laughed but the laugh was gone by the time he looked up to her face.

—No, it isn't funny, he said, looking back at the picture. He started to hold it up before the mirror out of curiosity, and then abruptly he threw it down and turned to her. —Can you come out for a walk?

—She must go for a long walk with the chem-ical in her no-stomach, she said. She was pulling on gloves.

As they went out, she stopped in the door. —You will be here? she asked Chaby. Chaby nodded.

—But you *will*! . . . she said with a desperate step toward him.

—Sure, I'll be here, Chaby said from the chair, and he winked at her and smiled, hardly raising the ends of his hair-line mustache.

At that she lost her rigidity, and wilted against the edge of the open door, smiling at him.

Otto waited at the stairhead. As they went out he tossed an end of the green scarf over his shoulder and spoke as casually as he could, —Where'd you get those earrings, anyhow?

—She has always had them.

—I never saw them on you. I didn't even know your ears were pierced. She said nothing. —Don't they hurt? I mean, they're so big.

—Yes, she answered turning away, —they hurt her.

Otto thought of taking her arm, but he did not, yet. Also he was walking on her right, and could do no better than bump her with his slung elbow. He was thinking about the picture he had found, and left, on her floor; was, in fact, intensely curious about it, but put it off, as he was putting off taking her arm until they should be well away from her door (as though once into territory strange to her, she would be at the mercy of his protection): all this, though the self-portrait hung square before his eyes, as he said to her, —I have to meet my father in a little while, in an hour or so. When she did not comment, he added, —For the first time.

—That will be nice, she said.

—I don't know how nice it'll be, he said. —Imagine, being my age and meeting the old man for the first time. He paused as they turned the corner and sorted themselves out from strangers walking there. —Put off the old man, says the Bible, put on . . .

Suddenly she took his arm, his whole slung arm in hers. —Do you know? . . . she said.

—What? . . . He tried to reach his hand out the end of the sling, and snare her gloved hand, but he could

not find it.

—I have discovered that there *is* no one, she said, in intimate confidence.

—No one?

—Last night there was a knock upon the door. I went and opened the door, and no one was there. No one was really there at my door. No one had come to call.

Otto mumbled and looked at her quickly, at the blue hollows of her eyes in the light of the street. —And . . . did no one come in? he managed to say, reaching across with his right hand to find hers.

—No, she said, and let him go as abruptly as she had caught him.

—Now look, you know . . . you mustn't get . . . you mustn't be too upset, you know, I mean after what happened . . .

—Do you know what happened too? she asked, looking up at him quite surprised.

Otto looked at her excitedly. It is true, he was confused; but she was with him, they were together after what seemed a very long time, and —All this . . . he said, —All this . . .

—He made love to her, and then she went away.

—What did you say? . . .

—Love that smelled like lilies of the Madon-na, she went on, her voice rising evenly to a plane of wonder and distance. —Yes, she said intently; then her voice dropped. —Like the pus of Saint John of the Cross.

He had started to get round and get hold of her, but she held him where he was with a look of infinite reproach.

—That smelled of Madon-na lilies, she said in this low tone, a tone of infinite regret.

—Now look, you . . . he *who?* . . . Otto burst round to the other side of her, started to take her arm and realized that she was still carrying *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. His mind churned a vast array of irrelevancies, from the faces passing them which turned here and there in dull curiosity to that incunabular joke which said that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was not written by hand because it was written by Harriet Beecher Stowe . . .

—He in the mir-ror, -who, she said in her mocking tone.

—Now look, that photograph, and his . . . look, what is it? . . . Have you been modeling? . . . for him?

—Sometimes she did.

—But where is . . . but where are the pictures?

—He did not show them to her. Her voice was brisk with disappointment. They were passing outside a bar whose door just then came open and poured out a heavy broken stream of German music which was gone with their next step, leaving her face in the blue and red lights of the window sign for beer, exposed in the expression of fear he first remembered on it when he had gone down on her in the chair in the afternoon and something, somewhere, broke: but in this instantaneous conspiracy of lights and make-up that immaculate fear became terror, and jaded terror sustained beyond human years and endurance, and he shuddered at this hag before he knew it.

—When the witnesses come, she said to him, not taking his arm but touching it with her fingertips, —will they identify her? or will they turn from her to the pain-tings of her which are not of her at all, and shudder as you shudder and look away.

So he had looked away, passing the window of a fun store, a bright litter of novelties, of colors and false faces, pencils, puzzles, a kiddies' toilet seat, Christmas cards, ashtrays, a paint set, rings with false stones, a phosphorescent crucifix, —jingle all the wa-a-ay, came from the transom above.

—We are the gypsies, she said to him as he turned quickly back to her, and she spoke in that low tone of earlier, of deep remorse, —the Lost Egyptians, and we pay penance for not giving Them asylum, when They fled into Egypt. What harsh laws they make against us, she went on, her voice becoming dull. —They will not permit us to speak our own language, she said looking up at him again, —for they believe we can change a child white-into-black, and sell him into slavery! She laughed at that, suddenly, looking up at him; but with his hand tight closed on her wrist the laugh disappeared and left her surprised, staring into his eyes. They had come to a stop, and she took up walking again though he seemed to try to hold her back.

—Now look . . . he said. —Look . . .

—He even said once, that the saints were counterfeits of Christ, and that Christ was a counterfeit of God.

—Now look, where is he? I mean does he still have that studio? that place on Horatio Street.

—Perhaps he does, or he does not. She does not see him any more.

—I want to see him, I . . . but you, look can I see you later? at home.

—If you want to.

—Will he be there?

—She does not see him any more.

—I mean Chaby, will he be at your house?

—If he wants to be.

—But he . . . I mean damn it he's always there, he . . . what's he doing there anyhow?

—Now he is there doing bad things to himself with the needle.

—Look when will you be home?

After a long pause, when they'd reached a corner and she stopped there, under the streetlight, she said, —She does not know, she must take a long walk with the chemical in her stomach that is not there, and then she must go to the doctor.

—But the . . . I have to meet my father in a little while, but look, I want to see you. I mean, I have to talk to you, it seems like months since I've seen you, and you . . . and I still love you, even if . . .

He broke off, and gave her wrist which he still held such a quick tug that the book fell to the ground. He got it quickly, and came up with, —Because I've believed nothing, or I thought I didn't believe in anything and maybe I've been pretending I didn't believe in anything, but only tried to use my head and figure things out and . . . because that's the way everybody seems to have to be now, because you can't trust . . . and you . . . and now . . . and then when I found you, I found you really didn't, you really didn't believe in anything and you have to, you have to . . . he finished breathlessly and reached for her wrist again but she withdrew it and he stood with his free hand quivering on the air between them. Then he took a deliberate breath, deeply, and spent it all saying, —Do you love me?

—If there were time, she answered him looking him full in the face.

—Or . . . or . . . he started to falter again, raising his hand to the razor cut on his cheek and pressing his fingers there when he found it. —It's like . . . he commenced again, lowering his voice, and his hand, and he caught her wrist this time, —It's as though when you lose someone . . . lose contact with someone you love, then you lose contact with everything, with everyone else, and nobody . . . and nothing is real any more . . .

She stared at him, patient now in his grasp which loosened slightly as his voice ran out; though he found enough of it left to repeat, —Or things won't work. Then he drew breath again and stood looking at her under the streetlamp. She had relaxed in his hold; even taken half a step closer to him, and he studied her face in the light from above them, as it seemed a faint and expectant, and a receptive, anxiety spread over it; while his own slackened slowly over the cheekbones, and the excitement drained from his eyes as he marshaled his senses. He loosed her wrist, and lowered his hand, and stood before her as he had stood on the dock before the glare of that white fruit boat; and as he had counted out change for the beggar in whose face he saw no beauty, so suddenly had it come upon him, he computed his emotions, reckoning how much he could spare, and how much retain for himself. —You can depend on me, he said to her.

She withdrew; and there, like small coins slipping through his fingers, he began to lose what he had balanced and accounted with such practiced care, having given the two-and-one-half-cent piece, which looked like a dime. He whispered her name hoarsely, and raised his arm to put it round her.

—Don't.

—But I . . .

—Leave her alone.

The safety pin came undone, the sling dropped as he put both arms around her, and his hand opened, everything spilled. But she made no move, no effort to move, she stood and waited with her head drawn down as far as she could do. Then he closed his hands, looking beyond her, so quickly gathering up all that he had almost lost.

—You'll be all right alone? he said to her.

—Now she will.

Otto stooped and picked up the sling. —I'll see you later on, he said. Half a block apart, he turned and looked back, to see her walking away from him.

•

Balloons, a watch, a poopoo cushion, textile paints and stencils, a gold-finished silk-tasseled watch-case compact, Your portrait in oil (a genuine original oil painting) from favorite snapshot, 4 1/2 x 5 1/2 inch canvas, decorative wooden easel and palette free; a dusty imitation ink-blot; a dusty imitation dog spiral; a talking doll; Blessed Mother, Infant of Prague and Saint Joseph, 24K gold-plated, in pocket-identification case, 25¢; Venus de Milo with a clock in her belly; a sewing kit (resembles quality bone china) figurine; a Christmas card with 180-page genuine Bible postage-stamp size attached; a ventriloquist's dummy; a false face, mounted on another false face; all these, as well as many more durable, beautiful, useful, inspiring things lay stretched before Otto's gaze where he stopped to pin up the sling. The pin was gone. He knotted it, unsteadily stealthy with both hands, and felt for his wallet before he put his hand into his trouser pocket, for it was shaking. People passed in both directions. One bumped him below, and cried,

—Yaa, yaaaa . . . The arm in the sling flew up in horror as he stared at his triumphant assailant, a person

under three feet tall staring up at him with wide eyes, an immense red nose, and a great brush of a mustache all hung on by the empty wire glasses. With a few steps he was inside the bar where *Eine kleine Taverne im Golf von Napoli* was being played on the juke-box, and he ordered beer. He was suddenly very cold. He brought his hand out with a coin clenched in it, and tapped it on the bar, looking unwaveringly straight ahead, at the eyes of his image in a mirrored cabinet above the rows of bottles behind the bar. He was alone in the place, except for the bartender; and he lit his last cigarette.

The door opened again, and a man in a battered Santa Claus suit came in, beardless and hatless, but with a well-stubbled chin. He looked jovially down the bar at Otto and then said, —Pour us something with a smile in it, Jimmy. My special. Toot sweet, Jimmy . . . He winked at Otto. —And the tooter the sweeter.

Unwinking, Otto turned back and put his forehead in his palm, that elbow on the bar and the coin in his slung hand, waiting. He closed his eyes for a moment.

The bartender came down empty-handed, opened the mirrored cabinet to take out a bottle of Old Heaven Hill Bourbon, and returned to the man in the battered Santa Claus suit.

Otto sniffed, and opened his eyes. On the shelf behind the bar, well out of reach, was a donation box for a Sacred Heart Society. Mounted on it was a colored print of Christ exposing the Sacred Heart, looking, from Otto's half-open eyes, like a C.I.D. man showing his badge. Otto stared at it and muttered something to himself. He sniffed again. It was his hair burning from the cigarette between his forefingers. —Damn, he said, and then, —damnation. He put the cigarette in an ashtray at arm's length, and looked up for the bartender who was just then coming with his beer.

—Fifteen, said the bartender. He waited while Otto fumbled through pockets, and finally joined the warm coin from his slung hand with a cold one from his jacket. —We only take American money here, Jack. The bartender tossed the cold shiny two-and-one-half-cent piece back to him and waited, looking absently at Otto's cigarette smoking in the tray until Otto found a dime. Then he took the coins, picked up the cigarette, and went back up the bar.

—But . . . Otto caught the word before it came out. He clenched his hand round the glass and stared straight ahead of him. And it took him a good half-minute to realize that neither the stubbled chin, nor the flattened nose, nor the bunched ears, nor the yellow eyes he stared into, were his own.

He turned and went straight back for the telephone booth. There he dialed SP 7-3100. —Hello? he said into the phone. —I want to report a case of drug-taking. Heroin. If you go to this address immediately . . . What? No, I'd prefer not to give my name.

The glassed doors came closed upon him slowly, and from outside he could be seen staring through the scribbled configuration on the glass, a dedication which might, under other circumstances, have recalled Sir Walter Raleigh's cunning advance upon Queen Elizabeth, scrawling "Fain would I climb, yet fear I to fall" upon a windowpane with a diamond.

The juke-box played *Fliege mit mir in die Heimat*. The bartender put out the cigarette half-smoked, as though it were his own. The man in the battered Santa Claus suit stood with his back to the bar and his elbows resting on it. —That's a nice muriel, he said, looking at the wall painting, where a moose stared out over an empty lake. But the clock, though hung high in the sky where the sun might have been at high noon in the fall weather of the moose's landscape, was running withershins, as a convenience to bar patrons who could see it right in the mirror.

—I knew a guy once, he had this muriel, said the man in the battered Santa Claus suit. —Except where it was, it was on the ceiling, he added reflectively, —And it was a dame.

V

> "The trust of our people in God should be declared on our national coins. You will cause a device to be prepared, without unnecessary delay, with a motto expressing in the fewest and tersest words possible, this national recognition."
>
> —Abraham Lincoln's Treasurer, to the director of the Mint

—I can't live with you and be a Christian, shouted the woman clinging to the edge of the dirty sink, answering the moaning from the next room, she whose ancestors had gathered at the foot of the Janiculum in ancient Rome, and sold whatever was for sale in the garlic-reeking interior of the Taberna Meritoria, that squalid inn on the Tiber bank.

—You're not a Christian, never were. And the moaning resumed.

—When are you going to stop that awful noise, she demanded, she whose ancestors strove with one

another, asking, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?”

—Be quiet. It’s the only reason you married me. You wanted to marry a Christian, you wanted to marry a good Catholic. Well, leopards can’t change their spots.

—Shut up! She turned the volume control of her hearing aid down.

Then there was silence. It lasted for a full minute, when both rooms were filled with a scream so ghastly as to stop the novice heart and breath and blood for the full eternal instant of its duration; a sound which, as the book said, once heard, can never be forgotten. The woman at the sink (she whose ancestors were kidnaped as children, to be brought up in the Faith, A.M.D.G.) clung to its sloped edge. The lines of her face were fallen, not in terror, but in weariness. Too late, she turned the volume control of her hearing aid down still further.

—How did that sound? asked her husband behind her, triumphant in the doorway. —That was an epileptic. I’m practicing.

—Oh Jesus and Mary, you’ve only been home this time for three weeks, and you’ve started again.

—What’s the matter with it? Saint Paul was an epileptic.

—Can’t you do anything else, Frank? Are you too old to do anything else?

It was true. Mr. Sinisterra was becoming an old man. Although he had been heard to say that he resented prison years no more than Saint Augustine resented the withdrawal he had made from the world when living near Tagaste; had, indeed, embracing the words of Saint Gregory (“the Contemplative Life is greater in merit and higher than the active”), spent a fair amount of time in solitary confinement (“the hole,” as it was called, a place which, though cleaner and more dry, corresponded to the *in pace* of the convent, where, for their own good, medieval religious were occasionally immured for life), in spite of all this, and his commendable approach, prison years had not softened him, nor prolonged his youth. Life at Atlanta was not, as his son had been told on occasion, “a long vacation for Daddy,” any more than Saint Giles’s retirement to the desert resembled a tour from a travel folder. Now the retirement was over once more, and with the humility of the prophet Jeremiah, who longed for the contemplative life but was rooted out to “go and cry in the ears of Jerusalem,” Mr. Sinisterra had returned again to shoulder the burdens of this world.

—I’m going out for awhile, he said in the doorway, looking suspiciously at his wife’s hand as it lowered from the hearing-aid control pinned at her bosom. She stared at him. —You ought to learn self-control, like those yogis, she said.

—I should learn control. I! Me!

—That’s a wonderful religion they got, that voodooism.

—Hopeless, he said, turning into the other room. —I was going to get you a book, but I don’t think you even could read it if I did. There he sat down before a mirror, illuminated like a theatrical dressing-room mirror. Spread before him was an array of jars, tubes, colored pencils, and hair in bits and transformations which any star might have envied. On the wall hung a crucifix, a picture of Cavalieri as Tosca, some neckties representing better schools at home and abroad, and a reminder of a papal bull of Pius IX, the Pio Nono of many happy memories, in this case the *Bolla di Composizione* of 1866, granting pardon to the felon who devotes to pious uses three per cent (3%) of his plunder, permitting him to “keep and possess the remainder in good faith, as his own property justly earned and acquired.”

On the table at his elbow, among bottles of aqua regia, alcohol, benzine, nitric acid, something known in the trade as “dragon’s blood,” a pair of shears, some beeswax, some resin, some mastic, some amber, some steel plates, and some oil of lavender whose springtime fragrance pervaded the room, lay two exotic passports, and a copy of the *Theologia Moralis* of Alfonso Liguori, on top of Bicknall’s *Counterfeit Detector* for 1839. He had opened a large bottle of a solution of potassium permanganate, and sat now carefully daubing his face and neck with this brilliant purple, throwing the silver medal which hung at his throat over his shoulder.

—Thank God he took down his washing anyhow, he heard her mutter.

—What do you mean my washing? What washing?

—Them twenty-dollar bills you had hanging all over the place to dry.

—If you smeared any! He turned a face, which was minute by minute blooming with the flush of youth, threateningly to the doorway. —That’s just the way they picked up the greatest artist that there ever was, he went on, returning to the mirror. —Jim the Penman, he drew every bill by hand, for twenty years he was a success. And what happens? Some dumb grocery clerk smudges one of them with a wet hand. When he was tried, you know what the defense was? He was an artist. Any of his work was worth more as a work of art than what the government was shoving. An artist, a real artist.

—Don’t you worry, I didn’t smear any of your worthless paper. Worthless, worthless paper, she muttered at the sink.

—*Worth*less! he cried. —Do you know how hard I worked on that? Do you know where I got the paper to

print them? What do you think it was, old newspaper? Well it wasn't, there was two hundred and fifty dollars' worth of paper hanging up there. Do you think I'd do a cheap job after the work it was to make those plates? Did I ever do a cheap job? Worthless paper! That was two hundred and fifty one-dollar bills, bleached to print the twenties on. It took me almost eight years to make those plates, he added.

—That was a nice way to spend your time in prison, God knows.

—That's right, those are hand-engraved steel plates, you don't see them any more. None of your cheap photo-engraving. He started to fold a packet in brown paper, but appeared unable to resist taking out a bill, which he turned over in his hand murmuring, —You don't see work like this any more, as he looked into the challenging face of the seventh President. Under the packet lay the current issue of the monthly *National Counterfeit Detector*, where reviews of his work had not appeared in many years: in this work, anonymity advanced with worth, just as it did in the vignettes on the currency itself. The Father of His Country was crumpled, folded, and offered in the most piking and meretricious traffic millions of times a day, infinitely better known and worse treated than McKinley and Cleveland, far more readily summoned than the five thousand times remote Madison, still less than kin, ten thousand times removed, with Salmon P. Chase, if more than kind with him in coveting supreme office, a recognition never granted to that Secretary of the Treasury under Abraham Lincoln, who made the five hands down without even getting a haircut.

—You don't see work like this any more, he repeated. —Everything's cheap, everybody does things the quick cheap way. This is one of the only crafts left. Look at the eyes, there's none of that dead quality you see in a cheap job. Look at the sensitive lips, he murmured laying the bill back with the others. —I don't waste my time like a lot of people I know.

—Don't talk to me about wasting time, she came back at him. —If you had the kind of pains like I do. Go out and catch cancer yourself, and see how smart you are then.

—Cancer! Indigestion, that's what you've got.

—And another thing I want to talk to you about before you get yourself all made up like a circus clown. Where are you going anyway? she demanded, appearing in the doorway as he opened a bottle of eserine and took out an eyedropper.

—I'm going to make a meet, he answered shortly.

—To make a meat. That's nice.

He filled the eyedropper and turned to her with exaggerated patience. —I'm going out to meet a passer, to hand this stuff over to him. It's all arranged and paid for.

—Such nice friends you got. Socially I should meet them.

—You should meet them! I don't even know him myself, I don't want to know him, I don't want him to know me. They're the ones who get picked up first. If he doesn't know me, he doesn't know where he got the stuff, he can't talk. It's always trouble with the middleman and the passers that get you pulled in. I don't even have any middleman. Everything's middlemen. Everything's cheap work and middlemen wherever you look. They're the ones who take the profit. Thirty dollars a hundred while I get eight. After the way I work? Look at those three plates, that's hand-engraved on steel, they'll never wear out like these zinc plates in a cheap photo-engraving job. He tilted his head back and raised the dropper. —This guy I'm going to meet, he's going to identify me by I'm almost blind with my glasses . . . She watched a drop of eserine fall into his left eye, while he went on, —Do you think I can take chances? How many men do you think there are in this country who can pick up engraving tools and do what I can do? There's hardly half a dozen, and they can hardly come near me. Even them, they either work for the government or they're in jail. And do you think nobody knows who I am? The minute they spot a piece of this stuff, they've got it under a microscope. They've got work of mine they picked up thirty years ago, and they can compare it. They're not dumb, with a microscope in their hand, the Secret Service, they can find the smallest resemblance, even after thirty years they can see my own hand in there, a little of myself, it's always there, a little always sticks no matter what I do.

She stood supporting herself on the door jamb, and looked at him wearily; sniffed, and raised her eyes as though looking over distance in the landscape of his kingdom, the strong-scented landscape of Sheol. Finally she said, —So keep your friends to yourself, but let me tell you, when the doctor gives me morphine for my pains, what happens to it? Right out of the house it disappears. Who steals it? Your son, that's who steals it. From his mother yet.

—He's not mine, he's yours. I don't claim him. Does he ever go to church? No. He hasn't got any morals, he hasn't got any talent.

—So who ruined him? So who stood over him when he was a baby, and says, My ain't it wonderful his first two fingers are the same length, so he could pick pockets, trying to teach him how to make his fingers like scissors, picking pockets. So who stood over him and says, My, with sensitive fingertips like that I could

feel the tumblers fall in any safe in the world. So who was it give him Daddy's signet ring, like he was a prince of somewhere, except this signet ring it's got a little knife in it, to cut pockets open yet.

Her husband turned to look at her. His was an odd look, for one pupil had shrunk almost to a pin-point, swimming in eserine which he wiped away. —Those things were primary courses, like any kid gets in his first grade school. Do you think I wanted him to be a bum? So I taught him some basic things, how to use his hands. Did he ever learn anything? Did he ever try? No. He never worked a day in his life, like his father. You had his moral side to bring up. That's a mother's work, all those years I was away you had him here to bring up his moral side. Look how it come out.

—So who's crying over spilled milk? It's no good to talk about, all I want is he stops stealing his mother's morphine. I go through his pockets, even, looking for it, what do I find, seasick remedy and chewing gum I find.

—So you think he's seasick? You know what he uses them for? He goes to the dog track, and dopes the dogs up with Mothersill's seasick remedy. The chewing gum he puts between their pads to slow them up. You think I taught him that?

—Anything bad he knows, you must have taught him.

She stood there, gazing at him, as he dropped eserine into his right eye. —Such a clown, yet, she said wistfully. —Anyhow he's never been in prison like his fine father who just come out again.

—You think I didn't figure that out? he said, turning from the mirror, to look at her with two pin-pointed pupils. —There was a war going on, and things are bad when there's a war. It's hard to get metal for the plates, it's hard to get the right inks, everybody you can depend on gets drafted, or they get a job in an airplane factory. Like prosperity, things get lousy. It's not so easy now.

But she just looked at him. —Frank, ain't it ever going to let up? Every time you go in this room, I don't know who's coming out. Two months go by, and everything gets chalk on them from your hands when you clean your plate. Everything smells all the time. Like I used to think lavender was flowers, but now I smell it somewhere all I think of is you doing this . . . this . . .

—I'm busy, he said, and returned to the table before him. —You're disturbing me on my nerves.

—Your nerves! she wailed, back at the sink. —So maybe I haven't got any nerves? Whenever you're away I think when you come back maybe it will be different, and then by the time you're back a month I almost wish you was away again. You'd be in there yet for that trouble you was in over the stamp, if it wasn't for a mistake they made.

—Mistake! If ever the hand of the Virgin watched over me it was that time. That conviction was thrown out because one of the jurymen was a Jew. He took his oath swearing on a New Testament. A mistake you call that. That was the Virgin Mary getting even for a mistake the Jews made two thousand years ago, that's what a mistake it was. He waited for her to answer, suspecting that she had turned off her hearing aid. Then he went on, nostalgically, looking at himself in the glass, —That stamp was beautiful, that one-penny Antigua stamp. It took me four months to make that plate. And do you think the color was easy? Do you think just anybody can make the color puce? That's why that kid is no good. Would he work hard on something like that? Do you hear me? He waited, suspiciously, to see if she had turned off her hearing aid, something he had not yet caught her at.

—I hear you, she said wearily, at the sink, and turned off her hearing aid.

—Well then stop talking to me like I was a common gangster. Did you ever see me with a gun? Did I ever hurt anybody, except once and that was a mistake, everybody knows it was, and you couldn't count the Masses I've had said for her. He crossed himself hurriedly, and chose his hair for the evening, a healthy black mop. —Not like that kid, he wouldn't have a Mass said for his own mother. He's slipshod and no good. Whenever I was home to give him the benefit of my study and experience, I tried to teach him. I taught him how to spring a Yale lock with a strip of celluloid. I taught him how to open a lock with wet thread and a splinter. I taught him how to look like he has a deformed spine, or a deformed foot. Nobody taught me all that. I learned it myself. It was a lot of work, and he had me right here to teach him, right here, his own father. So what does he learn? Nothing. He's never done a day's work in his life. You think a bum like that I'd claim him for my son? He's like everybody now, they don't study their work, they don't study their materials. Show me somebody who can get that color green so perfect, he went on, looking down at the back of a twenty-dollar bill. —It's not a place for bums to get into, it's a place for artists, for craftsmen.

Mr. Sinisterra paused to fit the black hair in place over his own, a thinning texture of early gray. Then he went on in a lower tone, —He has no ambition like his father. I tried to teach him how to make copper plates, zinc plates, glass plates. The only platinum plate I ever made he almost ruined it for me. Just once he tried it alone, he tried to make some Revenue stamps. I helped him right through it, like a old master, cleaning the copper plate with benzine, putting on the wax ground, softening it with a little lavender oil. He

made a mess of it. I had to throw the whole thing out before he got us all in trouble. Even the color, do you think he could tell the difference of one green and another? He couldn't tell it from red even. His father's a craftsman, an artist, he's nothing but a bum.

Mr. Sinisterra dusted the black hair into place. There were sounds from the kitchen, but no answering words; only the clatter of pans. —It isn't like the old days, he said, looking at himself in the glass. —It isn't like when you could pass a gilded quarter for a ten-dollar gold piece. It isn't like the days of Pete McCartney and Fred Biebusch, and Big Bill the Queersman, the days when Brockway passed a hundred thousand just like that. It isn't like the days when Johnny the Gent melted down the Ascot Cup.

He went to the rack to choose a necktie. Flicking aside Eton and Harrow, he lifted the soft dark blue with jagged red streaks of the Honourable Artillery Company, considered it for a moment, and then replaced it beside the false arm hung on the rack. —It's not a place for bums to get into, it's a place for art. You know how big the spaces behind Hamilton on the ten are? Less than one one-hundred-twentieth of an inch. Do you call that a place for bums? That kid wouldn't even try, when he made those Revenue stamps. The acid got under the wax and made everything jagged. Do you think he cared? He didn't even know the difference. How sharper than a snake's tooth it is to have a kid like that, do you hear me? You never read a book in your life. Well never mind. It's a great disappointment for a father, when his son don't take an interest in his father's work and carry it on.

The pig, stamped upon the coins of Eleusis when she coined her first autonomous money in the fourth century B.C., the pig of purification, adorned the necktie which Mr. Sinisterra chose, and turned to the mirror to knot it about his neck with a manner of great tradition born. —It's a great disappointment when he don't appreciate our tradition, he said. —Our family wasn't just nobody in Salerno, every secret we have has been handed down from father to son for generations. Do you think he cares? My father was proud of me. He turned to put on his suit coat, flicking at its lapels, and buttoning it before the mirror. His chest filled as he looked at himself there.

Behind him lay the Protocols of the Elders of Zion; and the magnanimous grant of Constantine, though that emperor was some five centuries dead when the spirit of his generosity prevailed through forgers in Rome, to bequeath all of western Europe to the Papacy. Behind him lay decrees, land grants, and wills, whose art of composition became a regular branch of the monastic industry, busy as those monks in the Middle Ages were keeping a-kindle the light of knowledge which they had helped to extinguish everywhere else. Behind lay Polycrates, who minted gold-coated lead coins in his own kingdom of Samos; and Solon, who decreed death for such originality in his. Canute severed guilty hands; and England, escaping his empire and succumbing to the Normans not much later, removed not only hands but eyes, a lily flower of punishment gilded with castration which solved nothing, for even in the reign of Edward III it was found necessary to draw and quarter a number of talented ecclesiastics.

Historians, anxious to rescue some semblance of a system from the chaos of the past, point out that since the dawn of civilization, the center of civilization has moved westward: from Polycrates' Asian island and Solon's Athens to Constantine's Roman Empire nine centuries later, on to Charlemagne's Frankish labyrinth, ever onward to Canute the Dane at the millennium, across the Channel to the fourteenth-century England of Edward III it came, gathered its breath there (while word of renascence breathed behind in Italy) for three centuries, readying for the leap across the sea to shores of a New World, where early settlers (having thrown off that yoke of tyrannical ignorance, religious persecution) promoted a culture founded in pure reason, and introduced their civilized art to the Indians, forging wampum of porcelain and bone. They prospered. Hard work was the only expression of gratitude their deity exacted and money might be expected to accrue as testimonial; though Pennsylvania decreed the pillory, with the ears nailed to it and cut off, and a complement of thirty-nine lashes and a fine, these dedicated beings did not quail. But like so many of the mystic contrivances devised by priesthoods which slip, slide, and perish in lay hands, this too became a cottage industry: tradesmen, barbers, and barkeeps issued money, keeping up as best they could with the thousand different banks who were doing the same thing. Before the war which was fought to preserve the Union, a third of the paper money in circulation was counterfeit, and another third the issue of what were generously termed "irresponsible" banks. Meanwhile inspectors went from one bank to another, following the security bullion which was obligingly moved from the bank they had just inspected to the one where they next arrived; and the importunate public, demanding the same assurance, was satisfied with boxes rattling broken glass. Merchants kept "counterfeit detectors" under their counters, and every bill offered them in payment was checked against this list of all counterfeits in circulation, and notes rendered worthless by the disappearance of the evanescent banks which had issued them.

Mr. Sinisterra kept his copy of Bicknall's *Counterfeit Detector* for 1839 as a professional curiosity, much as a noted surgeon may exhibit a copy of Galen's *Anatomy*. And just as the noted cardiac surgeon may admire Galen's discovery that the arteries contain blood (and not air, as four centuries of the Alexandrian school

had taught), but still smile patronizingly at his theory that the septum of the heart was pierced by imperceptible foramina (allowing passage of the blood from the right into the left ventricle); so Mr. Sinisterra mused over the ingenious devices of the century before him in Bicknall's, which listed 20 issues of money on fictitious banks, 43 banks whose notes were worthless, 54 banks which were bankrupt, 254 banks whose notes were counterfeited, and 1395 varieties of counterfeit notes in circulation. Thus he was becomingly proud of his tradition, which he had brought to the land of opportunity to exercise in the early part of the century, when the proportion of Italians to immigrants from less imaginative lands was about five to one: he whose consecration had helped to raise New York to its present reputation for being the greatest modern center of counterfeiting money of every currency in the world.

He crossed himself before the mirror, turned down his collar, and let his gaze rest upon the Siam National Railway's *Guide to Bangkok*, noting, as he did, that he must pick up a copy of Baedeker's *Spain*. He allowed himself a moment to dream, saw himself voyaging (for the Eternal City, in a Holy Year, lay before him) like those early pilgrims to the Holy Land, Lententide in Rome, Holy Week at Compostella while their families were left starving at home, where they eventually returned decked with cockleshells to recount their adventures, and receive the applause and reverent congratulations of their lesser neighbors who had cravenly remained at home to work for their living.

Into his pocket he thrust the *Theologia Moralis;* and, on second thought, a small sandy mustache with spirit gum stuck to it. He picked up the package of bills, and paused to gaze for a moment into the fearless eyes of Andrew Jackson before he folded the paper closed upon them, and secured it with two elastic bands. How could Jackson, fighting in the Battle of Hanging Rock at the age of thirteen, know that a hundred seventy-odd years later a man would be laboring over his portrait with the exquisite care of love Mr. Sinisterra showed for those eyes, those lips, that shag of hair? that more than a century later his rousing battle with wealth, and the Bank of the United States, would be taken up, if on slightly different grounds, by one so covetous of anonymity as this man who stood thrusting two hundred and fifty vignettes of the seventh President into his pocket now?

His wife did not turn around when he entered behind her, muttering —Seventy-two eighty-eight-hundredths of an inch apart! That's no work for a bum. He stopped, and said in a hoarse whisper, —Do you hear me? Still she did not turn. He raised his voice with the same question. Then he advanced upon her. She jumped, and let out a cry, clinging to the sink with one hand, fumbling at her bosom with the other. —You haven't heard a thing I've said all this time. You turned it off, didn't you? Didn't you! With that, he tore the hearing aid from her dress, and threw it on the floor. —There! he said, and stamped on it. —Now you don't have to listen to me.

She only stared at him, at his eyes pin-pointed, bearing blindness, through those dusty lenses. She shook her head, looking at his light reversible coat. —It's cold out, Frank.

—I know it, he said. —I won't be long.

—It's cold out, Frank. Here, you ought to take this around your neck. She went over to a chair, and picked up a green scarf which her son had thrown there. —Wear this. Probably it ain't his anyway.

Mr. Sinisterra stood while she put the scarf round his neck. —I'm sorry, he said, —but when you don't pay attention to me . . . Stupidity, I just cannot stand stupidity. She shook her head; and he left her there, stooping over to pick up the broken snarl of wire and plastic case at her feet. With that in her hand, she closed the door to his room which he had left open behind him, murmuring, —The smell . . . the smell gets everywhere, though no one heard her; and she could not be certain that she heard herself, echoing over Sheol.

•

hello.

Mr. Pivner gazed at a full-page advertisement in his newspaper . . . You can say "hello" to a man as you pass him on the street. But you can't sell him anything.

Mr. Pivner's reading embraced tangible things. He had not gone to college (but rather something which called itself a business school: he had studied "accounting"). True, even if he had, he might never have read Democritus, the sire of materialism (judged insane by his neighbors, true, those rare Abderites, who summoned Hippocrates to cure him). Mr. Pivner's attention rarely came upon things at first hand in any case. He preferred those mummifactory presentations called "digests," which reassured him about his own opinions before he knew what they were. Had he read Democritus, he might have discovered, in philosophy's first collection of ethical precepts, among portents of atheism, and the vision of his own soul composed of round, smooth, especially mobile atoms, that it is the unexpected which occurs.

Since life itself tried vigorously to teach him this, however, it was this knowledge that he resisted most successfully. In his reading (a serious pursuit, whether advertising or the Old Testament) he chose, not the

disquieting road to serenity, but the serenely narrow path to eventual and total derangement. Nirvana? what sense could he make of a lifetime spent striving toward a goal where nothing was? what satisfaction with Buddhism even when it had reached its tangible (idolatrous) form, to sit in a vase-domed temple turning a prayer wheel before a gilded statue, muttering, —*Life is suffering*

What sense in the Buddhists? They who affirm.

What sense in the Gainas? They who say *Perhaps*

As far from the Prince of Kapilavastu (who brought hope that the chain of twenty-four lakhs of birth in the soul's migration might be severed), as he was from the Nazarene (who, agreeing with the Buddha that life was a sore thing, virility even worse, threatened resurrection), Mr. Pivner sat staring through rimless glasses at a kindly book-jacket face which returned his amorphous gaze. He was preparing to meet his son, to win him as a friend, and influence him as a person.

As Odysseus had Mentor, Jesus John the Baptist, Cesare Borgia Machiavelli, Faust Mephistopheles, Descartes Father Dinet, Schopenhauer's dog Schopenhauer, and Schiller his drawerful of rotten apples, Mr. Pivner had Dale Carnegie: he and four million other individuals, that is; among whom none dared suspect that (*perhaps*) Salome's mother was right.

Did Damon try to sell insurance to Phintias?

It is true, Mr. Pivner, sitting under his three-way reading lamp (turned to its highest brilliance), did not plan to sell insurance, nor even a half-million yards of upholstery fabrics (aggregate value $1,600,000) to the youth he planned to meet that evening, nor glean a Packard car from him in return for applying the "principles of appreciation" as the Connecticut attorney did on page 101. He had taken this most worn of his books from the shelf because it inspired in him what he believed to be confidence. As he read there (underscored), "Let me repeat: the principles taught in this book will work only when they come from the heart. I am not advocating a bag of tricks. I am talking about a new way of life." That was the wonderful thing about this book ("Regard this as a working handbook on human relations; and whenever you are confronted with some specific problem . . ."): if at first its approach seemed fraught with guile, subterfuge, duplicity, sophistry, and insidious artifice, that feeling soon disappeared, and one had . . . "Ah yes, you are attempting a new way of life."

True, Mr. Pivner might have read Descartes; and, with tutelage, understood from that energetic fellow, well educated in Jesuit acrobatics (cogitans, ergo sum-ing), that everything not one's self was an *IT*, and to be treated so. But Descartes, retiring from life to settle down and prove his own existence, was as ephemeral as some Roger Bacon settling down to construct geometrical proofs of God: for Mr. Pivner, a potential buyer (on page 95) who was head of the Hotel Greeters of America (and president of the International Greeters too!) was far more real.

True, he might have read the New Testament, and worked out a similar synthesis of Christly conduct and Cartesian method to Machiavellian ends; but how much more direct was this book in his narrow lap: for it was not a book of thought, or thoughts, or ideas, but an *action* book. It left no doubt but that money may be expected to accrue as testimonial to the only friendships worth the having, and, eventually, the only ones possible.

"I am talking about a real smile" (Mr. Pivner read), "a heartwarming smile, a smile that comes from within, the kind of smile that will bring a good price in the market place." An *action* book; and herein lay the admirable quality of this work: it decreed virtue not for virtue's sake (as weary Stoics had it); nor courtesy for courtesy (an attribute of human dignity, as civilized culture would have it); nor love for love (as Christ had it); nor a faith which is its own explanation and its own justification (as any faith has it); but all of these excellences oriented toward the market place. Here was no promise of anything so absurd as a void where nothing was, nor so delusive as a chimerical kingdom of heaven: in short, it reconciled those virtues he had been taught as a child to the motives and practices of the man, the elixir which exchanged the things worth being for the things worth having.

It was written with reassuring felicity. There were no abstrusely long sentences, no confounding long words, no bewildering metaphors in an obfuscated system such as he feared finding in simply bound books of thoughts and ideas. No dictionary was necessary to understand its message; no reason to know what Kapila saw when he looked heavenward, and of what the Athenians accused Anaxagoras, or to know the secret name of Jahveh, or who cleft the Gordian knot, the meaning of 666. There was, finally, very little need to know anything at all, except how to "deal with people." College, the author implied, meant simply years wasted on Latin verbs and calculus. Vergil, and Harvard, were cited regularly with an uncomfortable, if off-hand, reverence for their unnecessary existences. ("You don't have to study for four years in Harvard to discover that," Mr. Pivner read, with a qualm of superiority, for he understood that Otto had, indeed, gone to Harvard.) In these pages, he was assured that whatever his work, knowledge of it was infinitely less important than knowing how to "deal with people." This was what brought a price in the market place; and

what else could anyone possibly want?

Here was Andrew Carnegie, who had only four years in school but garnered a million dollars for every day in the year. Here was Cyrus H. K. Curtis, "the poor boy from Maine . . . starting on his meteoric career which was destined to make him millions . . ." Here was George Eastman, who left a clerk's job at fifty cents a day to pull together a cool hundred million . . . So it went on, with many lesser, but equally enthusiastic examples, each of whom seemed to know little or nothing about his work, but every exquisite channel in the minds of his workers, all expressed in a tone of such intimacy that the reader, if he could not rise (meteorically) to their levels, could take satisfaction in seeing them brought down to his own.

The carefully selected quotations were impressive, and from as many sources as the success stories, which included exemplary fraud practiced on a bed-wetting child (for his own good) and model deceit practiced on a great opera singer (for his own good). To prepare this handbook on human relations, the author had read "everything that [he] could find on the subject, everything from Dorothy Dix, the divorce-court records, and the *Parents' Magazine* . . . " to three popular psychologists. He even hired a man to go to libraries and read everything he himself had missed. They spared "no time, no expense, to discover every practical idea that anyone had ever used throughout the ages to win friends and influence people." No wonder, thought Mr. Pivner, reading through these pertinently misunderstood half-truths, that it had succeeded. Here were Barnum and the Bible, Charles Schwab, Dutch Schultz, and Shakespeare, two Napoleons, Pola Negri, and the National Credit Men's Association, Capone, Chrysler, Two-Gun Crowley, and Jesus Christ, each in his own way posting the way to the market place. Even Jehovah appeared, if only in brief reversal ("Daniel Webster, who looked like a god and talked like Jehovah, was one of the most successful . . .").

"You owe it to yourself, to your happiness, to your future, and TO YOUR INCOME!" Reference to "old King Akhtoi" of Egypt ("Old King Akhtoi said one afternoon, between drinks, four thousand years ago . . .") made Mr. Pivner feel that the author had been right there, at cocktails, with that charming rascal, old King Akhtoi. The Socratic method was marvelously simplified ("His whole technique, now called the 'Socratic method,' was based upon getting a 'yes, yes' response"): the very essence of cornering, not truth which has no market value (and did, indeed, bring death to the cunning Greek), but a "good price in the market place." Christ and Confucius appeared, to recite the Golden Rule, and bow out, leaving Mr. Pivner (and four million other individuals) with the clever secret of humility which, carefully used, led the prey in the opposite direction to self-aggrandizement, the illusion of power: in fact, sometimes (when he was tired) Mr. Pivner felt that the sublime secret was to behave like a door mat, to present himself to the world as a cheerful simpleton with no ideas of his own, a good-natured half-wit turning the other cheek, to personify Nietzsche's idea of the Christian, a congenital idiot with nothing to gain (all the while, however, slipping a half-million yards of upholstery fabric down his sleeve).

As a matter of fact, he was assured by the author that the only thing keeping him from being an idiot was five cents' worth of iodine in his thyroid gland (hardly a good price in the market place, even for humility). "A little iodine that can be bought at a corner drugstore for five cents . . ." Indeed, the general tone of the book was one of humility, a complacent and ungainly sort perhaps, proportioned as it was to the camel passing through the eye of the needle.

Mr. Pivner thumbed through the pages, glancing at the familiar chapter headings, *Fundamental Techniques in Handling People . . . Six Ways to Make People Like You . . . Twelve Ways to Win People to Your Way of Thinking* . . . and his head nodded. He was very tired. In the background, unattended, the radio poured out, subdued, the Reformation Symphony. Why so much attention, so much time spent on this book resting in his narrow lap? Mr. Pivner found safety in numbers; any publication with a circulation of a million reassured him, and in a land where mental diseases tolled more people than all other human ills combined, a circulation of four million was more reassuring than anything else could be: for every twenty-five literate citizens over the age of fourteen, one had bought this book, not to guess at how many single dog-eared, underscored copies had circulated among the remaining twenty-four. Assuredly then, it was more than safe; it was an integral part of life around him, those who sneered notwithstanding (for they too were forced to share his life, to be won and to be influenced, no matter their faiths, their aspirations, no matter their reasons for courtesy, their grounds for love, how could they presume to distinguish what they offered from what they were given?); and those who decried and denounced it might be condemned out of hand as dangerous at best, bitter, ungrateful at the least, failing not virtue (which has no definition and no country) but that conspiracy of self-preservation known as patriotism.

The tic, which came in Mr. Pivner's lower lip just left of center when he was tired, came now, and waked him to a look of indecisive emotion. It would not stop, but pulled his lip down in quick throbs, as though he had abruptly been asked a question whose answer he knew, and feared to give. He looked suddenly at his watch. He raised it, and held it to his ear. He stood up (still holding the book, open) picked up the

telephone, and dialed O, —I'd just like to know what time it is, he said. (—Do you want the time bureau?) —No, I just wanted to know if you had the time, please. (—I'm sorry, we're not permitted to give out that information . . .) He hung up, and looked at the radio, waiting. The Reformation Symphony made him nervous, as all such music (called "classical") did, as the word Harvard did; but sometimes he was struck with a bar of "classical" music, a series of chords such as these which poured forth now, a sense of loneliness and confirmation together, a sense of something lost, and a sense of recognition which he did not understand. It must be time to take his medicine, before he left to go downtown.

The symphony continued as he left it, and went into the bathroom. He preferred that music to which he did not have to listen. It was only the human voice on the radio that stopped him, that raised his head in expectation, as though it were about to impart something of great personal significance, to *him*. Indeed, that was always the tone in the voice, disembodied; and still listening, expectant, he would sit back, and wait. He had been laughed at, by someone who said, —But you don't *listen* to that stuff? Why do you let it bother you? and of advertising in print, —But you don't *read* that stuff, do you? What do you let it bother you for? What was this anomaly in him, that still told him that the human voice is to be listened to? the printed word to be read? What was this expectant look, if it was not hope? this attentive weariness, if it was not faith? this bewildered failure to damn, if it was not charity?

The room was filled with the strident ring of a telephone bell. It shivered the metal sails on the man o' war, brought forth an undisciplined tinkle of broken glass, and a frantic shade of movement concerted in seizure: breathing the hoarse aspirate initial of greeting, waiting, listening, everything stopped:

——Hello! This is Meribeth Watzon, speaking for the New York Telephone Company . . . the radio confided without changing the expression of its features, grill and knobs and a lighted smile; and what shadows moved in the room were slow about retiring, those that remained borne still on the walls including the black shape of the cradled telephone where he had dropped it dead, for almost a minute.

Mr. Pivner stood quivering. He'd just broken his last container of insulin. It was too late to go out and return.

——Friends, don't take my word for it. You owe it to yourself to get the details of our free offer. And listen, friends, the next time you . . .

True, the janitor in Mr. Pivner's office building did not yet call him by his first name. True, the divorce rate had almost doubled since the publication of the book before him. True, he read in headlines of men in the governments he helped to elect, men who might not know their work, but they certainly knew how to deal with people, men who strode forth from the front page in expensive clothes, smiling, the hand raised in bonhomie, on their way to appear before investigating committees interested in their remarkable incomes, withering the smiles which had brought a good price in the market place.

" . . . dashed off in a moment of sincere feeling . . ." As he put the green scarf around his neck, his lower lip pulled, and he tried to hold it tight. ——Friends, you owe it to your own health, and your family's . . .

And King David, what did he say in his chamber over the gate, after Joab had dispatched his son still hung in the branches of the terebinth tree?

Mr. Pivner pulled on his overcoat, and put the needle and syringe into a pocket. He turned off the radio, courteously, waiting until the voice had finished a sentence. He left the book of selective quotations out on the table, next the photograph album. True, one must select; impossible to quote all that Shakespeare ever wrote, to prove a point he never embraced; impossible to print the words of Rosalind, when she said, "But these are all lies: men have died from time to time, and worms have eaten them, but not for love."

Mr. Pivner stood in the doorway for a moment, looking back into the small apartment before entering the world of loss which came when he turned off the light. He remembered years back, when he had bought that book; and in the doorway, still lighted, a fragment of gold arrested him, gold now like the double eagle of the nineteenth century, bored as those words had pierced him, with the sound of the counterfeiter's drill, hollowing out the coin, and filling it with lead, and sealing it so, a very difficult counterfeit to detect. He had bought that book hoping to win friends. He wondered if other people had bought it for the same reason.

The button at his hand clicked, the place disappeared in darkness, as the days of faith were gone, all gone into the dark, gone to earth under Fort Knox, and in the cemetery at Hatton Gap, Arkansas, where, a bare half-century before, Moses had polled six votes in the presidential election, and John the Baptist, three.

And the Buddha?

And the Gainas?

And the morning? and the evening? Morning, evening, noontime, night: what was the shape of Mr. Pivner's soul? round, or oblong? And its atoms, worth as much as iodine atoms? worth five cents? Or were they of a different kind: round, smooth, and especially mobile?

And a good price in the market place, say . . . thirty pieces of silver?

•

—Whhhhassafuksamatter? This delicate question went unanswered, for the man who asked it was alone on the street corner. He waved his rolled-up newspaper at no one, and then stood smiling. —So. You wonanswer? Ascared? he challenged. The light above his head changed, on one side, from red to green, on the other from green to red. A bus approached. It stopped, and so he got on it. He put his fare in the box, and stopped halfway down the aisle, —MERRY CHRISTMAS!

No one answered. —Sgoddam too bad, he said. —I got on a funeral hearse. Snobody's funeral, snobody to bury. Merry Christmas in a cemetery. He sat down, and opened his newspaper. After a few minutes of patiently staring at the words there, he asked the man across from him, —Wherzis bus go?

—I don't know, said the other.

—Fine thing, you don't know. I congradulate you. You're the first man I've met in New York'll admit he don't know something. Congradulations. He extended a hand which swung emptily in the air between them. The bus stopped, and as his neighbor got off he called, —Look out, don't break your leg or we'll have to shoot you . . .

He sat back and stared at the newspaper. Across the top of it were printed chapters from Genesis, which was being serialized for the holiday season, as a public service. —I'll be damned, it's the Bible, he said loudly. —You get the Bible in the newspaper, he said, addressing the man who had sat down across from him, next to a lady with a baby in arms. —Whdyou think of that. You know why that is? He looked up and down the bus. —Sbecause any of these fine people would feel like a jerk reading the Bible in public, they'd be *ashamed* to. But if they're oney reading the newspaper, that's all right. Merry Christmas! You don't have to go to college four years to know that. Am I right? Am I right? he demanded of this man across from him.

—Yes, Mr. Pivner said, lowering his eyes from the card above the man's head, and raising them again, to read, UNBELIEVABLY REALISTIC SEE FOR YOURSELF $8.00 PER CARAT

—Merry Christmas! the man threatened.

—Merry Christmas, Mr. Pivner answered him. He was very tired. He had stopped at a drugstore to buy his medicine, but not taken the time for the injection, fearful of missing his rendezvous, planning to take his injection in the men's room of the hotel, when he got there. Still, at this critical instant, his training did not fail him. He recalled chapter nine ("Wouldn't you like to have a magic phrase that would stop argument, eliminate ill feeling, create good will . . . ? All right. Here it is . . .") —I don't blame you a bit for feeling as you do, said Mr. Pivner, recalling the words of John B. Gough, quoted on the following page (" . . . when he saw a drunken bum staggering down the street: 'There, but for the grace of God, go I.'"). Then he had a strange sensation on one leg. He drew it toward him, and looked, as the woman lifted the baby away from the large spot on his trousers. —You can't hardly blame the baby, can you? said the woman. Mr. Pivner stared at his trousers as he stood up. The tic in his lip pulled it down in quick throbs, and he said nothing.

—Sit down. Merry Christmas, said the man who sat beside the only empty seat in the bus. Mr. Pivner sat down. He was very tired, and nervous. He lifted the wet portion of his trouser away from his leg, and looked out the window. His destination lay some fifteen blocks on.

—I congradulate you. You're the first man I've met, said his companion. —D'you want to read the Bible? I got it right here. He disappeared for a moment under a flurry of newspaper.

The bus bore on, block after block. Chapter six, *How to Make People Like You Instantly:* ("So I said to myself: 'I am going to try to make that chap like me . . . What is there about him that I can honestly admire?' . . . I instantly saw something that I admired no end"), —What a wonderful head of hair you have, said Mr. Pivner. The man beside him looked at the thin hair on Mr. Pivner's head, and then clutched a handful of his own. —Lotsa people like it, he said. Then he sat back and looked at Mr. Pivner carefully. —Say what is this, are you queer or something?

Mr. Pivner's eyes widened. —I . . . I . . .

—Where you going?

—I get off here, said Mr. Pivner, and got out of the bus when it stopped, six blocks from his destination. It was a cold night, and the wind blew, concentrating on the wet spot on his trousers. How could he explain that, to his son? He walked on, suffering, more weary, against the wind, hoping now that the wind would dry that place before he reached the hotel.

He stopped outside its doors, to pull the green muffler from his coat. The wind helped him to whip it into plain sight.

—Whhhhellllll, here we are, said a familiar voice beside him. —My friend! Merry Christmas!

—Not now, said Mr. Pivner, quivering a hand in the air. He stepped toward the hotel.

—That's the idea. A drink for Christmas, said his companion, accompanying him. —Merry Christmas! You know, I've got a religion too, my friend.

Mr. Pivner paused at the revolving door. He said, —Go away.

—We're going to have a Christmas drink, friend. We're going to be friends. Like Damon and Pissyass, ha, hahahahaha . . .

The revolving door swung, emptying Mr. Pivner into the lobby where he stood weaving from the shock of the warm air, blinking his eyes, looking. The revolving door continued its round: —Whhhay, Merry Christmas!

Mr. Pivner reeled. He fell toward the tall bellboy, who caught him by the shoulders. He tried to speak; but he only gurgled. He was barely conscious. He was being taken out of the lobby.

—Whooooufff . . . I have a religion too gentlemen . . .

—Get them out of here, out the side door.

—Merry Christmas gentlemen . . . what's this, the policemen's ball?

—It looks bad for the hotel, taking them out the front way.

—I seen the little one, standing out in front there, fooling with his clothes, said the tall bellboy when quiet was restored.

—It's no good for the hotel, that kind of thing. Too early yet, said the manager. —Even so, you got to be charitable for them.

—He passed right out in my arms, just like my old man. Some of them you can't keep away from it, like my old man, you could blindfold him and tie him to the bed, but he always finds it.

They both stepped aside to let a breathless young man pass. One arm was concealed under his coat. He stopped to pull at his muffler, looking round him. Then he checked his coat and went into the bar with the muffler still around his neck.

—Don't tell me that kid ain't had one too many, said the tall bellboy.

—So it's Christmas, said the manager.

•

The mirror behind the bar was tinted, and of such a slight convexity that those who appeared within its confines wore healthy complexions, figures not distorted but faces slightly slimmer, and he appeared the more grave, she assumed delicacy, lost weight and the years gathered conspiring under the chin. Otto's pale lips, drawn in tension, appeared as thin dark lines of determination, the straggle of hairs on the upper lip a diffidently distinctive mustache. He raised an eyebrow. He moistened his lips, and curled the upper one. Left eyebrow raised, eyelids slightly drawn, lips moistened, parted, down at corners, his quivering hand anchored by the glass, he turned to look at the woman beside him. She was staring straight ahead. He returned to the mirror, where her eyes in ambush caught him and he felt tricked, out-maneuvered; and he quickly returned his eyes to their own reflection. Kettle drums rolled in some semi-classical pursuit from hidden untended amplifiers, rolling to crescendos which manifested capture, then withering as the prey escaped.

The blonde coughed. It was not the delicate unnecessary cough of a lady, drawing attention which she snares with her eyes, but a visceral sound of submission to reality. Nonetheless, looking at her he saw only her eyes as she turned and got down from the bar stool. She retreated in two directions at once, and Otto chose the mirror image to follow her short bobbing steps, and the ceding insinuation of her thighs. Among images of tables and portières she escaped in the tinted glass, but established him as the hunter and he drew breath, deeply, as though the air were fresh.

In the mirror again he saw himself as he had seen himself from two thousand miles away. —How brown you are, Esther said. —And all in white . . . There was still time.

As a child, Otto had had a phantasy which, in all of the childish good faith which designs such convictions, he passed for fact to himself and his friends. At about the time he learned that he had a father, or should have one, Albert, King of the Belgians, was killed mountain-climbing. It was not difficult to relate the two: he told that his father had been killed mountain-climbing, and so took upon himself the peculiar mantle of a prince.

Looking hastily round the room now, and down the bar, the sudden apprehension of royalty filled him, royalty about to be shoved from the throne room to the scullery, where the pretender belonged. For royalty's blunders always glisten with extraordinary foolhardiness, that makes them royal, distinguishes them from the common subjects who only make mistakes. And what blunderer more absurd than he who dethrones himself? So it has happened; a prince or a king may do it (but find a princess who would not at any cost be queen! a woman who would confess for no reason, who would step from shadows to), dare that reality which is the fabric of damnation, as men who have ruined themselves, for no reason, will tell you.

Down the bar, a man of better than middle age took Otto's attention. His suit was flannel, too light for the season, but bearing other seasons in other lands, as though it were spring now, in London, and he had

stepped in from Saint James's Street for a drink; that when he walked out it would be to cross the Mall, and into Saint James's Park, across the turf, to pause for a moment and note the swans there, and other springtime foliage. (London and royalty wove close in Otto's mind.) The man signaled the bartender, raising a hand which caught Otto with the gold flash of a signet ring, an affirmation, a summons which drew taut the muscles in his legs, ready to stand and deliver, do homage, receive from that hand the clasp of recognition, pledge fealty, inherit the signet and the kingdom its seal perpetuated. Undeterred by the man's glance which turned to him, piqued quickly and moved on without curiosity or surprise (so the visage of monarchy, does not deign vulgar response), Otto looked and found resemblance. About the eyes, was it? the bridge of the nose? Clearer correspondence than the device hung from his own neck, wool proclamation of plebeian kinship, green signal of the multitude, its verdant undiscriminating growth.

He drank off the whisky in his glass, lightened the anchor which held him still. Beside his hand lay a pair of black gloves and a gold cigarette case, next to the half-finished cocktail in its long-stemmed glass, smeared red at the lip. Engraved on the gold in generous longhand was the word *Jean*. There was still time.

He lit a cigarette. His hand was weighted down with a full glass, and he relaxed slightly, looking down at his ringless fingers. He took the cigarette in his left hand and rested his slung-up elbow on the bar. The muffler got in his way. There was still time to destroy it. If he telephoned Esther, he might get her husband; if he called him, Esther. He looked quickly over the room again. There was still time to destroy the muffler before it sprang the trap which he had laid himself, before Procrustes appeared to fetter him, with no more than a shock of recognition, to the bed of reality, stretch him or cut him down to fit, release him then, and publish him abroad. He drank down half his drink, and tucked the green muffler under his jacket collar. Walking (so he believed, quickly) toward the telephone booth, his fingers sorting the change in his pocket for the right coin, he rehearsed his conversation. —Esther? Listen . . . yes, it's me, I told you I'd come back . . .

He rested against the side of the booth, and closed his eyes for a moment. Then he opened them, lifted the receiver and dropped his coin. Before he could dial, he heard

(—And so I says to him, you can't ever tell what *she*'s going to do, she's so psychological . . .

(—Nobody asked *me*, but *I* could have told you . . .

—Hello, Otto said. —Hello?

(—Hello, said another voice, a young woman, —darling, is that you?

—Hello? Hello?

(—I think we got a crossed wire, would the other parties mind hanging up? . . . So then he says to me . . . where was I . . .

Otto hung the receiver back on its hook, and clung to it himself. The door opened, and the light went out. Then as he started to the other telephone booth, he pressed his wrist against the breast pocket of his jacket, for assurance, the papers of identity, the money, the manhood implicit there. His wrist pressed against his chest. There was no interruption. There was no weight of that presence more familiar than his own bones, all he felt now with his wrist. The left hand leaped from the sling as he tore open his jacket with the other, and the bandaged wrist worked frantically down into the empty pocket, where his fingernails snagged rolls of dust. Then the left arm fell limp in the sling.

When he felt the empty pocket he had said *no*, quite clearly in the tone of *no*, of absolute rational denial. He repeated it again, this time not the thud of negation but *no* with a shape to it, rising in the middle, a convexity of complaint and disbelief. His upper lip quivered and he raised his right hand, and put his forefinger along its length to stop it. Then he turned quickly into the other telephone booth, dialed, and stood bent rigid before the mouthpiece. —Hello? he said. He gripped the receiver and listened. He heard a clock ticking. —Hello? hello? Then he heard a sound which froze his hand on the receiver, and he stood paralyzed with it jammed against his ear: it was the sound of someone salivating, lips opening and closing, the tongue dropping in fluid from the roof of the mouth.

He left the receiver swinging at the end of its cord, and turned seeking support, as he had in the subway threading a slow career down the veering deck where a man in shirtsleeves, swinging from pole to pole with tattooed arms, called out, —Hey buddy, could you tell me what's the name of this ship we're on? . . . and a spattering of lights signaled their next port of call. He disembarked with the man's question filling his mind: unanswered and undiminished it lay there, static and insistent as a piece of ugly furniture, its place appointed, only to be dislodged by another more hideous when he stepped out on the quay, —Merry Christmas, hey, who got sick on your tie? . . . and climbing the mole, —You're looking good too. Who's your embalmer?

—You're going to be the richest woman in the graveyard, said the bartender, smiling. —How long since you're back?

—Two days, she answered, turning her head, smoothing her blond hair back over the separate mink pelts swung at her shoulders. The upper part of her face was attractively drawn, the lines of her forehead and nose simple and sharp. Her mouth, and below her mouth, lay heavy, and the jaw no forceful prominence but thickset.

Lips parted, left eyebrow raised, he looked at her, but the eyes themselves stared out in an intent lunacy graduated by lust: he heard his own voice as one hears a voice far down the beach during a hesitation in the surf. The untended amplifiers threatened *Aïda*, and they drank. —My arm? he murmured. —Nothing, a scratch . . . and as he lowered his glass swept his forearm along his chest to feel only the corrugations of his ribs. He offered a cigarette with cool clumsiness, brandishing the sling. —Yes . . . they're a regular occupational hazard down there, you know.

The bartender laid the bill face down before him; and he glanced at it as though it were a splinter cast ashore, raising his eyes to the tinted horizon, and her indefinite profile afloat there, while his voice came on from far down the beach where the edge of the sea receded, to gather force from the mass and crash in again.

—As a matter of fact, I've just recently finished writing a play, he went on, and took his eyes from her image in the glass to that of the figure beside her whose familiarity he acknowledged without haste: rather, he approached it carefully, with the controlled enthusiasm of a painter advancing upon an unfinished portrait put away for months while he has, all that time, studied it and completed it in his mind. Slight alteration of an eyebrow, a touch at the lips, embellished with a slight flaring of the nostrils, and he'd turned and presented this portrait to her.

Her voice came in gusts, bringing them closer. —I don't think you really ought to read a play, it spoils it when you see it . . . But somehow when I own a book, it's almost like I'd read it . . . In the Modern Museum of Art, it was supposed to be a painting of a woman and he told me it was very valuable, but even my knees are better than hers were . . . The music had not stopped; had, in fact, been pounding its way into *Aïda* all this time, and by now reached "The dance of the little Moorish slaves." —Isn't just the word poem beautiful . . . ?

Staring into the loose top of her dress, he stroked his mustache with a fingertip, and sat closer, to hear, —I couldn't live without Christmas . . . as her knee came against his and lay there in warm confidence, like the plain gold cross whose stem sprang from between her breasts. —Yes, I turned into a Catholic when I got married . . . Shoulders drawn back, the cross climbed from between the cumulous embankments. —But then I got a divorce and I don't know if I'm still one or not. He gave me this . . . The cigarette case was snapped open and closed in metallic rumination. —It's all he ever gave me, it's supposed to be gold but I have to go and have it redipped every two or three months, I keep it because it's a kind of a sacred memory, that being the only time I was married and all.

—I know what you mean. He squeezed her knee in gentle affirmation. His eyes settled on the bill, and seeking something more pleasant rose to the tinted mirror which showed his hair mussed, the green muffler askew: but neither hand dared leave its duty, to the casualty, and the casual prey. —Back to Central America, he heard his voice echo, minutes later, —South America, really. Boru and northern Polivia . . . And he sat staring into the mirror at the person who had made this statement. He waited; as one may in polite conversation, for it to be corrected. But the figure he saw there in the glass made no such effort, simply sat, as though facing destiny on equal terms at last.

—Yes, my name's Jean, she repeated. —And you?

—My name? he said. —My name? His tongue clung to the roof of his dry mouth. He opened his lips and ran the end of his tongue over them. He started to raise his left arm to look at his watch, and the hampering sling surprised him as though he'd wakened bound. He did not look at his watch then, but thought he could hear it tick. He heard the sounds of his mouth recovering fluidity, heard his name but could not repeat it now, no more than the king who abdicates repeats the name he took when he assumed the crown. —Look . . . he murmured. She had a room in the hotel. The one next to it was empty. The bill for their drinks had mounted quite high: if he took the empty room he could sign for it. He looked down the bar quickly, to where the man in light gray flannel sat thoughtfully picking his nose with his thumb. —What time is it?

She leaned forward. —Your watch says twenty minutes of eight.

—Well then it's stopped, it must have stopped . . . He drew off the green muffler, and commenced to stuff one end in his pocket. —I'll see about the room. But he sat still for a moment longer, watching the man in light gray flannel, to see if he had been noticed during all this time. The man had no green muffler; and as Otto drew off his own, a contract of necessity disappeared: the Damastean robber took his bed and was gone, slain by Theseus, that hero who identified himself to his father with the sword his father had left behind, Aegeus, King of Athens.

Here the man in the light gray flannel suit signaled the bartender. The seal ring flashed, connoting

monarchy; and turning away, the prince, to some extent, relaxed, as the Protean image of his father, after two decades of transforming itself, settled again prepared to change as soon as grasped, just as Proteus, rising from the sea at midday to sleep in the rock shade, assumed every possible shape and form to escape prophesying, when the curious caught him.

Otto let himself down from the bar stool slowly, intent intending dignity, posturing peril; and then he hung there, staring, as the revolving door swung into the lobby. Santa Claus entered, propelled with a whack from behind, and stood unsteadily for a moment. Then he saw what he was looking for, and started for the bar just as the tall bellboy caught him and inserted him again into one of the revolving compartments, pushing him back in as he came round again, and finally getting in with him to help him out the other side, and send the red-clad saint to other hearths. The dining room swayed gracelessly, and as Otto's feet rested upon the floor it seemed to shudder, like the deck of a ship as the hull lowers upon a ragged sea. He steadied himself for a moment; and then with his whole hand he felt for his inside breast pocket, as though the wallet must have been there all the time, its absence illusory, caused by witchcraft; and he glanced quickly at the blonde, as those medieval inquisitors, fingering the pages of the *Malleus Maleficarum* may have glanced at the witches who seemed to deprive men of their virile members, when they found that "such members are never actually taken away from the body, but are only hidden by a glamour from the senses of sight and touch."

But his hand pressed against bone. With that, he retired from the image of himself which had stepped down from the mirror above the bar, to dwell apart and watch it move across the room toward the lobby, prepared to applaud this vacant being if things should go well, to abandon it tinted and penniless if things should conspire against it. Even absolute, he mistrusted glamours; even so, he did not notice the green muffler trailing from his pocket as he walked across the floor.

—A single room for tonight?

—We have just one, sir. With bath. Nine-fifty.

—Fine. Fine.

—And your luggage, sir?

—Coming along behind me, you know. From the dock, following me.

—I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to pay in advance. A formality . . .

—I say, my travelers' checks are all in my small suitcase, you know, following me along here from the dock. Just recently arrived, I mean back in this country . . .

—I'm afraid we won't be able to . . .

—I haven't much time to . . .

—We might be able to hold a room for you until ten, unless someone else . . .

—Yes, well, that will do then. It will have to do, you know. Thank you, Otto finished, turning from the desk, the particles of his expression uncomposed, as though at the theater and temporarily confused by the course of the play; but as the theater-goer has redemption written on his ticket stub, and a sterile fragment of faith tells him that salvation is just around the corner as he takes his seat for the last act, so an anticipatory calm pervaded the materials of Otto's face.

Nevertheless the machinery of faith inclines to creak when the multitude boards; and the more the formidable tyranny of their privilege exerts itself, and love of spectacle demands effects, the more brazenly the machine is bared. Among Rome's earlier and more cheerfully dealt contributions to the decline of civilization was the gallant assistance she gave to the decadence of the Greek theater, where Roman eyes blinked in startled satisfaction as the god descended in a machine to dispense salvation on the stage, which faith, in the audience, had anticipated (while Democritus, succumbing in a measure to popular prejudice, granted to the upper air inhabitants "of the same form as men, but grander, composed of very subtle atoms, less liable to dissolution . . .").

As Jean was saying to Anatole in the bar, even then, —I just always kind of *expect* something nice to happen. And then it does.

The slung arm rose taut from the sling; the free one dropped its work of jamming the green muffler into a pocket, and collapsed as Otto stood, swaying gently as though suspended, like Absalom perhaps, hanging by his chin in the terebinth tree as the darts of Joab found his heart, and so smitten he came down to earth: the revolving door turned, and from it issued an apparition on a fragmentary blast too weak to do more than flutter the end of the green muffler.

It was too late to go out another door. The man had seen him. Otto finished jamming his own muffler down into his pocket, in mechanical denial of what was happening, and came forward with his hand extended.

—Hullo, he said, a sound which took all of his energy, left him unable to add the word, —*Father*.

—Uh huh, said the other, looking round him quickly through the thick glasses, pulling the cane up under

his arm, hardly pausing to shake hands. —Everything all right? he murmured, going on in toward the bar.

—Why yes, I . . .

—You better take my arm. It looks better.

—Why yes. I'm sorry. Of course. Otto guided him in; and they paused. —Do you want to have a drink first? I mean, a drink at the bar? Otto managed to ask, staring over a sagging shoulder at the sagging charm of Jean at the bar.

—I don't drink. Too many people at the bar anyhow. We'll get a table.

Otto followed, looking back over his own sagging shoulder at the bar. —It isn't really crowded, he said.

His companion turned, and for the first time fixed him with sharp pupils which seemed to penetrate him. —You're not drunk, are you?

—Drunk? I? Why no, no I . . .

—That would be a nice stew.

A lonely waiter appeared, to show them to a table in one corner, felicitously almost dark. Otto walked with a slight limp, in time to the *March of the Sardar* which came from the hidden amplifiers. The cane before him kept similar time. Passing an occupied table, Otto looked with horror at the man seated there: not at the man, perhaps, but at his tie: the inquisitorial stripes still challenged him. He still felt eligible, or had until this moment. The glance of the man at the table was cursory, from Otto to the grotesque striding before him, the glance of the British resident as the two ruined nobles followed the crippled clamor of their music toward the south.

They were imprisoned, side by side, behind a table against the wall.

—You shouldn't have jumped like that, when you met me.

—Oh, did I?

—It just don't look good.

—I know, I . . .

—People notice things like that.

—I know. The waiter dropped menus before them and escaped. —I guess . . . well I mean we might as well start right off with dinner.

—You want to *eat?*

—Well, I mean I thought we were going to . . . I guess it doesn't really matter. It was difficult for Otto to study the figure beside him; nevertheless he tried, beyond the bushy hair and the heavy glasses. Otto wanted to see his teeth. —It's funny, he said. —You have such black hair.

—What's so funny about it?

—Well, I mean because mine is so light, Otto answered as the cane clattered to the floor.

—Is it on crooked? his companion asked in a low tone, raising his hand to his brow, and passing it delicately over his temple. —I been kind of rattled all evening, he said. —Since I left home.

—Why. I mean is anything wrong? at home?

—"He that is slow to wrath is of great understanding: but he that is hasty of spirit exalteth folly." I just done something sort of hasty, like the Bible says there. But stupidity gets me sometimes. I just blow up. He sat back, then, and appeared to relax. —That's dangerous in any business, let alone this one.

—Yes, said Otto. —Of course. He held the large menu card up as a screen for his confusion, increased now by a scent which crept up around him, a familiar fugitive aroma which he could not identify. He was not reading the menu, but anticipating, as though reality in any desperate measure would suffice to anchor his covetousness; and he did not dare look up the bar for Jean. Clams, gros, to start? or omelette aux truffes?

—But those things don't hardly seem to matter tonight. I feel in a nice mood.

Coq au vin? Pigeon aux petits pois? Poularde au riz, sauce suprême?

—I always feel this way after a good job. And Christmas all over the place . . . The lonely waiter appeared, and he silenced.

Foie gras à la gelée de Porto? Poulet . . . Fonds d'artichauts . . . Salade à la grecque . . .

—Hamburger steak, sounded beside him; and the music was Mozart's *Turkish March*. Where had he found that? Otto realized that he was looking at the wine list. As he folded the huge card back upon itself, the voice said, —Same thing for you?

—Yes, I . . .

—Two hamburger steaks, well done. And hurry it up.

Albert, King of the Belgians, careening gloriously down among the crevices of rock, gone, never to reappear and interrupt legends offered about him, to suffer translation from the fiction of selective memories to the betrayal of living reality.

Otto looked at the heavy glasses, saw dust on the surfaces of the lenses. —I noticed your eyes. Are they

. . . I mean, very bad? I mean, they really look . . .

—Eserine.

—Oh. Is it contagious? I mean, is it dangerous?

—Dangerous? It's not dangerous.

—But . . . is it painful?

—No. You can feel it, but it's not painful.

—Oh. Otto folded his hands before him. —Is it hereditary, do you know? he asked, looking up.

—Is it what?

—I mean, how did you get it?

—I got it from a friend of mine.

—Oh, said Otto, and sat a bit further away. Then he said agreeably, —I suppose you wonder what I've been doing with myself.

—Keeping busy I guess, was the answer, in an uninterested tone. Otto looked down at his hands, and reconsidered. —What have you been up to lately?

—I'm working on a passport now. It's no job for a beginner. It never was work for bums to get into. They ruin it for the real craftsman.

—Yes. I mean I guess it's like that in everything. But passports? I mean, what are you . . .

The lonely waiter bore down, a plate in each hand. —All right, can it.

—What? I mean, I just asked about passports, what are you . . .

—It's a very cold night out tonight, ain't it. Their plates were put before them, and the waiter went the way he had come. —What's the matter with you, anyway. Don't you know there's some things you just don't ask about like that? This is a public place.

—Oh. I'm sorry, Otto said, and watched his companion cross himself, and start to eat. —Are you *Cath*olic? he asked.

The eyes turned full upon him, penetrating the dust. He swayed, and looked down at his plate. —Am I Catholic! What do you think I am?

—Oh. I mean, that's fine. I was just sort of surprised. Seven thin slices of mushroom stuck to the top of the meat. Magic number: Otto cut into them. Somewhere (in exile, doubtless), the handsome young prince must be sitting, over cognac so fine it could hardly be swallowed, recalling legends of the king. Otto put a piece of the dry meat into his mouth, and could hardly swallow it. Beside him, he smelled lavender, and felt ill. He looked up to see the blond Jean leave the bar, carrying her bag. She glanced at the two of them without recognition or interest. Otto raised his face, his eyebrows, and his fork, to signal her.

—You know her? You know that woman?

—No, I . . . well, I talked to her while I was waiting.

—It's no time to get mixed up with women. Keep yourself out of trouble. He went on eating.

—Yes, well . . . I guess it was just Christmas, you know, I mean, the sort of Christmas feeling. Otto raised another shred of meat on his fork. —I've thought of it, you know. Joining the Church, I mean.

—Uh-phhm, was his answer, through a mouthful of bread.

—It's . . . it kind of gives a reason for things that otherwise don't seem to have any. I mean, it legitimizes . . . well, you know . . . life, sort of.

—You're either born into it or you're not. The fork beside him rested on the tablecloth. —There's too many people around joining it as if it was a sight-seeing party.

—But I . . .

—You got to be born into it.

—In a sense, I was, said Otto, with a slight laugh of confidence, waiting affirmation. There was none. He rested his fork on the table. He felt dizzy. From the corner of his eye he saw the figure beside him bowed over the plate, eating fast, moving the food only a matter of inches from the plate to his mouth. A fly descended upon the bread, and busied itself there. Otto's hand shook as he raised it with the fork. —I guess it's silly, that I should be nervous now, but I am I guess.

—Hide it the best way you can. It's all right to be nervous, anybody gets nervous in a thing like this sometimes. But you don't need to show everybody you're nervous. You look pretty young.

—Young? Well I guess I do *look* young. But I've been out of college for about three years now.

—College? You went to college? He wiped his mouth with his napkin, bowing his head to do so, and looked up.

—Yes, I thought you . . . I went to Harvard, Otto said, and for the first time noticed the man's necktie. —Why . . . you have on a Porcellian tie. Otto stared at the silk pigs' heads. —Were you P.C.? I mean, I didn't even know you went to Harvard.

—Me at college? You know where I studied. Attica and Atlanta.

—But . . . that tie, it is the Porcellian tie isn't it.

—Don't worry, kid. I know what I'm doing.

The fly lit on Otto's hand, and he shook it away. His legs were crossed, and he commenced rubbing his ankle up and down against what he believed to be the center leg of the table. The man in gray was leaving the bar. As he watched him go, Otto's hand rose with slow automatism to his chest, and his wrist pressed the vacancy there. Who could prove a thing? if he rose abruptly, dumping the table over if necessary, to turn square upon the upholstered shoulders beside him and cry, —Do *you* believe this? But then, who would pay the check? and the bar bill? There would certainly be no offer of a Christmas gift of money which Otto must, somehow, manage to suggest: a gift which might pay for the drinks he had enjoyed with Jean, for having seen the frayed trouser-cuffs when they walked to the table he could hardly expect more. Suddenly he imagined his hair furiously red, his skin dark, or eyes at a telltale slant: that would give the lie to this whole thing. But no: his nose was, really, quite like the one beside him, though Otto refused to recognize it as being absolutely so, derivative. Noses were, after all, noses, quite similar among Caucasians.

The most gross insult might simply be to say, —I trust there hasn't been some mistake? Better than that, to get up quietly from the table, cross the room quickly to the gentleman in light gray flannel (who also had a nose) and shake hands with him. But even now, the gentleman in light gray flannel was gone.

All this time, the sling had bumped between them without rousing curiosity. Now, he heard, —What are you wearing that sling for, you really got hurt?

—Well, in a way, I . . .

—I thought it was faked. You haven't learned how to handle it yet. You act like you're keeping a live squirrel in it.

—But it . . . I . . .

The music was the *Blue Danube* waltz. Otto rubbed his mustache with his fingertip, and looked into a distant mirror where he could see Santa Claus's strategic entrance, and stealthy approach to the door of the bar, where he was apprehended.

The fork beside him clattered to the plate. —I'm done.

—I think I've had enough, Otto said, barely half finished with the meal. He lit a cigarette, as the smell of lavender rose, heard a ringing in his ears from nowhere, wet his lips and heard forced salivation. Might it not all be rehearsed again, but differently, he thought, seeing a thin man of average height and quiet manner seated at a table in the middle of the room, finishing his dinner with a brandy: might Otto not have walked over and shaken his hand, and seated across from him, unsurprised, have listened to his intimacies with opera stars, artists, producers, over breast of guinea hen and wine?

The man in the club tie rose, looked at them, locking them together in his glance, and left. It was too late. Procrustes' bed was made: the only thing now was to get out of it the best way he could, which Otto did, more with weariness than pain. —It's kind of difficult, to talk about money, but . . .

—I've got it right here for you. You want to take it now? said the voice through a mouthful of bread. He was cleaning his fingernails with a tine of his salad fork.

—Take what?

—Twenties. Five G's in perfect twenties.

—Five what?

—Five thousand. Here, it's a thick packet. He motioned with his elbow to his side pocket.

—Five thousand *dollars?*

—Christ! Keep your voice down.

—But isn't that too much? I mean, even with Christmas . . .

—Listen, are you sure you're not drunk?

—Why no, *no*, I . . .

—I wouldn't give this stuff to you if you was drunk. You'd probably throw it all over town before the night's over. Lift it out of my pocket there.

—Oh I'll be very careful of it, ver-y care-ful of it . . . Otto said as he reached into the pocket and lifted the packet out, while the other sat silent and unconcerned, cleaning his nails with a tine of his salad fork. Otto wanted another glass of whisky. He opened the packet, and took out a twenty.

—Christ! Don't wave them around here! said the man beside him, and looked over the room quickly. But no one was near to notice them, and when he looked back he seemed unable to resist taking the bill from Otto and laying it on the cloth before him. —Beautiful, he said. —Beautiful, isn't it.

—Yess, Otto gasped.

—A real work of art. He stared into the face of the seventh President. —You know it takes six different artists to make one of these? That's what makes it tough. Six to one. Six against one, you might say. He turned it over, and ran a fingertip gently over the portico of the White House. —A real work of art, he said.

—You don't learn that at Harvard.

Otto stared. He clutched the packet, as though it were liable to be wrenched from him at any instant.

—You know, they burn around six tons of this stuff a day, the true quill, down in the Bureau of Printing and Engraving. Worn-out bills. It's a crime.

—Yes, but . . . well . . . this . . . was all Otto could say.

The hand beside him rose to catch at a lapel, as the man sat back and stared upward, relaxed in nostalgia. —Johnny the Gent died the other day, he said. —You know him?

—No, I . . .

—He melted down the Ascot Cup. He was the first one to gild the sixpence, and passed them as half-sovereigns until they had to call them in. He knew so much about the Church that once he posed as Bishop of the Falkland Islands. He just died, Johnny. He had about ten dollars on him.

Otto appeared to listen; but he heard nothing but jarring syllables.

—He organized the best den London ever saw. He was even a Sunday School teacher for five years. He was a great man. I've thought of him a lot of times when I was sitting in the hole.

The waiter approached a nearby table. —Put that stuff away. Otto put the twenty into his pocket, and the packet between his knees.

—I miss him when a great artist dies like that. He was no bum. It's no place for bums to get into, but they're ruining it every day. There hardly is a single old master left, a real craftsman, like Johnny, or Jim the Penman. And me. I haven't had a notice in the *Detector* in fourteen years.

—The what? Otto asked, politely, but firm.

—*The National* . . . listen. Shut up and listen to that a minute. It is.

—What?

—Vissi d'arte, vissi d'amore, he murmured with the music, —non feci mai male ad anima viva . . . And they sat silent to the violent grief-impassioned end.

When it was done, Otto said, —That was very nice.

—*Nice?* Is that all you can say? But you're just a kid, you never heard Cavalieri do Tosca.

—No, I . . .

—I'm going to get out now. He stood, and found his cane.

—Well . . . but I mean, don't you want some coffee or something?

—No. I shouldn't have stayed this long anyhow.

Otto took the check. —I'll get this, he said graciously.

—All right, kid. Thanks.

—But thank you, I . . . Merry Christmas. Otto was left, the packet clutched against his parts, sniffing the delicious aroma of lavender, only half aware that the table had four legs. A fly landed on his hand, and he simply stared at it.

•

Two men went out the revolving door, the second a figure in a checked suit, who had been waiting for some time in the lobby. He caught the other by the arm. —This is you, isn't it?

—What do you mean?

—You're Frank? They told me I was going to meet you in the lobby. They kept me half an hour late, but you're an hour. Have you got the stuff? Five G's in queer?

—Jesus and Mary.

—I'm the pusher they sent, you know? Have you got the queer?

—Jesus Mary and Joseph.

—What's the matter with you, for Christ's sake?

—That kid. That fairy. He took every bit of it. He sat there rubbing his ankle against my leg . . .

—Where'd he go? We'll go in and get him. He's got the queer on him?

—We'll wait out here. We'll get him when he comes out.

—Where you going now?

—Right here in this doorway. The coat came off, was reversed, the black wig went into one pocket, green muffler and glasses into the other, and the sandy mustache appeared, stuck to his upper lip. —It's cold, said Mr. Sinisterra. —And stop calling it "the queer."

•

Otto had appeared at the desk briefly, to put down a ten-dollar deposit on his bill. He was taken to a room. There he sat on the edge of the bed. He tore the wrapping from the money, and started to count it. The

sling got in his way. He ripped it off and threw it on the floor. Then he made piles of ten bills each, fanned out alternating backs and faces, on the bed cover. He stood looking at it, and then turned to the mirror, and ran his fingertip over his mustache. He called downstairs, and waited for the bellboy to come with a razor and "anything else that might come in handy," passing the time counting the money, in various positions. When the razor arrived, he shaved quickly and dressed. He reeled a little, putting four twenties with his change (which included a ten), and the rest into a drawer, hurriedly, for he heard stirring next door, remembering his neighbor. He turned off the light, closed his door, and stood outside 666, where he knocked and, unable to restrain himself, and as surprised to find the door unlocked, threw it open.

—Who . . . what do you want? Jean cried, pulling a sheet to her throat, uncovering her neighbor, whose light gray flannel suit lay on the floor.

—Why you . . . why . . .

—Get out, get out of here, what do you mean coming in a lady's room like that.

The door banged.

—Now just who the devil was that?

—Don't worry, honey, it's only a fairy I met down in the bar.

—A fairy?

—You know, queer. He said he was a writer, and they're always queer nowadays.

•

—There he goes, said the man in the checked suit. —Out the side door. Look out of the way, you dumb bastard.

—That's no way to talk to Santa Claus.

—Well get out of our way.

—Merry Christmas. Have you got a dime for old Saint Nick?

—Get the next cab in the line and follow him.

The two cabs pulled away from the curb half a minute apart, and a police car drew up before the hotel.

—I could sue you for false arrest, Mr. Pivner said when he got into the lobby, with a policeman, —if that would do any good. Do you know what you've done?

Behind him the policeman talked with the tall bellboy, who said, —Well Jesus, *I* thought he was drunk. The guy with him was. The policeman said, —We got him down to the station house and found a needle on him. We thought he was a junkie. He's real pissed-off.

—Do you know what you've done? Did you see him? A boy with a scarf like this on, he came here to meet me, that was my son, my son . . .

The policeman turned to the revolving door, and the tall bellboy said to him, —While you're at it, take Santy Claus along. He's driving us nuts out there.

The controversy in the sky, by this time, was no nearer settlement; there was really no promise of armistice at all, though the haggling might continue, precipitating fine rain for periods of monotonous variance, broken by impatient bursts of sleet. The skyline of the city was reduced to two dimensions. There was no depth; accustomed to mass, and there was no such sensation, but instead buildings in immediate isolation, their heights awhirl in the weather, their lights incredible in the night, their feat undiminished by comparison with the mass which had clung to their sides pretending support, cowering now out of sight, would be there next day if it were fair, pretending, and sharing the steep triumph of these hampered giants tonight abandoned in trial to their integrity.

The first cab turned into Jones Street; the second waited at the corner. —He's going into that doorway where all those cops are. What's he doing there. —How should I know what he's doing there. I never should have trusted him. —I wouldn't trust a fairy. —He's not a Catholic. I should have known. They watched Otto talk with one of the policemen, and get back into his cab. —How'd'ya ever *do* a thing like that? —It was pride, it was the deadly sin of pride, I was so proud of those . . . those . . . O Mary, pray for me . . . If I hadn't been so proud I would have watched my step . . . —Let's just let him go, said the man in the checked suit as Otto's cab left the curb. —The hell with him.

—Let him go? with all that? You think it's worthless, that paper? You think it's a cheap job I did? Driver follow that cab.

•

The juke-box played *Return to Sorrento*.

Someone said, —Have you read this? It's by a woman who spent the *entire* winter last year in Rome, she tells all about it here.

At hand, a limp wrist hung on air. —I was in Florida for two fearfully rainy weeks, and I didn't get browned very much . . . Laughter sprinkled up around him.

—I'm a drunkard, said one of two young men sitting at a table with Victoria and Albert Hall. —Nothing but a drunkard, he repeated despondently. —You think that's bad, I'm a drunk and I'm queer too, said the other, —an alcoholic *and* a homosexual. —So? demanded the paterfamilias. —I'm a drunk, a homosexual, and a Jew.

She looked them over calmly, and finished her drink. —I'm alcoholic, homosexual, and a Jew, she stated. —And I'm crippled. When the next round of drinks arrived, she was the toast.

—Have you heard the one about the muscular fellow named Rex? who had minuscular organs of sex?

—Do you know, Il y avait une jeune fille de Dijon?

—Es gibt ein Arbeiter von Linz?

—"The whole gripping story is founded on fact. Look at the beautiful girl shown in the accompanying cut . . ." Anselm read aloud. —Are you listening? "Note the cruel marks cut in her tender body by the lash of the cat-o'-nine-tails wielded by the hands of a heartless and Christless Mother Superior in whose heart all human sympathy had been assassinated by the papal system . . ." He lowered *The Moan of the Tiber* to look up at Stanley. —You're still brooding over that thing? he asked, seeing the torn strip of newspaper in Stanley's hand. —That's yesterday's paper, the whole of Saint Mark's is probably under water by now. What are you drinking so much coffee for?

—I have to stay awake, when I get home to work, Stanley said and looked anxiously at his wrist watch.

—To work! Anselm muttered. —What are you waiting for? But he appeared to have no interest in what Stanley might answer, or not. He sat slumped, looking sullenly out from the table at the evening victims of the Viareggio. The spots on his face were dulled, his eyes lit with a smoldering rancor now and then as he watched them, but his tone was vague when a tall girl with dark hair reaching her furpiece said to someone, —Well I have yet to see an animal reading a book . . . and Anselm mumbled, —How'd you like to get your hand in her muff? Then he brought a hand up, fingers turned in upon the palm, and commenced to bite his nails. A minute later he had slumped again, motionless, and started to whistle, dull and rasping through his teeth.

Stanley looked up. —What's that? What you're whistling.

—*Too Much Mustard*.

—Too much . . . what? No, what is it? It's familiar, it's Bach?

—Yes, it's called I can give you anything but love, Anselm answered without looking up. —Bach wrote it when he was three, he added, —for Mother's Day.

—Anselm, Stanley said inclining toward him slightly, —is there something, is something wrong?

—Is something wrong! Anselm turned at him. —That's the stupidest . . . But his voice tailed off, he lowered his eyes from Stanley, and scratched his head.

—If there's anything I could . . . do?

Anselm looked at the blunt black ridges of his nails, then held them out. —I've got a sycosis, see? Not psychosis, like these other crazy bastards. Plain sycosis. Scabs. And he went back to scratching his head.

Mr. Feddle entered, an alarm clock swinging from his neck on a piece of twine. In the doorway he bumped the man in the checked suit, whose companion said, —Go in and get him. —I couldn't just pull him out of there, said the man in the checked suit. —He won't stay long, he's too jumpy to hang around a dump like this. —Look out, there he goes! . . . —Goes, hell. He's going to the can.

As he stood, occupied, the mirror was beside him at his left shoulder, and Otto stared into it. He continued to stare as he turned a minute later, buttoning his trousers, weaving slightly, and allowed the smile to come to his face slowly as though savoring the renewal of an acquaintance long away, dead perhaps, for all they knew, in the jungles; returned now, and returned affluent. Then the smile left his face as slowly, and the same reckoned composure with which it had come: with all the sincerity of a suppliant before an icon he said, —If I were a character in a play . . . would I be credible? When the door banged open he was standing looking down at the pale left hand extended from his sleeve, and licking the strangely naked upper lip.

—What are you grinning about? You look pretty pleased with yourself.

—What? Oh . . . he spun around. —Max.

—What happened, you sell your play or something?

—My play? I . . . yes, yes that's it. How did you know? Yes . . .

—Good, Max said over his shoulder. Smiling, he added, —Look, I hope you didn't think I had anything to do with what people were saying.

—People? Otto repeated vaguely, going toward the door.

—You know, that you'd plagiarized . . .

—Oh, oh that, yes, no, no I wouldn't have thought that, Otto said, and left Max bound there to deepen the steaming gully in the cake of ice in the drain. He saw Stanley sitting at a table with Anselm, who was listlessly turning pages in a magazine which bore the picture of a girl sliding down a bannister, and the challenge, *Can Freaks Make Love?* on the cover. Anselm tore something out and pushed it across the table to Stanley who looked at it and then away quickly, his eyes searching the room for refuge until he lowered them to the floor.

—Hey, Hannah? Look at those two, said a tall round-headed young man in an expensive suit. —Did you ever see that Kollwitz print, "*Zwei Gefangene Musik hörend*"? That's what they look like, two prisoners listening to music.

—Stanley is a sort of prisoner, Hannah said half to herself.

—Anybody is who's always broke. He handed her the beer he'd got her.

—You can talk! Hannah turned on him, accepting the dripping glass. —You work for your money, so you don't have to worry spending it.

He stared at her; then cleared his throat and asked, —Say, is that really Ernest Hemingway behind me?

—What if it is, what would that make you?

—He, I . . . I'd like to meet him, I think he's a great writer.

—You think some of it will wipe off on you? You're still a salesman. Did you ever read Cummings' poem, *a salesman is an it that stinks to please* . . . and you want to write?

—I do in my spare time, I've taken a course . . .

—Go stink to please somewhere else.

—Yes, I . . . all right, all right . . . He turned two hundred dollars' worth of tweed on her, and said, —Mister Hemingway? My name is George . . .

—Glad to see you, George, said the Big Unshaven Man. —What are we drinking?

Otto paid for his whisky-and-soda with a twenty-dollar bill, and stood unsteadily looking about him.

—What are you mumbling about? Hannah demanded from just beneath the level of his gaze. He was looking at a tall blond girl who had just said, in Boston accents, that Paris was like a mouthful of decayed teeth.

—Hannah? I just sold my play, Otto repeated, but aloud this time, as though finding confirmation in what he heard.

—You sold your play? her query sustained him, but no further than, —Can you buy me a beer? as she put an empty glass on a table behind her. He struggled to the bar, got her a glass and handed it to her over someone's shoulder, but when he'd paid for it and turned again she was gone, leaving only her query echoing Max's, sanctioning what he had heard in his own words, and ratified now with a murmured yes and a smile of discovery. But immediately he saw Max, standing at the table with Anselm and Stanley, looking in his direction and talking through a smile, he felt unsteady again, called upon to defend himself, and his hand rose to the empty fall of his jacket as he approached them.

Max always looked the same, always the same age, his hair always the same short length, in his smile the humorless agreeability of one who could neither suffer friendship nor celebrate enmity, a parody on the moment, as his clothes caricatured a past at eastern colleges where he had never been.

—And if it's only through sin that we can know one another, and share our human frailty? Stanley went on, staring into his coffee. —And by doing that, we come to know ourselves . . .

—Crossing the Atlantic Ocean to get laid. He can't even get it up without a dose of methyltestosterone, Anselm interrupted, without looking up as Otto approached, without a pause in his speaking he tore something from his magazine and held it out to Otto, who read, "LONELY? 25¢ brings magazine containing pictures, descriptions of lonely sincere members everywhere, seeking friendship, companionship, marriage . . ." —What better reason is there to get out of this stupid white Protestant country, for Christ's sake. Yes, for Christ's sake. At least Catholic countries take sin as a part of human nature, they don't blow their guts when they find you've gone to bed with a woman. Somebody like him is scared to try it here, he'd rather go where nobody knows him, a bunch of stupid foreigners he doesn't have to respect because they don't speak English, and don't have any money, where nobody will point at him in the street if they see him coming out of a whorehouse. Christ. It breaks my heart. Somebody like that, it breaks my heart. But you know what breaks my heart? He looked up directly at Otto, who started, the smile jarred from his face, whose eyes, evading a wince, found Max's indulgent smile. —That that's sin! Anselm hissed, looking back at the table top. —That . . . Chhrist!

None of them spoke. Stanley clung to his coffee cup as though moored there. Otto tottered slightly. Max stood reflecting the vacant satisfaction he found in exposé.

—With all the . . . rotten betrayals around us, and that, that . . . that one moment of trust, is sin? Anselm whispered, looking at none of them.

None of them spoke until Anselm said, —You're spilling your God-damned drink, what's the matter with you? and Otto, righting his glass and licking his naked upper lip, came round to the other side of the table and the empty chair Max stood beside, bumping a girl who was carrying *Everybody Can Play the Piano* under her arm, and saying, —Well I thought his approach was rarther crude, just coming at me like that with a dollar bill wrapped around it . . .

—You're not sitting here? Otto asked Max, who stepped aside with the courtesy accorded infirmity. —Who's going abroad? Otto asked after a moment, seated. Stanley looked up at Anselm, as though to give him opportunity of answering, then said himself in a quelled tone, —Don Bildow . . . sounding as though he wanted to say more, but could find no more to say. And Otto looked up, over backs and shoulders, to see Don Bildow's white face bobbing behind the plastic-rimmed glasses; and heard, from someone falling toward the table, —Everything is either concave or convex . . . someone caught and raised to receive this intelligence, —Nothing, absolutely nothing, can convince me that all of us and everything isn't shrinking at the rate of one millimeter a minute . . .

—Has anybody seen Esme? Otto asked, his voice in an abrupt strain. —I just went by her house, he added hurriedly, and brought his glass to his lips.

—Nobody there? Max asked behind him.

—Well no, no not really, I mean no.

—Not even Chaby?

—No, he was . . . he wasn't there, no. I mean, I didn't see him, I didn't really go in, I . . . I just passed there, Otto finished looking up confused, rummaging his pale left hand, whose freedom no one had noticed, in a pocket, and seeing Stanley's ragged mustache, licking a lip whose nakedness no one had remarked. —Would anybody like a drink? he asked, and signaled a waiter who did not see him. Behind him, someone said, —A million people try to disappear in America every year, a million Americans try to erase themselves, that's a statistic and it doesn't include criminals either, a million a year, a million people a year . . .

The juke-box played *Return to Sorrento;* and nearby someone said that Saint Francis Xavier was only four and a half feet tall.

—"Does Drunkenness Threaten Your Happiness or Your Loved Ones? Our Remarkable New Discovery Quickly and Easily Helps Bring Relief from All Desire for Liquor! . . . No Will Power Is Necessary To Stop Drinking. This Is Strictly a Home Method! . . ." Anselm read, returned to his magazine and his dull tone.

—I'd just like some coffee, Stanley said.

—Have you got some money? Anselm asked. —If you do I'd rather eat. And he called a waiter.

—Yes, as a matter of fact I, yes I just sold my play, Otto said to them. He looked quickly from Anselm's shrug to the first sign of Stanley's approving pleasure but could not stop his eyes, and turned to Max for confirmation.

—Eggplant Parmigiana, Anselm ordered beside him, and Otto caught the waiter's arm as he departed, to order another whisky, and coffee for Stanley who looked up at that moment to ask, —Didn't you go to see Esme earlier?

—Well yes, earlier, I saw her earlier . . . The confusion in Otto's voice was reflected in his eyes. Escaping Stanley's simple question, he looked round at hazard for a new topic and unfortunately found it immediately. —There's Hannah, he said. —I just saw Hannah, she . . . I . . . The waiter appeared with their orders.

Anselm was laughing. —But I don't see why someone said what they said about me, about Hannah and me, Stanley brought out. And Otto, fleeing the appeal on this side, and the laughter on the other, looked to Max, whose smile was the conspiracy of an instant, an embrace confirmed in Stanley's discerning, and quickly lowered eyes.

—Stanley, you don't think . . . I didn't mean . . . Otto commenced, the lines of his face rising toward his brow in anxious entreaty, when Anselm interrupted, growling, with his mouth full, and Otto turned to him for deliverance.

Anselm ate rapidly, jamming pieces of bread into his mouth between forkfuls of the eggplant, as though he expected it all to be taken away at any moment. Still he managed to growl at Stanley, and crumbs flew from his mouth across the table. —The beast, Anselm gurgled, chewing, —the beast in the jungle. The beast with two backs, he growled and snarled and laughed at once. —Stalking, crouching, ready to spring, that's the number of the beast that's stalking you, the beast that's waiting to devour you, the beast with two backs, waiting to sspring! . . . and he lunged, blowing bread crumbs.

—Look, Anselm . . . Otto's voice quavered toward firmness.

But Anselm already appeared to have relented. He sat chuckling over his almost empty plate, looking down as though some imminent satisfaction filled his mind; while under the table out of their sight, his

hands opened a small flat tin, took out an envelope, and unrolled its contents.

Meanwhile the waiter stood there with the bill, and Otto seized the interruption, taking a roll of money from his pocket. —Here, I'll get this, he said, as though it were necessary to forestall them, though neither moved until Anselm shot an arm forth unseen and dropped something into Stanley's coffee. And as Otto sat back, folding his money, Anselm asked him agreeably, —Could you lend me something?

—Why, why yes, sure, Otto said. —How much?

—Whatever you can.

—Yes, Otto repeated, hesitated, and turned to Stanley. —Do you need any right now, Stanley? Any money? because I'd be glad to, to lend you some?

—Maybe, five dollars? Stanley said. —I might need it, if I go to the dentist, I have a tooth . . .

—Here, take this, Otto said unfolding the bills again, and he held out a twenty. —Go ahead, you might need it.

—No, just five, that's all I'd need, just five.

—Give him five, I'll take the twenty, Anselm said quickly, putting a hand out. —You know the kind of a lousy life I have, I need it . . . But he watched Otto hand the clean twenty-dollar bill to Stanley, over another faint gasp of protest, and accepted himself a worn five, murmuring, —Thanks, I . . . thanks. And, have you got a cigarette? having trouble even then getting one from the pack with his blunt bitten finger-ends.

—I didn't know you smoked, Otto said to him.

—I do sometimes, Anselm said holding the cigarette unfamiliarly, and then he folded the five-dollar bill smaller and smaller, until it was a wad scarcely the width of his tortured thumbnail. He puffed the cigarette once or twice, then dropped it on the floor and stepped on it; and in that minute all of the sullenness of a little while before had returned, and he stared at the table as though he were sitting there alone.

Max had turned away to talk with a small elderly man dressed in black, with black rubbers and a black hat, carrying a black umbrella. He appeared to say nothing, nodded his head occasionally, and accepted the drink Max brought him, while Max talked. Max returned to identify the black figure as the art critic for *Old Masses*, said he had a very incisive wit, and had given his pictures very good notices, —which is what makes all the difference, Max added smiling.

—It's strange having the use of this left arm again, Otto said finally.

—Oh yes, you were wearing a sling, weren't you, Stanley said, looking up quickly at the hand motionless on the table. —It looks very white, he commented. —Did it leave a bad scar?

—Why don't you ask him to show you the scar? Anselm demanded. —I'll bet it was a nice hole. You envy him, for Christ sake.

—It isn't the wound that matters so much, getting it, Stanley said as Otto sat back and lowered the pale hand to his lap. —But the scar, the scar is a witness for all the wounds we get . . . all the wounds, all kinds of wounds. I heard about somebody once who had a scar and he bandaged it, every once in a while, to renew the wound.

—Scars, all Stanley wants is scars, to show people. Scars! Hey Stanley, did you hear about the reliquary they opened that was supposed to have Ignatius Loyola's left arm in it? They brought it over on a boat, when they opened it they found an arm with a heart tattooed on it, with a bleeding dagger and the word *Mother*, ha, haha . . .

—That's not true, Stanley said promptly. —And it's not wanting to suffer, just for that, just to suffer, it's more . . . proving the right to it, to suffering.

—Come off it, man, said a haggard face rising over the back of a booth. —You're dragging us.

—He's right, for Christ sake, everybody suffers, the crime is in this world you suffer and it doesn't mean a God-damned thing, it doesn't fit anywhere. You can stand any suffering if it means something, Anselm went on rapidly, but still as though suppressing some specific thing which filled his mind. —The only time suffering's unbearable is when it's meaningless, he finished, muttering.

At that Otto raised an eyebrow and licked his lip, preparing to quote the lines with which Gordon reduced Priscilla toward the close of Act II, the scene in the doorway of the summer cottage which glittered before him even now, as though in production. Gordon: Suffering, my dear Priscilla, is a petty luxury of mediocre people. You will find happiness a far more noble, and infinitely more refined . . .

—You remember what Montherlant has to say, Max interrupted them. —Le bonheur est un état bien plus noble et bien plus raffiné que la souffrance . . . His French was unprofessional and surprisingly clear. Otto muttered impatiently at being interrupted the moment he had started to speak, and turned to ask Stanley if he had ever read any of Vainiger, as Max finished, —le petit luxe des personnes de médiocre qualité.

—That's a lot of crap, Anselm said without looking up.

—When he says that life must be led in the dark, Otto pursued, —and that we must assume postulates to

be true which, if they were true, would justify . . .

—Hey Stanley, I've got a song for you.

—Leave him alone.

—Hannah, sit down, sit down in Otto's place, he's delivering a lecture on *Die Philosophie des Als Ob*, Anselm advised her.

—On what? Otto demanded curtly.

—The buttons say U.S., So they just mean us I guess, Anselm sang, tearing something from his magazine which he handed to Hannah. —So they must just stand for me . . . and Mo-therrr . . .

"Get Male HORMONES Science has discovered that domestic and business worries often disappear when male hormone deficiency is overcome . . . If you do not feel the return of that old-time activity, that keen love and zestful desire for life . . ." —Shut up and leave him alone, Hannah repeated, crumpling the paper but she did not drop it.

—Leave who alone? Otto and I are discussing Vaihinger, aren't we Otto? He's an expert on als ob, ich gebe Ihnen mein Wort, Hannah, an expert, ich bin ihm nicht gewachsen, Hannah . . .

—Shut up, she said to him, looking him straight in the face as he became more agitated. The spots on his complexion stood out vividly, and his hair was up as though a wind were blowing. He reached up and felt it, took out a dirty pocket comb and made cracking sounds combing his hair.

—Scabs, he said. —I'm sycotic. Do you know who I envy? I envy Tourette. He had a disease named after him, a very God-damned rare one.

—Are you drunk? If you're not why don't you shut up.

—When you have Tourette's disease you go around repeating dirty words all the time. Coprolalia. Everybody below Fourteenth Street has coprolalia. Then he opened his magazine and turned suddenly to Otto. —"Women are funny," he read. —"You never know whether you're making the right move or not. Avoid disappointment, heartbreak! Save yourself lots of tragedy. Don't be a Faux pas!"

—Anselm, Otto began quietly, —why don't you relax and . . .

—You're drunk. Why don't you try God? Four three-letter words, *Why Not Try God?* That's a book by Mary Pickford. Real coprolalia. You'd like that. Then he got breath and said, —You know who I envy? Never mind. The buttons say U.S. . . .

—What's the matter with you tonight, is it on account of Charles? Hannah cut in, and Anselm stopped singing abruptly, and stared at her.

—I'm not . . . singing to you, he said after a moment, faltering, and he looked down at the dirty floor muttering something.

—Well why don't you . . .

—Well why don't you leave us alone! . . . you, God damn you, you . . .

—I meant to tell you how glad I am about your play, Stanley said to Otto. —I am, honestly.

—Thank you, I . . . I know you are, Otto said, and put a hand to his shoulder. —You're really good, aren't you Stanley.

—I wish I were. I wish everyone was.

—There'd be a lot of crazy priests out of work. Work! Hahaha . . .

—Anselm, you . . .

—Damn you Hannah, God damn you, is it any business of yours if I feel this way about Charles? And his mother coming here to get him and take him home to Grand Rapids and when he wouldn't go she left him here, with nothing? with his wrists . . . just like she found them, she . . . You remind me of her, maybe it's your God-damned smile. Maybe it's the way you try to get your hooks into Stanley, for his own good, for his own good!

—But what . . .

—It's the complacency I can't stand, Anselm burst out. —I can't stand it anywhere, but most of all I can't stand it in religion. Did you see Charles's mother? did you see her smile? that holier-than-thou Christian Science smile, she turns it on like . . . They're so complacent about this error of matter they've picked up, "It's nice because it's mine," that's the kind of a look they have, as if the old bag who started them off was the first one to think of the error of matter, didn't they ever hear of Catharism? or the Albigensians? or the Manichaeans? or even Bishop Berkeley? No, they stop thinking the minute they get hold of that thing *Science and Health*, they never read another book after that, they've got a corner on the Truth, everybody else is a Goy . . .

—So what have you got your balls in an uproar for? Hannah pressed him.

—Because Charles and I . . . I don't blame Charles a God damn bit for flipping. God is Love! We'd all flip, taking that from your own mother and you're lying there with your wrists slashed open. But love on this earth? Christ! . . . pity? compassion? That's why I've got my balls in an uproar if you want to know, talking

about some kind of love floating around Christ knows where, but what did she give him? When he wouldn't go back to Grand fucking Rapids and be treated by Christian Science? She gave him one of those eternally damned holier-than-thou smiles and left him here. She left him here without a cent, to let Bellevue kill him, or let him try it again himself. God is Love, for Christ sake! If Peter had smiled like a Christian Scientist Christ would have kicked his teeth down his throat. He sat there whispering to himself, and then said, —At least the Catholics have some idea of humility, I have to admit.

—All right, Anselm, nobody . . .

—All right, all right, I'll shut up. But don't you understand me? He half rose from the table, looking at her with an insane intensity; and then shuddering through his frame, sank back in his chair, and she turned to Stanley.

—How is your mother? she asked him.

—You always ask me that, Hannah. Thank you for asking.

—But how is she?

—She's . . . waiting. She's still waiting very patiently. They're going to move her to another hospital.

—Catch my mother waiting patiently, Anselm muttered.

—Please don't talk disrespectfully of your mother, Anselm.

—She's a nut, Stanley, said Anselm calmly, looking up at him. —It's all right, I'm just stating a fact. She's a nut. An old nut. Right now she's probably down in the Tombs forcing a Bible on some poor bastard who just wants to be left alone with . . . alone. He was perspiring, staring at the dirty floor. —Do you care if He . . . a saint, kissing the leper's sores? he whispered to none of them; and then said, —Never mind, never mind, you don't . . . you can't . . . do you know who I envy?

Mr. Feddle's alarm clock swung like a pendulum as he almost fell, recovered, and tipped in the opposite direction. The swinging clock banged the edge of their table. —That old fool, Otto muttered, —except he's not funny.

—But very sad, Stanley said, drawing back as the clock swung in a dangerous arc, above the tabletop, and down. Someone cried, —Owwwww, as it cracked an ankle. —He's happy now because he's publishing something at last. People congratulate him, they're really laughing at him all the time because it's a vanity house, but he doesn't know that, that they're laughing at him. And his wife looks troubled and says, But publishing is expensive, isn't it, she doesn't know you're supposed to make money publishing something, she thinks any author has to pay to publish something of his own. At parties he used to go around autographing books from the bookshelves, he'd write a dedication and sign the author's name.

—That's good, Otto laughed, looking at Mr. Feddle's back which stood now stolid as a grandfather clock, only the pendulum swinging for he had just bowed and shaken hands. —It could go in a play.

—You shouldn't be cruel now, just when you've sold your play Otto.

—But even if I hadn't, Otto turned on Stanley. —Even if I hadn't . . .

—I envy Doctor Hodgkin. Anselm was cleaning his teeth thoughtfully with a folded match cover. —He had a disease named after him.

—What kind of disease?

—Hodgkin's disease, for Christ sake.

—A kind of cancer, said Max from behind them.

—Cancer hell. It's a kind of leukemia. If you want to know what it is, it's progressive hyperplasia of the lymphatic glands associated with anemia. Lymphadenoma.

—Where'd you hear that?

—I studied medicine, Anselm said, mumbling as he did usually when admitting to something favorable about himself; and as immediately embarrassed at so having drawn their attention, tore from his magazine "Piles! Amazingly fast palliative relief . . . No mess or sticky fingers! . . . It's Better, Faster, Easier to use! . . ." Beneath that: "God Wants You . . . Poor health? Money troubles? . . . A remarkable New Way of Prayer that is helping thousands to glorious New Happiness and Joys . . ." —Here Stanley, take your choice. It's all one anyhow, he said, rolling the cover closed on *Can Freaks Make Love?*

—You know, the trouble with you, you're all mothers' sons, Max said to them. Stanley stopped stirring his coffee and looked up, Anselm turned on him, Hannah had turned away. —You and Anselm and Charles, Max smiled agreeably to Stanley. —And Otto? he added, looking at Otto who said,

—As a matter of fact, I just finished dinner with my father a little while ago.

—Otto's part of a series of an original that never existed, Max said as though he had not heard.

—What do you mean, you . . .

—That's what you told me yourself yesterday, didn't you? Max drew him on.

—But no, Otto rubbed his hand over his eyes. —The series didn't exist but the original existed. The original did. It had to. He sat there looking glazed-eyed for a moment, then turned to Stanley. —I just had

dinner with my father, he said, as though remembering back over a great distance, or attempting to separate a distant image from one which had recently supplanted it. —For the first time, he added.

—Did you like him? Stanley asked uncertainly.

—It's a funny feeling. It was strange, sort of . . . I feel like I'd lost something, like . . . I feel like nobody sort of . . . Staring straight ahead of him, he rubbed his forehead, and his wrist, descending, paused to press against his ribs, where no identity interrupted his contagion with himself. —I don't know, he mumbled, licking his naked lip, and went on in a low tone to Stanley, —Look, if you had a friend, somebody you haven't seen for a long time and he . . . someone else takes his place, but he still . . . I don't know. Never mind.

—You're drunk, Anselm offered.

—That's funny, Otto persisted without looking up at Max. —To say the original never existed! Look, he went on to Stanley, —Suppose you knew somebody who used to be a friend and who . . . and you found out he was, well like Mister Feddle, putting names on things that weren't his, I mean . . .

—You know who I envy? Anselm broke in on them impatiently. —I envy Christ, he had a disease named after him. Hahaha, hey Stanley?

Stanley pretended not to hear. He looked up from his cold coffee and said to Otto, —But if Mister Feddle saw a copy of a play by Ibsen, if he loves *The Wild Duck* and wishes he had written it, he wants to be Ibsen for just that moment, and dedicate his play to someone who's been kind to him, is that lying? It isn't as bad as people doing work they have no respect for at all. Everybody has that feeling when they look at a work of art and it's right, that sudden familiarity, a sort of . . . recognition, as though they were creating it themselves, as though it were being created through them while they look at it or listen to it and, it shouldn't be sinful to want to have created beauty?

—Why don't you go home and read Saint Anselm before you talk like this? said Anselm sitting forward, opening his eyes which he had closed as though attempting sleep here. —"The picture, before it is made is contained in the artificer's art itself," he said. "And any such thing, existing in the art of an artificer, is nothing but a part of his understanding itself."

—Saint Anselm. Dig him, said the haggard face bobbing over the back of the booth. —What are you trying to prove?

—I'm proving the existence of God, God damn you. Saint Augustine says a man who is going to make a box has it first in his art. The box he makes isn't life, but the one that exists in his art is life. "For the artificer's soul lives, in which all these things are, before they are produced."

—Where's God? In the box?

—You dumb son of a bitch . . .

—What's your favorite song, Anselm?

—*Nola*. Now screw, will you.

—I wish I had written *The Wild Duck*, Stanley said.

—I'm high, man.

—On what?

—On tea. We been balling all night. Have you got any? Hey Saint Anselm, have you got any charge? The haggard face hung over the back of the booth like a separate floating entity, rolling the eyes toward Max, to say, —He's in training. To be a saint.

—I notice he doesn't eat meat, is that the reason Anselm? Max asked. —So that your body won't . . .

—What God damn business is it of yours?

—Save the bones for Henry Jones . . . gurgled the haggard face.

—Anselm, preaching leftovers of the bleak ruin of Judaism, Max commenced with sententious ease, —a watered-down humanism . . .

—Cause Henry don't eat no meat. Hey Anselm, I got something for you.

—What are you supposed to know about religion? Anselm turned on Max.

—As Frazer says, Max explained indulgently, —the whole history of religion is a continuous attempt to reconcile old custom with new reason, to find sound theory for absurd practices . . .

—And what does Saint Augustine mean when he talks about the Devil perverting the truth and imitating the sacraments?

—This sacrament will go the way of all the rest of them, Max smiled. —It won't be long before they're sacrificing Christ to God as God's immortal enemy.

—Hey Anselm, listen to this, Daddy-o noster. Daddy-o, up in thy way-out pad. You are the coolest, and we dig you like too much . . .

—The god killed, eaten, and resurrected, is the oldest fixture in religion, Max went on suavely. —Finally sacrificed in the form of some sacred animal which is the embodiment of the god. Finally everyone forgets,

and the only sense they can make out of the sacrament is that they must be sacrificing the animal to the god because that particular animal is the god's crucial enemy, responsible for the god's death . . .

—Crucial! . . . Anselm spat out.

—Thy joint be right, the squares be swung . . . the haggard face continued, reading from a scrap of paper.

—And what does Justin Martyr mean, when he says "the evil spirits practice mimicry"? Anselm demanded. —Crucial! . . .

—Help us to score for some scoff today, and don't jump us salty if we come on like a drag, cause like we don't put down other cats when *they* goof . . . the haggard face went on in the silence straining between Anselm and Max. —For thine is the horse, the hash, and the junk . . .

—God damn you! give me that God-damned thing! Anselm burst out, swinging round and tearing the paper from the loose fingers; and the haggard face dropped out of sight, to bob up once more with, —Cause face it . . . and disappear again, as Anselm tore the shred of paper into smaller and smaller bits.

—Look Anselm, Max said coming up to him, —why don't you be reasonable? You'll end up like Charles, this pose of yours . . .

—Like Charles! And you, what . . . be reasonable! Anselm got to his feet. —This pose! this . . . Gott-trunkener Mensch, yes, you . . . be reasonable! That's what they called Spinoza, your prince of rationalists, damn him, you know what they offered Spinoza to conform? A thousand florins. "Conform outwardly" they told him, but what did he do, he changed his name from Baruch to Benedictus. The prince of rationalists!

Max had taken a step back, and another, smiling as though embarrassed for Anselm, as Anselm came on. —And what did they do, they damned him, the lens-maker Spinoza. They excommunicated him, right into the darkness of reason. The Schammatha, they damned him in the name that contains forty-two letters, they damned him in the name of the Lord of Hosts, and the Tetragrammaton, in the name of the Globes, and the Wheels, and the Mysterious Beasts . . .

Max was backing toward the door, toward the man in the checked suit who said, —To tell the truth I wouldn't dare go in there, they're all nuts. —I'm freezing to death, said his companion.

—In the name of Prince Michael and the Ministering Angels, Metateron, Achthariel Jah, the Seraphim, the Ofanim . . . Anselm went on shrilly as Max backed out into the night. —The trumpets dropped, they reversed the candles, Amen, there's the Schammatha, damned right into the darkness of Reason . . . and he stood quivering in the empty doorway for a minute, indifferent to the eyes turned on him. Then he spat in the street and came back to the table where Otto had just stood preparing to leave. —Here, take this, Anselm said to him, holding out his magazine. —There's a special article in it, *Can Freaks Make Love?* with illustrations, a "rare photo of Chang and Eng, the original Siamese twins, with two of their natural children . . ." He slumped in his chair again, and after a moment started to whistle, rasping through his teeth.

—What is that? what you're whistling, it's Bach isn't it?

He looked up at Stanley, and after a moment, —Yes, he admitted, —the seventy-eighth cantata. His elbow rested on *The Moan of the Tiber*.

—An aria? Stanley asked to his empty face.

—"We hasten with feeble but diligent footsteps" . . . a duet, Anselm said vaguely, watching Stanley stir the cold coffee, with a lifeless chill in his eyes. —Sung by women, by women's voices . . .

Stanley gasped, lifting the spoon from the coffee cup. —What is it? he whispered, as the thing slipped back into the coffee. He raised it out again.

—Ha, ha, hahaha . . .

The alarm clock strung to Mr. Feddle's neck went off.

—What is it? It's a . . . he held it in the air, unable to move, staring at it.

—You can use it for a bookmark, Stanley. For when you read Malthus. Hahahahaha . . . look at what Stanley found in his coffee.

—Anselm, did you . . .

—Hahahahahahahahaha

Mr. Feddle shut the clock off with one hand, finished his beer with the other, bowed to three people, stumbling away from the hollow desperate laughter behind him, out the door where he bumped the man in the checked suit who said, —There, there he goes, out the other door, the side door.

•

Above emptied streets, the roseate heaving persisted; above bodies contorted with sleep, strewn among the battlements erected in this common war without end, some wrenched as though in the last embrace, spoke with tongues, untended and unattended, extended limbs and members to come up against the thigh of another fallen, and be similarly still, or rise distended to enter the warm nest again and swim in the dark channel, committing the final assault in the anonymity of exhaustion, hearts emptied of prayer. But the

blood-luster of the sky witnessed that the battle was not done, though all were slain: it shone like the sky over the Campagna where Attila's Huns met the Romans in engagement so fierce that all were slain in deed, extreme but inconclusive, for their spirits continued the battle three nights and days over the field of unburied dead.

In the bar of a midtown hotel where the rear guard bivouacked among chrome and glass, scarred, alert, at battle stations (for there's no discharge in the war), Otto rested his left arm openly before him, raised one eyebrow, turned his lips down at the corners, flared his nostrils, and paid with a twenty-dollar bill. He spilled his drink. —Better give me another, he said. —Irish.

—You've had enough, Jack.

—Will you give me another drink?

—You've had enough tonight. Go home and sleep it off.

—Have I had enough? May I buy you a drink, madame?

—Come on, Jack, don't start any trouble. Leave the lady alone.

—I'm talking to her, not to you.

—Come on, fellow. Be a sport. Get the hell out of here.

The man in the checked suit came in the street door as Otto, clutching *Can Freaks Make Love?* rolled in his right hand, strode from the bar into the lobby of the hotel.

—You want to buy some pictures?

—Pictures? Otto asked, turning.

—Girls, you know?

—Just girls?

—Yeh, what'sa matter, you queer? He started to thrust back into the envelope the pictures he had half displayed, tangles of white limbs.

—Don't I know you? Otto stared at the young man, the hat on the back of his head, the extinguished cigarette stub in the corner of his mouth. —You don't know me, Mac, the young man said quickly. —You don't know me. You want these or not.

—Let's see them.

—What's the matter, you don't trust me? I can't bring them out here. A buck for the pack.

—All right, here. Here. Otto handed him a one-dollar bill.

In the men's room, he opened the envelope. A sailor banged the door, coming in, and Otto went into a booth. He stared at the first picture; and then sat down, staring at it. He turned it up, and looked at each one, his fingers quivering against their glossy surfaces, at each one quickly, ascertaining the face, unable to contain the whole figure in his apprehension, seizing at details, the unfamiliar maple chair she sat on, curled in, the Venetian blinds, the wallpaper, the upholstery pattern on the chair, her fingernails, the lines of her knuckles, the irregular dent of her navel and the two full blots swelling toward him, detailed blemishes on the expanse of her flesh, which delineated it but could not bring it to life in any variety of pose and exposure, obstacles at which his gaze stumbled, passing over the shadowed white in a silent mania of search which led him helplessly to her face, and deserted him there, fixed by the mouth which stigmatized his hunger, fixed by the eyes which knew him, and did not move.

Aware of silence, he stared at these blemished rubrics, WARNING! ALL SO-CALLED PROPHYLACTIC TUBES . . . NOT SANITU . . . GENUINE!, on the metal door before him, conscious only now the sounds of it ceased that the sailor had been sick in a wash basin.

—Hey, come on out, you want a good browning?

He sat, paralyzed by silence, suddenly cold and in detailed motion, shivering. The metal door before him banged, and rattled on the latch. —Hey, come out of there, what are you doin in there, poundin your pork?

Another door banged.

—O.K., sailor. Be a sport. Get the hell out of here.

He heard that; and heard the scuff of shoes on the tile floor; and listening, heard nothing.

•

Out in the street, he paused as two men came toward him from one direction, a woman from the other. She walked slowly, looking at him in apparently careless interest, a look of appraisal.

—Pardon me, he said. She stopped. —Are you . . . are you . . .

—Trying to make a pick-up? she asked him.

—Yes maybe but it isn't that bad, it isn't that crude, it isn't just for that, it's that maybe you can . . . that I need . . .

The man in the checked suit stopped, stayed by Mr. Sinisterra's hand.

Otto stopped swaying, stayed by the woman's hand on his wrist. —Come along with me, she said. He

started to withdraw his hand, to take her arm, and he felt his wrist caught in a chain. —But what's this? I . . . I mean you . . .

She gave the nippers a slight twist, and repeated, —Come along with me.

—I knew it, said Mr. Sinisterra, standing behind a refuse can.

—A cop?

—It sticks out all over her.

—It sure does. She's got a front like a cash register. We're screwed. If he has any of the queer on him we're really screwed. What are you going to do?

—Be quiet.

—Where you going?

—I'm going to church.

—What the hell are you going to church for?

—To confess.

—To confess *this*? to tell them . . . why Jeez what's the matter with you, them priests have a pipeline right into the cops . . .

—Be quiet. You think I'm a half-wit? I'm going to confess a *sin*.

—What sin, for Christ sake?

—Pride, said Mr. Sinisterra, removing the mustache from his lip, and putting it into his pocket. —And to burn a candle.

—For who you're goin to burn a candle, said the man in the checked suit, stepping back to look at his companion, his simple face falling into one of the few expressions it afforded, complete bafflement.

—For Johnny the Gent, said Mr. Sinisterra, walking on. —He had humility.

•

The music was the *Sorcerer's Apprentice*, threading into the lobby as though seeking a listener, for the bar was empty.

It came forth as though lunging from a coil hidden beyond the portières, trailing and lunging, as though these notes reaching the lobby now had been audible in the bar moments before; and, sitting in the bar, one might have followed the single course of the thing from behind, to behold it rearing over its prey.

Then it struck. Mr. Pivner stirred, started, woke in alarm, to recover all that he could in this unfamiliar chair, his newspaper, which had slipped to the floor as he read, ZOO ESCAPES INCREASE, HUNT MADMAN Police believe that they are on the trail of the man, apparently insane, who broke into the Bird House at Central Park Zoo last week in an attempt to turn loose the specimens on display there. Theft was discounted as the motive. The lunatic, described as a tall Negro of uncertain age, was seen by Bertha Hebble, a cleaning woman, as she passed . . .

—I beg your pardon sir, the young gentleman who you were waiting for has not come in yet. It is getting quite late, and . . .

—I must get home. I must get home, but I want to write a note, said Mr. Pivner, standing. He went to the desk, and the music lurked as he wrote. Then he put on his hat, which he had been carrying, and turned toward the revolving door, which the manager set in motion, and said —Good night, as the music towered in ambuscade's tense imitation of silence.

Sticking from an ashcan halfway down the block he saw a cane. He looked about him quickly, to establish his loneliness in fact; and when the four notes struck in finale he was beyond reach, moving slowly, escaping again in unconscious defiance of something which he did not understand, affirming with each step an existence still less comprehended, so crowded were its details, so clamorous of worth, until heeded, and then speechless as the night itself.

VI

"Des gens passent. On a des yeux. On les voit."

THE SKY was perfectly clear. It was a rare, explicit clarity, to sanction revelation. People looked up; finding nothing, they rescued their senses from exile, and looked down again.

Behind the bars which kept children out of their cages, the two polar bears moved continuously without touching each other, the male in an endless circuit, down to the front where he half reared, dropped and returned to his mate who stood swinging her head back and forth, timekeeper for their incarceration,

clocking it out with this massive furred pendulum. —He's doin that every time I come here, swingin his neck, a little girl complained, straining at the outside bars. A little boy asked, —What's their *names?* The female turned toward the rock cave, exposing the people to the filth of her unformulated rear. A young Negro stood and stared. A fat man in a yellow and brown necktie aimed his light meter, and stepped back to adjust an expensive camera.

—You thought I'd gone to Lapland, didn't you.

—My dear fellow, I hadn't the faintest notion where you'd gone, Basil Valentine said without turning from the bears' cage. His voice sounded strained and a little weary. He was wearing a double-breasted gray coat, slightly fitted, fully buttoned, a gray hat with a rolled brim, gray gloves, and his tie was striped black and dark red. The polar bear approached looking him over, reared at the bars, sex apparent wobbling among fur drawn into spines by the water, and retired, gone green up about the neck. —But you do look rather better this morning, Valentine added, as though needing the makeshift of this observation to turn around, and look. —Where've you been?

—I? In a Turkish bath. Good God but it's cold.

—If you would put on an overcoat when you come out . . .

—What difference would that make, it would still be cold wouldn't it?

—You know, Valentine went on, as they came out of the arcade, —when I look down to your feet, I'm almost surprised to see them there, on the ground. I half expect empty trouser-cuffs blowing in the wind.

—Yes. I hate the cold.

—Shall we go down and buy you an overcoat? To see you hunched up, with your hands in your pockets . . .

—An overcoat? No but listen, there's something. There's something. I went to the bank this morning, for some money. I went to get some money out, and they told me there's only a few hundred dollars. Why, there should be . . . there should be . . .

Basil Valentine pursed his lips, not as though coming forth to the subject at hand, but shifting from one preoccupation to another. —You've never known what sort of hand Brown kept on that account, have you.

—Why no, I . . . He put money in, and I took it out.

—And you haven't seen him . . . recently. Since your . . . the spree you went on?

—I interrupted his murder . . . but there. I'd just escaped my own.

—What do you mean? Valentine asked impatiently.

—Never mind. I won't try to explain it. Situations are fragile.

—Come now . . . what happened? Basil Valentine demanded, walking on with his head lowered as they approached steps leading down. He spoke no more loudly than he might have done asserting some demand upon himself, and as impatiently, knowing the question but finding it necessary to hear it in words, as though the answer, cogent as the query, were bound to follow upon it, —and enough of this foolishness, he added.

—No. No, I'm not joking. Who can tell what happened? Why, we have movement and surprise, movement and surprise and recognition, over and over again but . . . who knows what happened? What happened when Carnot was stabbed? Why, the fellow climbed into the carriage and stuck a knife in his belly, and no one would ever have known it if he hadn't stopped to shout, "Vive l'anarchie." All of our situations are so fragile, you see? If I meet you, by surprise? in a doorway? or come by invitation, for cocktails? or by carefully prearranged accident? Even that. No matter, you'll see. They're extremely fragile. And all this . . . all this . . .

A hand was waved before Basil Valentine where he paused to take off his gloves at the top of the steps. All this had been going on for some minutes, and Valentine was obviously annoyed. Indeed he did know of the anarchist Caserio's absurd blunder after assassinating the president of France, half a century ago, an image which assailed him now with all the vivid insistence of those irrelevant details which crowd a memory being probed for some calamity so alarming, or so disgraceful, that memory does not want to surrender it to consciousness until leavened by time, when the enormity of the deed may be appreciated at a distance, and, from this distance, dismissed. Basil Valentine got his gloves off, and stood looking at his hands for a moment there at the top of the steps as though recovering what the gloves had concealed, and verifying the left hand folded over the right with the glitter of the gold seal ring in the sun. Then, with the gray gloves clasped behind him, he descended.

—Did you see the moon last night?

—I can't say I noticed it, Valentine answered, looking quite old; though in profile his face maintained its look of strength, even heightened now by the severe preoccupation which his voice reflected.

—Yes, in its last quarter. The horned moon.

They had walked down near the seal pool in the center, where a child of about eighteen months stood

blocking their way, gazing up at Basil Valentine who paused again to take out a package of Virginia cigarettes. The child was hatless, wet-nosed, and dripping steadily from the breech.

—Here, here . . . Valentine burst out, looking up. —I shouldn't touch it if I were you. He offered a distracting cigarette.

—Touch her! But she's lovely! And the rose . . . ?

—You never know what they may have in their hair, and I shouldn't like to think where she got the flower. It's ruined, let her eat it, and come away. Valentine turned without looking back at the dripping figure, twisted to watch his retreat, chewing rose-petal. His effort to appear agreeable was being riddled by these thrusts, and he heard now beside him,

—Did you ever read the Grimm Brothers? the *Froschkönig?* No, never mind. Listen, those fragments? you have them? you still have them safe?

He stopped, to light their cigarettes. —I haven't forgiven you for running off with that cigarette case, you know. Where is it?

—I didn't ask you . . . that? that? Why, it's probably in Ethiopia by now. The three Indies. And the bull? Well damn it, I brought you back a griffin's egg, a much scarcer commodity, I found it in a secluded shrine in . . .

—You haven't yet told me where you've been. Hunched over his cigarette, Basil Valentine looked through its smoke without taking it from his lips; and they stood there motionless as plants, Valentine in epinastic curve as the expression on his face unfolded to immediacy, and bent him down over the growth from the lower surfaces before him. —You still hope to expose these fakes then, do you? he said calmly. The stem before him was uprooted.

—That's why I came back! I . . .

—Back? Valentine straightened up. —You went home, did you? he said, and seemed to appreciate the confusion this remark brought to the downcast face beside him as they walked on: it was at moments like this, absorbed in satisfaction, gleaned surreptitiously in a steady look from the corner of narrowed eyes, that Basil Valentine added ten, or even twice that many years to the face he showed to others. Even so, his silence evoked nothing as they walked toward the lion house, no response but an uneven cadence in the footsteps beside him, and he finally questioned, —That cut on your cheek? what is it?

—I fell in the snow, killing wrens. There. But this . . .

—You're done with that drunken inspiration for the priesthood, at any rate? . . . Eh? Tell me, what happened.

—What happened! What happened to Huss? John Huss, enticed by a salvoconducto up to Constance, where three bishops sat on his case, and he was burned . . .

—Anyone who hints that the Antichrist is to be found in Rome, my dear fellow, Valentine interrupted patiently, —and denies Peter as head of the Church . . .

—Burned and his ashes thrown into the Rhine, fishing for men, O sancta simplicitas! . . . yes, I've been off to see good old King Wenceslaus, there, and . . . my sainted mother! the women's voices . . . do you remember the Boyg? Why, I was almost pulled into the priesthood.

—And wasn't that why you went?

—And if it was! if it was! My sainted mother? . . . it's as though I'd left before she named me. Do you remember that story the poet tells? "I lay this destiny upon him, that he shall never have a name until he receives one from me" . . . never mind. The women's voices, and even that one, I left with her kiss on my cheek, see the scar? . . . there without so much as a talitha cumi I left that wise virgin.

—And now? The look from the corners of Valentine's eyes was the same concentrated appraisal of a few steps before. —The last time we talked . . .

—Yes, we talked about Shabbetai Zebi, didn't we. It's a way of getting acquainted, discussing the failings of mutual friends. A messiah? At Smyrna a letter from God falls out of heaven to confirm him. He's flogged and imprisoned. He denies he's the messiah, while the Jews outside are breaking their neck to free him, fasting, jumping naked into rivers, remember? They say he's never slept with a woman, though God knows he's been married for years. Before the Sultan, he denies it again, he's given the choice of death or Islam. Damnation! Sirius the Dog Star, the bright star of Yemen, Al-Shira . . . what was it? a sun itself where it rises with the color of ruby, then sapphire, emerald, amethyst, and then the most brilliant diamond . . . damn it, listen. In that immaculate place of yours, you . . . yes, immaculate, a thing like that would show up. It would show up immediately, a package like that wrapped up in old newspaper.

—You're still bent on this . . . suicide? Valentine asked, drawing on his cigarette, lowering his hand to take it from his lips. It stuck to his lips, and the coal burned his fingers as they slipped over it. The cigarette dropped to the ground, his lower lip trembled for that instant at losing control of it, his right hand came up clenched and behind him his left hand dropped a glove. —But here, he snapped, —will you walk up beside

me where I can talk to you, instead of . . .

—Suicide!

They were approaching the steps to the lion house, passing a fat woman on a bench with two books in her lap, one gaudy but closed, *A Day with the Pope*, the other opened, *First Lessons in Italian*. With a hand mounting two mean pearls on a thin line of gold almost absorbed in the flesh, she drew an enameled nail down the page, and then wiped her nose, each time folding the piece of disposable tissue in half until she clutched only a wet wad, forming the words behind it, *mi piace*, with her lips, —mee piachay, mee piachay . . .

Three little girls had just deferred to the clamorous wishes of the smallest of them, and bought a balloon.

—It's been noted, of course, that the thought of suicide has got many a man through a bad night. Nietzsche, I believe . . .

—Suicide? this? Do you think there's only one self, then? that this isn't homicide? closer to homicide? that, listen . . .

Approaching the door, the lines on and around Basil Valentine's eyelids became apparent as he looked at the anxious face turned up to him; and, brought out of profile into the smiling duplicity of the full face, the strength seemed to drain out through the narrow chin. —It mayn't be so simple, you know. This so-called homicide of yours, he said. —This putting off the old man?

A child posted by the door pointed to a remarkably symmetrical dog spiral on the walk. —Look at that dog-do! the child said with intense admiration.

—Get out of the way, Valentine snapped, and pushed the child aside with a firm narrow foot. —Shall we go in? he asked, still smiling, with a step back to hold the door open.

The place was filled with noise coming from the opposite end, moaning which broke into a stifled scream, relapsed in a heaving sob, repeated, and repeated, interrupted by a hiss and spitting. The animals moved about their cages in the restless patterns of their lives, to turn their heads in that direction as they passed, across the front of the cage, round to the back, emerging again; and the tigers coming forth approached the bars as though they were coming straight through. Some of the animals did not move. A black panther, caged down across the way, stood watching, motionless but for the black tail whose weaving tip just cleared the floor. Other leopards sat waiting, and watched; an albino with pink eyes. The lion lay still, archetype of the calm of enduring vigilance, fore-paws extended. The racket went on, leaving only two apes, caged halfway down one side, generically unconcerned.

—And you don't hate Brown, do you? Basil Valentine asked abruptly. —For what he's done to you.

—Brown? hate him? for what he's done to me?

—There's a favor I have to ask of you, Valentine went on, as though he considered his question answered.

—That Patinir? I remember. You think I don't, but I remember.

—No. Something else, Valentine commenced, his tone both fresh and casual. —The *Stabat Mater?* What do you plan doing . . .

—She? . . . bury her and marry her, after all, she . . .

—No, no. That painting, the last one you were working on.

—Why?

—Well, if you are as you say, through with all this, I . . . thought I'd rather like to have it. What's the matter?

—You? Yes, I told you, how fragile situations are! Every moment reshaping the past. You? you want it?

—If you'd give it to me, as a . . . to a friend, a favor to an old friend? Valentine put a hand out to his shoulder, but he turned away.

—Everything down there's destroyed. I burned everything, I put everything into the fireplace and set fire to it.

—But not that? not that picture too?

—Why not? he demanded, turning.

—If it was, as you said, becoming . . . not van Eyck, but what you want?

—What I want? he whispered, and shuddered. Moans from the other end rose above the broken echoes of human voices.

—The face, Valentine said. —The . . . reproach in that face, it was very beautiful, I thought. Then Valentine felt his wrist gripped tightly.

—Yes, the reproach! That's it, you understand?

They were halfway down the tiers of cages.

—Gee lookit how *he* does it, said a boy before the apes' cage.

—That's a her . . . and lookit her eat it, she's stoopin over and *eat*in it.

The caterwauling rose. The two pumas, as they would prove to be, were in the last cage to the right. Next

to them, and separated by a metal wall, a white African lioness brushed the bars of her cage, stalked to the back, and came forth round a tree trunk in the center, its length torn by her claws and teeth. Her tail wove to one side and the other, and she twisted to bare her teeth and snap at it, making no pause when the cries in the next cage broke. —Weh weh weh it's all right beautiful lady, yes, come on, you gonna eat it all up today? you gonna eat your tail all up? Yes . . . weh weh weh . . . said a woman before the cage, sharp-nosed, with too much make-up, she held out a skinny hand with a ring mounting a miserable stone, to the lioness.

—Listen. You see why it's important now?

Shocked as much by the smile fixed on him, as he was by the grip fastening his wrist, Valentine had started to withdraw. The instant his arm tightened the hazardous hand left it, but the smile persisted; and Valentine asked, —Why what's important?

—Yes, clearing up all this, these . . . those fragments, if they won't believe me. If you saw it too, in that face? The eyes turned away, the eyes not looking at you, but the forgiveness, the . . . grace? Yes, but even in that, the reproach. If you saw it too, that reproach? You understand, then, don't you. How I've felt since that dream? The Seven Sins, when they come to confess, and be shrived? The second dream, I don't remember the first one, but the second one, he wakes up but he goes to sleep again over his prayers, and there's Reason preaching, a "field full of folk"? And one by one, Superbia, Invidia . . .

—Damn it . . . !

—What?

—I've dropped a glove somewhere, Valentine said in a tone which penetrated the cry of the puma. Before him the lioness came forward with her head lowered and out to one side, waiting for him to appear in her view. Then their eyes met, and without turning from her as she did from him, passing the bars, he added, —Come now, what is all this . . .

—I'll tell you about it, listen. When I was away, I was dreamt, I mean I dreamt, I had two dreams I think, but the first one, I don't remember the first one. But the other one, sitting bolt upright in a chair, was it? And there she was, she touched me. Her lips were blue like indigo, and she . . . I didn't understand it then, but now, you can see, yes that reproach, if you saw it too. You can see that I can't just go to her, like this, after what I've done and, done to her. That I couldn't just go to her and offer her this . . . what's left.

—What is it, all this, this dream . . . ? Valentine interrupted, not turning nor raising his voice, nor his attention which seemed to seethe and recede with the shape of the lioness looming toward the bars and retiring. —This she, this face in that study . . . ?

—Yes, and you see why it's crucial. Why, when we've settled all this and we can leave . . .

—Leave! Valentine took a step back, without looking round his hand caught the wrist rising before him. —Tell me, what are you talking about?

—She . . .

—She? This . . . stabat Mater . . . dolorosa, it's she standing over you, is it? isn't it? Yes, you've told me, this blessed Queen of Heaven? . . . Valentine looked up quickly as the lioness turned away. The hissing in the next cage rose to broken cries. —Yes, your mother, isn't it? Your . . . "sainted mother"?

—My mother? He twisted in Valentine's hold, which was not tight but rigidly closed on his wrist. Beyond Valentine's shoulder, across the way, the rigid pattern of the bars was broken by dark blond hair and dark eyes, the abrupt, aware delicacy of a woman of undamaged beauty, who turned from the leopard cage to look for the child with her. She carried a fur coat over the arm of a tailored suit, and her expensive walking shoes lent purpose to the steps of her slender frame, deceptively fragile, full-bosomed and, again, so well tailored that that modesty was such only because she could afford simplicity, turning now to catch, for an instant, the eyes in the distraught face turned, for no reason, to her. He mumbled, or cleared a constricted throat, which was it? and she moved on quickly.

—Your . . . blessed Queen of Heaven? Basil Valentine seemed to force attention to his words as he stared into the cage where the lioness came forth again with her head lowered, turning, to look up, paused at the bars with forelegs crossed left over right, and then with no effort leaped to one side and was gone. —This woman, the "women's voices," and did I see the moon last night? this . . . good heavens, like Lucius in the *Golden Ass*, eh? Valentine faltered on, unwilling to pause and allow contradiction, postponing denial with whatever memory crowded upon him, casting up shattered shapes and fragments, shapes and smells. —And you, I suppose you went down and plunged your head seven times in the sea? You . . . "Little by little I seemed to see the whole figure of her body, bright and mounting out of the sea and standing before me . . ." One recalls her "odoriferous feet" but . . . yes, so it's not, then? Not your mother at all, that reproach and all the rest of it . . . ? Unwilling to stop until his hold was broken, unwilling to let go the wrist until it turned from his hand, unwilling to listen, until their embrace was sundered by laughter.

—My mother? why she . . . good God, she in the painting?

—Yes, you told me, you know . . .

A boy in the remnants, or perhaps the beginnings of a Boy Scout uniform had got between Valentine and the bars, and reached out over the rail. —Gimmeyatail, Zimba, he said. The sharp-nosed woman repeated, —Yes, weh weh weh . . . The lioness approached, looking beyond them.

—It's some girl you've picked up, is it? And all this talk about clearing things up, it's all some notion she's . . .

—No. Not that, all that is still itself, it's only part of itself.

—Really . . .

—Do you hear me?

—Really, and tell me, who is this . . . Solveig of yours? this Senta? The girl you've been using to model, I suppose, didn't Brown say he'd sent along something?

—Listen . . .

—And how is it I didn't see her? the night I dropped in on you.

—But she doesn't . . . we've never even . . .

—Gimmeyatail Zimba, the boy said between them and the cage.

—Or is it all in this phantasy of yours, eh?

—Yes, I'm working it out, and everything fits, everything fits so far, everything. And, that dream? I told you about that. Why, you've dreamt? and afterward, you meet them, who you dreamt of? What an advantage! . . . you know things they don't know, things about them they don't know that you know, things they've done, they never suspect you know. Why, they can go right on talking as though nothing had happened. Yes, like the saints, Rose of Lima? and what innocency of hers was woven into her past by her Jesuit confessor! What defense have they against our phantasies? And meeting her again, can she imagine what she's shared? where she's been enjoyed, in privacy? Can she imagine the postures and pleasures she's shared? And you know, all the time. What an advantage you have, over people you've dreamt of!

—Gimmeyatail gimmeyatail gimmeyatail . . .

—So you understand, how important this is? How crucial . . .

Basil Valentine turned and laughed in his face. —Really, really my dear fellow. No, he said, clutching the single gray glove before him. —The "somber glow" at the end of the second act, is it? the duet with Senta, is that it? . . . "the somber glow, no, it is salvation that I crave," eh! "Might such an angel come, my soul to save," your Flying Dutchman sings, eh? Good heavens! And up they go to heaven in a wave, or whatever it was? Really! And all that foolishness you were carrying on with the last time I saw you, that "I min Tro . . ." and the rest of it, that Where has he been all this time? and your Solveig answers In my faith? In my hope? In my, . . . good heavens! You are romantic, aren't you! If you do think you mean all this? And then what, They lived happily forever after?

—But listen, listen, she . . .

—No, no, it's too easy. After all, you know. With no interruption, Valentine paused, looking into the cage of the lioness. The lioness had come to the middle of the cage, watching him. She went round the tree trunk where her tail followed close, circling it. She stopped and moaned at the tail. She turned and bit at it. Then she moaned and faced him again. He did not speak until threatened by the voice beside him, then went on derisively, —And Saint Rose of Lima! Why, this sudden attempt to set the whole world right, by recalling your own falsifications in it? And then? Happiness ever after? Then you will be redeemed, and redeem her, and . . . good heavens knows what! And then, what next? First it's Shabbetai Zebi, now it's the Flying Dutchman? Listen to me, he went on, his voice dropping, —this lost innocence you're so frantic to recover, it goes a good deal farther back, you know. And this idea that you can set everything to rights at once is . . . is childish. I know what it's like with Brown, of course I know, I know you can't go on like that. But you and I, my dear fellow . . .

The broken cries from the next cage had stopped, given over to heaving and groans.

—What! You and I, what!

—Listen to me, Basil Valentine said, suddenly closing his grip on the wrist he'd recovered, without taking his eyes from those of the lioness. —Do you remember, when I told you that the gods have only one secret to teach? Neither was looking at the other. Over Valentine's shoulder, the blond woman reached the child who had run to her. She was bent down now, listening, her skirt drawn tight, her jacket full with the weight of her breasts, her face alive with attention. —Were they really fighting? she asked, still inclined over the child, being led back to the next cage where the pumas were, in her voice that tone children accept as awe, delighting to shock the innocence of those who awe them.

—That secret, do you remember? said Basil Valentine still holding him tight there and still looking, himself, into the cage of the lioness. —What Wotan taught his son? the only secret worth having?

—But how were they fighting?

—The power of doing without happiness, Basil Valentine said.

—*See?* said the child. She saw. She pulled the child to her, and looked quick into the other faces before the puma cage. They were all men. They all found her upturned face instantly, caught her dark eyes, one with a smile, one grinned an intimate recognition, until seeking escape she found herself looking into eyes familiar from a minute before, eyes not drawn to her by this instant of leveling, but still fixed on her, eyes which made no response at all. So she continued to stare at him, where he stood held in Valentine's grip there, for moments, finding sanctuary where she could recover all so abruptly assaulted, in eyes which shared nothing, recognized nothing, accused her of nothing: but those moments passed and, recovering, she groped for escape. But that lack of response held her, that lack of recognition no more sanctuary than the opened eyes of a dead man, that negation no asylum for shame but the trap from which it cried out for the right to its living identity. She clutched the child by the shoulder, as one essays handhold climbing from a pit, and turned to stare into the cage of the pumas, reddening over her face and neck and, though none knew it but she, to the very breaking-away of her breasts.

The sun was visible, white, in a sky which showed no premonition but in its fleeting neighborhood. The fat woman had followed it, from her chill seat near the seals to another, facing the sun, though she did not look up so far, no further than passing waist-levels, mouthing behind her damp wad, or the faces of children. —Frerra jacka, frerra jacka, dormay-voo? one sang. —What's that? asked the smallest. —Soney malatina, soney malatina . . . —What's that mean? asked the smallest, and the string of the balloon slipped from her finger. —It don't mean nothin stupid it's French, and lookit you lost the balloon already.

How old Valentine might have looked, to someone who'd shared with him the cruel familiarities of youth. Or are there moments of intimacy, of which only strangers are capable? of which those known, and suffered over years, could never conceive, so seeking for their own reflection in the attrition of familiarity. So the fat woman, mouthing —grot-zy, grot-sy . . . behind her damp wad looked up as though she might in that instant know the history of every line around his eyes but only lacked the time to set it down, set it down anywhere, even in her own; or set it down in prescience, not magic, not art, but only history before it happened: not age as mere accomplishment, but in performance, living out what would be lived out, age knowing itself, earning itself in that instant and gone. Until all she could have told, if she'd been interrupted a moment later, surprised? indignant? mouthing —grott-sy, probably all she could answer would be, —How old he looked just then, throwing that gray glove into the ashcan when he came out of the cat house.

—What now? the sun? A priest of Mithras, was it? Come along, my dear fellow, I'll tell you why Mithraism failed, the greatest rival Christianity ever had. It failed because it lacked central authority. It spread all over the country with the Roman Legions, but Christianity was a city religion, and power lies in cities, remember that. And what was it you said? A man's damnation is his own damned business? It's not true, you know. It's not true. Why, good heavens, this suicide of yours? Why, like Chrysippus then? feeding figs and wine to an ass, and dying of laughter? Look! look there, in the sky where it's still blue, that line? That white line the airplane's drawn, do you see it? how the wind's billowed it out like rope in a current of water? Yes, your man in the celestial sea, eh? coming down to undo it, down to the bottom, and they find him dead as though drowned. Why, this . . . pelagian atmosphere of yours, you know. Homicide, was it? What was it Pascal said, There's as much difference between us and ourselves as between ourselves and others? . . . no, but that was Montaigne wasn't it.

He stooped a little, finding his way up the steps to the street.

At the corner the three children stopped, to look at a deer hung there by its hind feet, to remark, —Lookit where they stuck the paper flower!

From down the block two women approached. —And I just haven't been the same since the *Morro Castle* . . . the tall woman said, and laughed. —And I wish I could, but I can't, this dismal cocktail party tonight, my husband has to go, he's her editor, and I'm his wife. We're going to miss the Narcissus Festival in Hawaii again this year, I told him we'd just have one of our own . . .

Basil Valentine's hands were clenched deep in his coat pockets. —Now? a Turkish bath? he muttered. —Well don't worry, those fragments, I'll be there tonight, I'll be at Brown's. And he looked up, as though watching something blown on the wind.

Ahead, the three children approached a figure sprawled on the sidewalk, and a little boy on a tricycle wheeling round it. —What's that? asked the smallest. —A man, what's it look like? —It looks like a Sanny Claus. What it's wearing, it looks like it was a Sanny Claus suit, don't it? —How could it be a Sanny Claus? It don't have a wite beard. —But it's getting a beard.

Valentine's look was not so steady: he raised it every three or so steps with that sort of blank surprise of a man glancing up to where he has been used to seeing a mirror upon entering a room, and finding a blank wall. —At Philippi? he murmured. —Yes . . . Why, I will see thee at Philippi, then. Like the sky, his eyes

remained unclouded, but (perhaps it was the sky beyond him that did it) simply darkened, evenly, assuming a hard solidity and the enduring texture of gray, as the sky itself was doing, as one might have seen, looking up at them both.

The tall woman turned her friend in at a door before the stubble-chinned figure sprawled on the walk in front of her house, —Right under the dining-room window, in fact, right here, as she remarked, —in front of God and everybody. She almost tripped over the tricycling child, but got the rail and down the steps to say, —My husband says that's when you have to be careful, around lunchtime, that's when most of them jump, when the streets are full of people, they do it then for the publicity.

Above her the sky darkened. She did not look at it, but went in with her eyes on her own hand laid out at elegant length on her friend's fur; while behind her, outside, the tricycle wove smaller and smaller circles, as its rider watched over the left shoulder how close the rear tire could come to the fingers on the pavement.

By late afternoon it was snowing.

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The flakes were small, blown neither one side nor the other, nor falling direct to earth, but filling the air with continuous movement.

Mickey Mouse pointed to ten minutes of four.

The first thing she saw when she entered her apartment was the unnatural radiance of the sunlamp. Agnes Deigh paused there, still holding her keys, as though to appreciate fully the affliction before her, worse second by second as she hesitated, considering what might have happened had she not arrived; even perhaps that there was still time for her to leave, quietly as she had come, back into the transfigurating weather: but before she was able to contain this possibility sufficient to examine it, and find there one of those mortal shocks with which life rarely presents us opportunity to abandon the bonds of circumstances woven with such care, and start off upon any of a thousand alternative courses among which, like the needle in the haystack, lies the real one: habit betrays us, as it betrayed Agnes Deigh. She put a hand on the Swede's shoulder, and made a sound.

—Owwwayy . . . what . . . what . . .

—How long have you been asleep under this thing?

—What *time* is it?

—Almost four, she said, and finally turned the sunlamp off.

—Oh my God, my God, I've been here for . . . owwwww . . . what shall I *do*? . . . the Swede wailed.

—There's some butter. I'll get some butter.

So that is what she did. —I'll *die* . . . she heard him a minute later from the bathroom, applying it. —How could it *happen?* But just *look* at me! . . .

Instead she looked away, and said, —I wish you'd . . . But she had looked away in time, and broke off, biting her lip, her eyes fixed at the same level (staring at a table lamp) as though she could not raise them.

—Baby. *Ba*-by! Ooooooooooo.

—I wish you'd put something around you, she said, recovered, looking up, and caught her lip again, for it had almost happened again: she had almost said what she did not know she meant, instead of what she meant to say; just as, that day in the office when she had intended to ask, Are you Catholic? . . . and had suddenly heard herself demand, Do you believe in God?

The Swede had got back into the bathroom. Agnes Deigh sat down, and opened the only letter that was waiting for her. She read,

> Dear Madam . . . The case you reported to us as sadism and brutality reported by you to this precinct Tuesday December 20 at 10:17 A.M. resulted in false arrest for which you may be held responsible. Dr. Weisgall who you accused, was punishing his daughter in which case unless injury results no third party is obliged to intervene. This case is marked closed in our files but we feel it our duty to warn you that if at future date you accuse someone of criminal action that you investigate the facts thoroughly before reporting it to the Police. We also feel it our duty to warn you that Dr. Weisgall may be justified in communicating with you as agent of his unjust arrest, and any future action will take place between yourself and the injured party . . .

—Baby who sent you ros-es? The Swede had emerged, clothed.

Agnes looked up. She made a sound, almost told him, and bit her lip on that stark erect syllable. Then her telephone rang. —What? she said into it, shaken. —Hello? . . .

(—Hello, Mrs. Deigh?

—Baby I've got to find a *doc*tor.

—Yes, what is it? who is it?

(—I'm sorry, this is Stanley and I think I left my glasses at your house once, and when could I . . . how . . .

—I hate to run off like this baby but I'll call you, from the *hos*pital probably, but I can't go to the hospital on Christmas *Eve* . . .

—Stanley, Stanley, I . . . I'm so glad you called. Yes, I found them. I found your glasses, Stanley. But I won't be home now, I'm going to a party in a little while. But could you come there? Couldn't you meet me there?

(—But I'm getting a toothache, but yes, all right, I can come for a little while but I have to go up to this new hospital where they moved my mother . . .

—Yes here, here's the address . . . She read it to him; and almost a full minute passed after she'd hung up the phone and sat, staring at the letter she'd just received, before she looked up and realized she was alone.

Immediately she got pen and paper and started to write. "Dear Doctor Weisgall. I cannot begin to tell you how sorry I am for my recent mistake. How can I explain it to you so that you will forgive me? A woman's life is not . . ." She stopped and read that; as she would stop and read again, and again, until the letter on the edge of the wastebasket started, "Dear Doctor Weisgall. Perhaps it is not until late in life that we realize that we do not, ever, pay for our own mistakes. We pay for the mistakes of others, and they . . ." And the letter which fluttered to the floor, "Dear Sir. I trust that you are intelligent enough to distinguish between a vulgar act of meanness and revenge, which God knows I have no reason to commit, and the act of a citizen and a human being doing what she believes . . ." when she got up to find two strips of tape. Then she stood at the window stretching the skin at her temples, sticking the tape there to discourage wrinkles while she rested. Unblinking, she stared out at the snowfall a minute longer; and when she turned on the room her moving eyes found the roses. They were full blown with the steam heat: and that instant her gaze struck them, three petals fell.

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The snowflakes frolicked about the Swede's face, which was growing larger and more brilliantly red by the minute. He hit at them, as though they were a flight of insects sent to plague him. It did no good. They came from every hand until, seeing a bar, he fled from the white swarm inside, where patrons looked with impolite interest at his high buttered countenance. He got into the telephone booth, after only one drink, and dialed. —I came out in this blizzard to find a doctor but I don't know any doctors . . .

(—My doctor's away . . . on vacation . . . in prison . . . I can't think which . . . The tone was vague.

He dialed three more numbers, got no answer, and returned to the bar to try to think of telephone numbers.

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—Nothing?

—Nothing. Nothing at all, except this . . . wet, said Maude, standing against the door she had closed behind her. Snow crystals melted and dripped from her coat to the floor. —I had to come home in a taxicab.

—The same judge?

—Oh yes, and I almost hate him even though he does look like Daddy.

—That's a good sound reason itself.

—Arny please don't be cruel, not today. It's Christmas Eve, Arny. I feel so awful. Even when my doctor said, Does she look like she's malingering to you? Would *you* undergo an operation on your spine if *you* were malingering? And their lawyer said he was sorry but . . . Oh Arny, I get so tired.

—Do you want a drink?

—No. My doctor gave me some morphine. Are you drinking this early?

—Just a couple before I have to start drinking at the party.

—Arny I wish you wouldn't drink so much. Have you filled out the papers?

—What papers?

—*The* papers. You know, the ones for the . . . I can't pronounce it, for Sweden.

He planned to fill out these papers, declaring their fitness as parents, after the party. Now he poured the last of a bottle of whisky into his glass and sat down slowly, making a wry face, supporting the lower part of his abdomen with a hand inside his trouser pocket.

—I'm hungry, he said abruptly. —I didn't have any lunch.

—Do you want some spaghetti? Maude said vaguely.

—Spaghetti in the middle of the afternoon? he mumbled, as she went toward the kitchen. But what Maude thought was spaghetti turned out to be a box of waxed paper. She offered salad; but they were out of whisky. When he went out for some, she sped him with, —But get a quart, there's something sinful about a pint of whisky.

—Sinful?

—Well, naughty . . . She sat down wearily, and had hardly managed to assume that suspended look of a passenger on a railway train which came over her when alone, when the telephone and the doorbell both rang at once. She shuddered right through her frame, put out a hand in each direction, and finally got to the door. But when she'd let Herschel in, and picked up the telephone, all she could say was, —What?

(—Baby do you know a doctor? I need a doctor.

—A bone doctor? Maude managed. She looked helplessly at Herschel.

(—I've just had the most terrible accident . . .

—Baby are you in the hospital? Herschel answered, taking the thing.

(—No but I will be, if you'll just tell me a doctor.

—But where are you, baby? I always told you this would happen, no one can drive the way you do and go on living in *this* world . . .

(—But it isn't an automobile accident, I have sunstroke.

—Who *is* this?

(—It's *me*.

—Oh you! I thought it was you-know-who. *Sun*stroke? Are you drinking?

(—Second-degree burns at the very least, stop asking sillies.

—Listen baby we're going to a party. You just come there and we'll find you the cutest little doll-doctor you *ever*! Now listen, here's the address . . .

And when he'd hung up, Herschel turned to Maude. —And *I*'ve had the most . . . just *most* day, you cannot dream where I woke up! Can you tell I have this shirt on inside out?

—Who was that? Maude asked, motioning at the telephone.

—It was Rudy, I think he'd been in an auto crash, or something. He said the strangest things, he must have hit his head, and so I just told him to come right along to Esther's cocktail, baby is there a clean shirt? Because I can't possibly go anywhere in this. He followed her into the bedroom, where Maude opened a bureau drawer and took out Arny's last clean shirt.

When Arny arrived, with a full quart by the throat, Herschel was already revealing his latest arcanum: —Chavenet. It really doesn't mean anything, but it's familiar to everybody if you say it quickly. They mention a painter's style, you nod and say, Rather . . . chavenet, or, He's rather derivative of, Chavenet wouldn't you say? Spending the summer? Yes, in the south of France, a little villa near Chavenet. Poets, movie stars, perfume . . . shavenay, Herschel brayed becomingly.

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The evening of this feast day, for so it was, perennially addressed to SS Adam and Eve, and the 40 Maidens martyred at Antioch, was brisk or cold, according to one's resources. The people in the streets had not changed; most of them, certainly, were the same people who might be seen passing the same points with the same expressions at the same hour on almost any of the three hundred sixty-five feast days of the year. Nevertheless, something had happened. There was a quality in the air which every passing figure seemed to intensify, a professional quality, as everyone became more consciously, more insistently, what the better part of the time he either pretended, or was forced to pretend himself to be. This was as true for each quantum in the bustling stream of anonymity, moving forth in an urgency of its own, as it was for such prodigies of the tyranny of public service as the policemen offering expressionless faces cut and weathered in the authority of red stone, and their contraries, a porous group in uniforms of low saturation and low brilliance gathered round something on the sidewalk before the American Bible Society, an object so compelling that it gave their diligent chaos the air of order. It appeared to be a gigantic male Heidi.

—Cross the arms on the chest, Maurice. All right there, get his feet. Wait a minute, don't lift yet until I tell you.

The policemen, busy elsewhere attending the smooth functioning of that oppressive mechanism which they called law and order, looked as unlikely of ever being seen in any other combination of lip, nostril, and cold eye, badge, uniform, and circumstance, as Saint-Gaudens' statue of the Puritan; in the same way the Boy Scouts hazarded neither past nor future, heirs to all the ages and the foremost files of time notwithstanding, they composed and expressed a pattern endowed with permanency.

—Look out f'his head, you want to break something?

—How'd it get so red?

—He's red all the way down. I looked.
—So how'd he get that way?
—You tell us, your father's a doctor.

Be Ye Doers of the word, and not hearers only, said a lighted sign behind them. In the window was a large loose-leaf book, whose lined pages were filled in a cramped round hand. A sign beside it said, *It took Mrs. Gille / 15 years to / copy the Bible // The Bible / was presented / to her son / at Christmas*. There was a picture of Mrs. William Gille, of New York City, and her hand-copied Bible.

—You passed First Aid, Maurice?
—Merit badge.
—What do you say?
—Artificialresperation?
—Right. Take his feet there and twist.
—He won't roll. He's big.
—*Twist.*

They stepped back, as the hulk rolled, and the nose hit the pavement.

—Cup the face in the arm, there.
—O.K. Get on him.
—*You* get on him.
—I'll get on him.
—We'll both get on him.
—O.K. Ready with your side? One two three go . . .
—Ughhh
—two, three . . . *push*, two, three . . . push,
—Sweet little boys.
—He's talkin. He said somethin.
—He's got me by the knee.
—Sweet little boys.

The police too were busy, in as serious, if less concerted pursuits. In the Fourteenth Street I.R.T.-B.M.T. subway station one of them reached Hannah. A policewoman handed that nomadic laundress over to the stronger arm of the law.

—You might at least have given me time to rinse them, Hannah said, a note of hauteur distinct in her voice as she gathered the wet clothes up under her arm. Earlier, she had gone to see Stanley. She had knocked at his door and found him not at home. Even going round to the front and peering through the bars of the grating and the dirty window, all she had been able to see was in order, that silent patient order of things abandoned. She could make out the picture of the cathedral at Fenestrula, the stacks of paper, palimpsests on the left, untouched to the right, twelve empty staves to a page but already dedicated and, she realized with a twinge of cold, as though the cold brought it to her clearly for the first time, not to her. Peering in she saw all this, even enough of the bed to ascertain that it, too, was empty. She could see everything in his room, in fact, except the crucifix, for it hung above the bed, next to the window through which she peered.

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This willful insistence of finality was so pervasive that, on those occasions which seemed to resist, an element which might too easily have been called fateful intruded, heavy-handed some wheres as though fate had become exasperated; in others, no more than the cajoling hand of co-operation.

Stanley's mother had been transferred to a first-floor room in a large municipal hospital, pleading, the entire journey, for her possessions. After Stanley's visit, her attendants might have noted that there was something more than the usual immediate anxiety in her voice, which had deepened with her demands to a tone which implied that they would never have opportunity to separate her from another of them. Had they brought her appendix? her tonsils? her severed limb . . . and her teeth?

The denture was put into a clean glass on the bedside table, where the nurse, watching the doctor leave, poured the wrong solution into the glass without spilling a drop, and left her old patient gazing at that submarine chimera. Stanley's mother gazed. It moved gently, suspended, as though melting there before her eyes. She dug nut-sized knuckles into her eyes, and looked again. Gumming imprecations of an exhausted nostology, she slept.

She woke, jolted into consciousness by a belch, pulling her three limbs toward her, startled. What was it? She looked into the glass. There was nothing in the glass but a placid clear solution with a slight pink precipitation on the bottom. It was too much. She must get where she was going while there was still time.

Who but a priest, dead for a thousand years, could have read the words which formed themselves on those remnants of lips, as she made her way informally across the room, moving as though encouraged by fitful gusts of wind, weightless, like a sail without a ship, toward the windowsill. The window slid up easily; the shade rolled up like a shot. The forceps shifted, the music began, and she crossed herself, nightmare of the girl she had been two generations before, running to the water's edge, stopping for a breathless instant there to commend her own salvation before she dove in.

•

Transfixed below, the darkness unfurled upward, pierced by lights at each point in its ascendance until it hung, impaled, on the city. Over and under the ground he hurried home.

Mr. Pivner's lips moved as he walked. Perhaps it was this complement which gave him, as the seasonal festoons gave the pitted face of the city, this intense quality of immediate realization, real no longer opposed to ostensible but now in the abrupt coalescence of necessity, real no longer opposed to factitious nor, as in law, opposed to personal, nor as in philosophy distinguished from ideal, nor the real number of mathematics having no imaginary part, but real filled out to embrace those opponents which made its definition possible and so, once defined, capable of resolving the paradox in the moment when the mask and the face become one, the eternal moment of the Cartesian God, Who can will a circle to be square.

Mr. Pivner's monologue was neither gibberish nor absent mumbling. In a clear, if inaudible voice he was accounting for every one of his movements. It was difficult to know (and he might have had difficulty himself, saying) whether he was carefully preparing an explanation, or believed himself actually before a Tribunal where he had been summoned to account for his movements. What had once been anxious inclination was become severe practice; it might have been brought on by the hours he had so recently suffered at the hands of the police, an inquiry which had been, by the standards of almost everyone else who passed through the station house that day, an indifferent, even tedious procedure, in light of the compass of their own applied, and again detected, talents. For Mr. Pivner, it worked quite the other way; and it was, perhaps, just this quality of merciless boredom with which his captors treated him, the entirely disinterested manner with which their relentlessness pursued him, that impressed his own impersonal presence in the world most deeply upon him. Under their questioning, he began to see himself capable of almost anything, someone to be watched, and accounted for after those awkward incidents which composed the biography of the city whose turbulent diary he was accustomed to following in the newspapers.

He looked at his wrist watch, lowered it as his lips kept moving, and abruptly raised it again, first to his eyes, then his ear, and walked faster. He bought a newspaper, turned his corner, and it was not until he was mounting, motionless, in the elevator, that his lips stopped, finishing his account to the Tribunal as he approached his own door, and the locked-up disposal of witnesses waiting to confirm him. The key half in the lock, he paused, listened, and moved frantically, shaking the door to get it open and himself through, to strike at the light switch and reach the telephone which he seized and raised so quickly that it hit him in the eye. —Hello? hello? He heard that sound of patient vacancy which is called the "dial tone." —Hello? hello, operator? His hand quivered over the dial: he spun it all the way:

(—What number were you calling, ple-ase.)

—Operator? Oh, didn't this . . . I'm sorry, I thought I heard it ring.

He moved more slowly, returning to the hallway to remove his hat and coat, and pick up his newspaper. He placed the newspaper on the table beside his chair, turned on the radio, and went into the bathroom.

He came back carrying his medicine and a syringe, paused to change the station on the radio for no reason but to change it, and returned to his chair to relax into that state of spiritual unemployment which he called leisure.

Then her eyes caught his, staring out at him wistfully from the harsh newspaper reproduction where she stood patient in long white stockings; and Mr. Pivner looked confused, as though he'd been abruptly handed back among the classic peoples of pre-Christian times, whose dates, declining with the advance of time, had always given him the feeling that they had lived backwards. He picked up the paper, and his eyes followed automatically the feature story account of the little Spanish girl soon to be canonized, while his mind rummaged its rich embarrassment of glories and defeats no longer news, for recognition. He opened the page, and saw the headline on the bus gone down a Chilean ravine, killing one American and eleven natives, before he realized it was an old paper, and looked at the date to be sure. He folded it quickly and thrust it at a wastebasket behind him. He found the newspaper he'd just brought in, and settled back with a sigh, a weary sound suggesting a suspicion, if he had stopped to reconnoiter, that if the evil thereof is sufficient unto the day, so is it to a place. For had he known, no great disaster had occurred in that region of Chile where the bus crashed since the nineteenth century, when the cave-in of a burning church gave hundreds of bereaved families grief sufficient for decades; and these eleven new and sudden deaths were

enough to be mourned for another score of years, deeply felt without publicity, realized in their full right as suffering and death, ungalled by the attrition of a world's tragedies circulated elsewhere on what had been, but remained, there, hectares of green trees.

If you can count, you can paint . . . he read, an advertisement in the evening paper. *New Subjects for your Paint-It-Yourself Collection* . . . and his lip drew in the tic which came when he was weary: for over this artistic suggestion loomed the specter of his retirement. "Yes, even if your artistic talents are zero, you'll be able to decorate your house, from wall to wall with fine paintings and be able to say: 'I did it myself.'"

The music was Francesco Manfredini's Christmas Concerto, approaching resolution in the last movement only to cease abruptly in favor of a voice, a voice laden with the viscous pauses of sincerity, feigning itself the last movement of that concerto interrupted with such confident presumption as though, in those minutes of music the listener had got, not bored but lonely, even alarmed at being left so long abandoned to the allurements of some possibility of beauty. Isolating in confident repetition the name of a product which had the distinction of never having been a word in any language, the voice came to the rescue, stickily compelling, glutinously articulate.

"Just match your numbered pre-planned canvas to the numbered pre-mixed paints. If you can count, you just can't miss . . ." he read, before he turned the page, this reasonable appeal, his head already nodding over retirement from the means which had become the only reasonable end. Still it was to him that they appealed; and a hand went to his pocket, where the past (his own, for there was no other) lay coined in justification.

With his last attention, he noted that the Burma Translation Society had published *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, and that U. Nu (Thakin Nu) hoped for more books, so that his nation would not "remain static as ignoramuses . . . This indeed is a matter of life and death to all of us." His eyes closed slowly; and when he thought, he fastened his hand on his extravasated heart, glad if only of recognition and familiarity, proof against Reason, and the cries of the mendicant Past.

When the doorbell rang; Mr. Pivner started violently, and grabbed the telephone. —Hello? hello? The doorbell rang again. —Oh . . . I'm sorry, he said to the sound of patient vacancy, —I thought . . .

He received the large package from the delivery boy, a wild-eyed figure about twice his own age who stood waiting dumbly for something more than his words of gratitude. —For *me*? *Piv*ner? Is it addressed to *me*? Oh, I . . . wait, he said, unnecessarily, —here . . . He fetched a quarter up from his pocket, which was accepted with a grunt. As the old man turned away, Mr. Pivner stopped staring at the package and cried out, —Wait! Here, I . . . merry Christmas. He handed over fifty cents.

The robe was too big. Nevertheless, the pattern was so conservative, and the material so fine, that this seemed rather a mark of luxuriance than some deliberate hebetude on the part of the giver; also in a way it marked the thing as a gift, for had he got it himself it would have fit perfectly. For that reason, any notion of exchanging it left his mind directly it arose there. The card said simply, "Merry Christmas from Otto."

And though he was surprised when he realized it, was it really any wonder at all that Mr. Pivner, whose world was a series of disconnected images, his life a procession of faces reflecting his own anonymity in the street, and faces sharing moments of severe intimacy in the press, any wonder that before he knew it, he had beseeched familiarity, and found himself staring at the image of Eddie Zefnic, as he sat running the end of his finger over the fine ridges of wool challis draped across his knee.

Wearing the robe, he stood up. He looked about him for something to do, something which, done while wearing the robe, would establish it as his own. First thing he noticed, there on the photograph album, was his syringe. He picked it up, noted that he had intended to attach a new needle, and went into his bedroom to get one. He opened a small upper drawer; and as he took a needle out the dull luster of gold caught his eye. He lifted the watch out by its chain, and dangled it there for a moment before he opened it. He pressed the stem with the heel of his palm, and caught the opening spring of the hunting case on his fingertips. Then he stood staring at that unchanged continent face, the hands stopped upon his father's forsaken past at XII; though whether noon or midnight, he did not know. The hunting case closed with a snap on this instrument which seemed, as his hand closed upon it, capable of containing time, time in continuum, where all things, even ends, might be possible of accomplishment. Mr. Pivner put the watch into the pocket of his robe, feeling, as he did so, Otto's card there. He put the card into the drawer, where the watch had been, and returned to the other room with the fresh needle.

Still, it was to him they appealed, (for that time coined dead in his pocket). ——In just a moment, *Necrostyle* will bring you the correct time. But first, friends, do you feel dull, logy, just not-up-to-much, first thing in the morning? Well . . . Mr. Pivner took his injection with great care, as he always did. When he was finished, he was told that the correct time was six-thirty. He was startled at that; and on second thought he lifted the gold watch out of his pocket by its chain, opened it, and pulling out a lever on the side he turned the stem, and brought the gold filigree hands into concert with his own affairs.

——Every hour, on the half-hour, the latest news, brought to you by . . .

He was suddenly in a hurry. He removed the robe with reluctant care and put on his jacket. He moved around the room, straightening things, or only touching them, as the voice rehearsed unimproved details of the war which no one talked about, commencing a summary of the same news summarized an hour before, which it had taken that hour to rewrite. He hung the robe carefully, and noticing its lopsidedness as he did so, removed the gold watch and put it into his vest pocket, not pausing to thread the chain through a buttonhole, for he was in a hurry, having intended to reach the hotel well before seven o'clock tonight. He put on his coat, and the green scarf, and had his hat in hand before he went to turn off the radio, waiting courteously, as he did from habit for the voice to finish a last-minute bulletin. ——In the metropolitan area, police are on the look-out tonight for a large man with a red, noticeably swollen face, who is believed to have abducted a group of seven Boy Scouts.

It had begun to snow again. Mr. Pivner hurried along the slippery sidewalk and caught a bus almost immediately. It did, in fact, wait for him, which put him in even better spirits as he sat down and looked out the window, allowing himself to marvel at this dreadnaught which bore him away to the south, and the wonders of science which made it, not simply possible, but ordinary. Then the bus drew to a stop, and moved again reduced to a crawl, a cautious hulk in the solid dark line of vehicles. Traffic in the other direction was stopped; and as though conducting tourists reverently past a venerable setting of martyrdom, the bus crept past the figure of a man on the glistening wet surface of the street. One of his feet was balanced up on the toe. His hat was four feet away, and all that moved was his smashed umbrella, its black festoons stirred by bits of wind. It was the image of the foot, so delicately awry, which held Mr. Pivner even as they went on. His bus passed another, stopped in line in the opposite direction. His driver leaned out, to call to the other driver, —Ya got a knockdown.

Mr. Pivner's lips were moving again. He opened his newspaper, and stared for a moment at the headline, *Minister Dies in 51-Day Fast Seeking "Perfect Will of God,"* trying to compose himself. Then he turned the pages looking for that ad, If you can count, you can paint . . . There were times when he had considered taking up a hobby, painting? or building ships in bottles; but something that would interest him. Seeking those words; I did it myself, his eye caught a picture: *Raise Chinchillas! in Your Own Home . . . No Mess! No Trouble!*

They all appealed to him, counting him excellently satisfactory just as he was; but if, on learning mistrust so late, he was not: how would they reward his ingratitude? how requite his betrayal?

Science assures us that it is getting nearer to the solution of life, what life *is*, that is ("the ultimate mystery"), and offers anonymously promulgated submicroscopic chemistry in eager substantiation. But no one has even begun to explain what happened at the dirt track in Langhorne, Pennsylvania about twenty-five years ago, when Johnny Concannon's car threw a wheel, and in a crowd of eleven thousand it killed his mother.

Mr. Pivner stared at the chinchillas. They looked warm.

•

"Here's to fire, not the kind that burns down shanties . . ." he found himself reading a few minutes later, bound by necessity before this scribbling on the wall. He shifted his eyes, chagrined at being seen staring with such attentive preoccupation at this, and the various graffiti surrounding it, even by the young man similarly preoccupied, and equivalently occupied, beside him. But the pictograph his eye caught was so alarming that he lowered his eyes, glimpsing in that brief embarrassed sweep, the face beside him, a haggard face drawn over a sharp profile which stared intently ahead. And his eyes were drawn slowly back up this figure his own height, near the same stature, slowly up, then snagged, drawn up short, and back, caught on a corner of green. And he was staring at that, down at the bit of wool protruding from the coat's pocket, waist-level, when the whole face turned on him, turned bloodshot eyes in a desolation of contempt.

Instantly Mr. Pivner returned square before him: "But the kind that burns in young girls panties." And after a shrugged fluster and buttoning beside him, he was alone.

—Is that old jerk going to come in here every night now, just sitting here in the lobby? the tall bellboy demanded as he emerged a moment later, and the night manager approached him. —Perhaps you would care to wait in the bar for the rest of the evening, sir?

—That young man, Mr. Pivner managed, —he, who just left?

—I believe he has been a guest of the hotel.

—Oh well yes, well then, no . . . Mr. Pivner lowered his eyes to the shining tips of the night manager's shoes. —But . . . ! he looked up suddenly: eyes as bright, and incurious as the shoetops, dismissed him.

—If the young man you have described . . .

—Yes, thank you, thank you . . . Mr. Pivner hurried into the bar, and there ordered orange juice. He

sounded weary and unprepared for surprises, even one so familiar as the dim image already resident, awaiting but the raising of his eyes, in the tinted mirror. To one side of him, a blonde sagged slightly in his direction. Her elbow edged nearer to his own a gold cigarette case, and he politely averted his eyes to avoid reading the inscription, withdrawing, bumping the man on his right. Mr. Pivner cleared his throat, as one prepared to apologize. But the other merely darted a pin-pointed glance at him and turned away, straightening a lapel where hung a boutonnière shabby enough to appear, in this light, made of paper. And Mr. Pivner settled his rimless glasses back closer to his eyes to stare forth into the tinted glass whose length construed the three figures in vacancy, maintaining a dim reality of its own, embracing their shades in subterranean suspense.

To one side, the blonde opened her purse, and exchanged a muffled pleasantry with the bartender. From the other side came a gasp. Mr. Pivner cleared his throat, as though prepared to apologize but unable to think, so quickly, of anything specific to apologize for. But the sharp eyes gleamed at something beyond him, and with such intensity that his own were drawn in a reflex to look to where the blonde paid for her drink. But all Mr. Pivner saw, in the dim light, was a crisp twenty-dollar bill exchange hands: or so it looked to him, moonblind in the tinted gloom of that landscape where the three of them hung, asunder in their similarity, images hopelessly expectant of the appearance of figures, or a figure, of less transient material than their own.

VII

> We will now discuss in a little more detail the struggle for existence.
>
> —Darwin, *The Origin of Species*

—It reminds me rather of that convent, the one at . . . Champigneulles, was it? Near Dijon, said a tall woman, looking round her. —The one that was turned into a madhouse.

—I know what you mean, said the girl beside her. —Everyone keeps changing size. The tall woman looked at her quizzically, and noted that both of her wrists were bandaged. She took a step back; the girl took a step forward. —What do you *do*?

—I? Why . . . when?

—Write?

—Oh, said the tall woman, recovering, —I support my husband. *He* writes. He's an editor, you know. He's editing Esther's book.

—Who's Esther?

—Why, my dear, she's our hostess. There, talking with the tall fellow in the green necktie. She turned, as her husband approached with a martini. —What an *in*teresting group of people, she said. —And what *in*teresting music.

—It's Handel, he said, handing her a glass. —*The Triumph of Truth and Justice*.

She looked around her, and raised the glass to her lips. —Do you think *next* year we might get to the Narcissus Festival in Hawaii?

Drinks were spilled, another brown line burnt on the mantel, people collided, excused themselves and greeted one another, and Ellery, tucking the green silk tie back in his jacket, said, —Just stop talking about it for a while. Who's that? he added, nodding at a blond girl.

—I don't know. She came with somebody. She's going to Hollywood.

—I want another drink, Ellery said, and went toward the blonde.

—Ellery, please . . . But he was gone. She sat, holding her kitten.

—What does it mean, said a heavy voice near her. —The garbage cans in the street, the kids on the East Side playing in the gutters, swimming in that filthy river, see? What does *that* mean?

—Well *she* says Paris reminds *her* of a mouthful of decayed teeth, but *I* think Paris is just like going to the movies . . .

—A lovely little hotel near Saint Germain, I don't think I crossed the river more than twice all the time I was there. I really *lived* on the left bank, it's so much nicer, the architecture, the cloud formations over there . . .

—Of course if you like Alps. I found them a fearfully pretentious bore myself . . . I mean, what can you *do* with an Alp . . .

—He's still in Paris. He wrote that he's just bought one of those delightful Renaults . . .

—Oh yes, I do love them. An original?

Esther stood up. Her face was flushed. The music disturbed her because it seemed the records were being played at random, one stray side of Handel after another in haphazard succession. She started toward the room which had been the studio, where the music came from, and bumped into a person who was saying, —Do you mean you've never *heard* of Murti-Bing? Before she was halfway across the room, her way was blocked by an immense glistening countenance. —Baby they told me you were looking for a doctor, and . . .

—Do *you* know of one? Esther asked, too startled for poise.

—No but I'm looking for one too. Maybe we can find one together . . .

Esther found Rose sitting in the dark. —Isn't the music nice? *I*'m playing them, she said. —Yes, but perhaps, he wouldn't want any of them broken, Rose. —Oh, *I* won't break them, Rose said, smiling at her in the dark. Suddenly Esther put an arm around her: and then as abruptly withdrew it, and left her there with the phonograph.

—*Was*n't it silly of me. I tried to kill myself twice in two weeks. The second time I was out for two days. Sleeping pills.

—How many did you take?

—Twenty-three. Why?

—I just wondered. It's always a good thing to know.

Esther closed her eyes, as though shutting out sound, and moved on toward Don Bildow, whom she saw across the room talking with a gaunt man in an open-collar green wool shirt, and a stubby youth.

—Yes, I'm almost finished it, said a woman beside her, to the editor. —It's to be called *Some of My Best Friends Are Gentiles*. I'm so *weary* of these painful apologies from our sensitive minorities. I often think how nice it must be among dogs, a bulldog saying, there's a greyhound, there's a basset, a Pekinese, none of them mind at all. They're all dogs. Here all you have to do is say a word like Jew or Catholic or Negro or fairy and *some*one looks ready to cut you up . . .

—I'm sorry to interrupt, Esther said, —but who is that fellow talking to Don Bildow? The tall one.

—He's a critic. I can't remember his name. He used to do books on *Old Masses*.

—The other one calls himself a poet, said the woman who had been talking. —He's a professional Jew, if you know what I mean.

Nearby, a man smoking something from a box whose label said, "Guaranteed to contain no tobacco" spoke to a fluttering blond boy who, someone must eventually remark, resembled an oeuf-dur-mayonnaise. The tall woman indicated him to her husband, with the query, —And who is that perfectly weird little person? He's been talking for simply hours about the solids in Oochello. Wherever that is.

—He's one of our . . . more sensitive writers, her husband got out expelling air as though it were salt water.

—Yes, she murmured, —I can see he has a good deal to be sensitive about. She watched, as the object of her gaze halted a pirouette of departure to say, —But all my *dear* friends are exotic, just all twisted and turned like the ir*reg*ular verbs in any *civ*ilized language, and *all* from over-use! . . . The tall woman said thoughtfully, —Yes, and I tried to read his book. Didn't I? she added, turning to the other woman who, she noticed now, was wearing a maternity dress in collapsed folds, the pregnancy foiled. Then as though bringing a topic from nowhere she smiled and said, —Will you bring me a drink? to her husband; —I'm drinking for two now, to them both; and, —I don't know *how* he could have been so careless, to the other woman.

As Esther crossed the room, Herschel caught her arm. —Baby, you must hear what Rudy's given his maid for Christmas. A hysterectomy! Isn't that the most thoughtful thing you ever heard?

While the tall woman continued to stare toward the door, where the sensitive youth fluttered an escape against the current of entrants. —At least I think that's who it was, I remember the picture on the book jacket, posing with magnolias . . . She paused, to add, as he disappeared, —Or was that a book by Edna St. Vincent Millay . . . ? And stepped aside for,

—Big Anna! but what happened baby? How did you get *here?*

—My Boy Scouts, I'll never speak to them again . . .

—But I'm really upset about Rudy, Herschel went on, —*that* one called and has been in an auto smash somewhere.

—I have to find a doctor . . .

—And you're so pretty tonight, and your nose, you know what they say about nos-es. Now you just drink this and we'll find you the cutest little doll-doctor . . . Oh! so pretty for Christmas Eve, all red and shiny like a candy cane.

In the doorway, Maude hung back. —Do you think we could just go join the baby and live in Sweden, Arny? —Same thing there, he said. —I'll get you a drink. Can you really tell I've got this shirt on inside out?

Someone was saying, —Rather like Pyramus and Thisbe, if you know what I mean, and of course

everyone knows that he was so sensitive she had to put cotton in the bedsprings the first time so he wouldn't be embarrassed . . . That person quieted, nodding at who came in the door. Others turned to see Agnes Deigh, who said immediately, —It's really the most God-awful thing, will someone get me a drink? Is Stanley here?

—Who's Stanley?

—A funny boy with a mustache. She sat down, looking round her; but Stanley had not arrived, and she was soon enclosed behind a curtain of trouser-seats.

—I really prefer books. No matter how bad a book is, it's unique, but people are all so *or*dinary.

—I think we really like books that make us *hate* ourselves . . .

—But . . . why doesn't someone just write a *happy* book . . . Maude had said that; but no one heard her. —If you had a judge who looked like *your* Daddy wouldn't *you* trust him? she asked a youth who turned on her with, —Trust that old bastard? Chr-ahst, he doesn't even trust himself. Do you want to buy a battleship?

All Maude could say, looking round the room, was —How do all these people know each other?

—Chr-ahst only knows. Do you like the party?

—It's a little . . . chavenet. Don't you think?

—Chr-ahst yes.

Esther had retrieved her kitten, and stood holding it too tightly. At her elbow, someone said, —Well Ruskin dated his life from the first time he saw them. —Well, of course *Rus*kin, said the other. —He was in town just last week, wasn't he? said the tall woman. —I heard my husband talking about him. They had lunch together, I think . . . he's doing a book about stones . . . ?

Across the room Ellery was turned toward her. He was talking to the blond girl, laughing, listening to her, she stood almost between them. The length of her back faced Esther. The heels were high, shoes narrow, legs slightly bowed. The whole of her figure up to the shoulders was slim as though waiting to be taken and turned, and bent downward and back: Esther felt heavy, resting against the door jamb, shapeless, and her head was tired, full, aching dully. —All I want to do is rent a house in the south of France with four deaf mutes . . . said someone near her. The room before her was clean; but in her own mind it existed with the permanence granted only to shambles. Tenants whom she had not met stood like fixed dwellers in her life, never to be dispossessed: they had been borne to her as they were in their permanent blue suits and brown suits and black dresses and eyeglasses, permanently standing and turning, talking to and about one another, nourished and propagated by their own sounds and the maneuvering of cigarettes, leaving the act of life outmoded, a necessity of the past, a compulsion of ignorance: men raised cigarettes in erect threat; women proffered the olive-tongued cavities of empty glasses. —What's that music? someone asked her. —I don't know, it's something of Handel's I think, said Esther, pausing to listen to the strains of celebration written by the barber's son who had learned to play on a dumb spinet, as the anachronistic morning-sickness rose in her, and she put an arm across her sensitive breasts. Ellery blew a smoke ring toward her, a savage missile which the blonde reached out and broke on the air.

—You'd better ask this nice lady right here, said a man who was fluttering a pamphlet titled *Toilet Training and Democracy* in one hand, leading a seven-year-old girl with the other.

—I'm the little girl from downstairs, the child said to Esther. —Mummy sent me up to ask you could you give me some sleeping pills . . . Esther set off with her to the bathroom, where they interrupted someone who was looking through the medicine cabinet. —Oh, sorry . . . he said, —just wanted to see if there were any razor blades here . . . He left with difficulty. Emerging a minute later, she was caught forcefully by the wrist. —Look, you've got a kitten, I've got to tell you the one about Pavlov and his kitten. You know Pavlov, he had dogs. Pavlov rang a bell and whfffft, they salivated, remember? The dogs I mean. Well this time Pavlov has a kitten . . . Voice and man were swept away, and Don Bildow was not where she had seen him. But Ellery was coming toward her smiling. She raised her face, smiling; and he stopped short, at the couch between them, where sitting alone was a man whose profession was as immediately obvious as that of the rickshaw boys of Natal, who white-wash their legs. A bow tie of propeller proportions stood out over extra-length collar bills on a white-on-white shirt, protected by many folds of a cloth which somehow retained the gracious dignity of transatlantic origin in spite of the draped depravity in its cut. —Benny! I'm glad you got here.

—Business is business, said Benny, raising his glass.

—What do you think of the idea?

—Terrific.

—I've got the guy all lined up. We're going to pay his family when he goes through with it, half now, half on delivery. But it's got to look accidental.

—Listen to this, said Benny. —I thought of this last night.

—What? An angle?

—Well, I didn't know whether you wanted to gag it up or make it arty or what. You know. We could have built a nice artistic number around it. Some ballet, with a story line in the background. Sweet. Or I thought if you wanted to gag it up we could make a kind of musical out of it. You know? Girls. Exploding cigars.

—Yeah but look, that's not quite . . .

—I know, we couldn't do that angle anyway, the cigars. We've got a couple of good cigar accounts that would yell. No. The more I thought about it, the more I thought, what you guys really want is stark human drama. The real thing. So listen to this. I thought of this last night.

—Yeh . . .

—From a church. He does it from a church steeple.

—Christ! Benny, you'll win the Nobel Prize for that. It's a natural.

—I figured how we can make it look accidental enough. There's this church up in the Bronx right across from a dancing school. We'll have the cameras up there doing a show on kids learning ballet dancing, see? Then when we get the word all we have to do is break in and dolly them around right out the window. Beautiful camera angle.

—But what about the priest? He might screw it up if he's around.

—He'll be around. He'll be busy inside, saying a Mass.

—It's terrific. That's all I can say. Ellery spoke with his eyes lowered, in thoughtful admiration. Then he raised them. —You deserve a drink. Where'd you think of it, alone or in a story conference?

—In church, said Benny.

—But Anna baby, came a voice from the end of the couch, filling the gap of Ellery's marveling silence, —they boiled Sir Thomas More's head for twenty minutes just so it would hold together, before they stuck it up on London Bridge . . .

—Right there, said the tall woman, nearer Esther, —in front of God and everybody. That's the way those things always happen. Do you think I have on too much perfume? I have sinus trouble and I never know. Isn't it *warm* in here.

—Well, your furpiece . . . Esther began, turning to face her.

—I know, my dear, but to tell you the truth I don't dare put it down anywhere.

—I'm sure it would be safe in my bedroom.

—Oh, then you're Esther. My dear I'm sorry, I didn't mean . . .

—It's all right, you're probably right. I don't know a lot of the people here myself.

—Tell me Esther, has *he* come yet?

—Who?

—Your guest of honor, of course . . .

—Do you know him?

—Hardly. But I've seen his picture so many times. And I own his book. I heard him speak once, about families, I mean about having children and that sort of thing. I can't bear them myself. I mean *bear* them, literally you know, she laughed. —A tipped uterus, you know. There seem to be so many nowadays, you run into a tipped uterus wherever you turn . . .

They both turned hopefully to look across the room, where the door opened. —My dear *he* is probably someone quite notable. You have to be, to go about with an alarm clock strung around your neck . . .

—Mendelssohn Schmendelssohn, someone else said. —I'm talking about *music*.

—Wasn't that silly of me, said the tall woman, watching Esther cross the room toward the couch. —Telling her a thing like that when here I am two months gone. It just goes to show what habit will do.

—I think Sibelius' fourth is his best.

—Fourth, schmorth; it's his *only*.

—It just goes to show that you can't trust nature.

Across the room, Mr. Feddle already was engaged, inscribing a copy of *Moby Dick*. He worked slowly and with care, unmindful of immediate traffic as though he were indeed sitting in that farmhouse in the Berkshires a century before.

Maude looked up and said, —Isn't it funny, how dark it seems over there, I mean where they are, do they make the corner dark or did they just gather there because it's dark there . . . Then she saw that the heavy-set man was in uniform, and said, —Oh. What are you? —Army Public Relations, he said, looking up again at the group in the dark corner. —They look like something out of a Russian novel, he said. —Chavenet, said Maude, looking up at him with wide unblinking eyes. —Yeh, him, said the officer. —Just because I'm not an intellectual don't mean I don't read books. Together they stared across the room; and Maude, feeling his warm hand on the back of her neck, relaxed somewhat.

A few years before, someone who had once seen one rather unfortunate print of Mozart (it was in profile,

the frontispiece in a bound score of the Jupiter Symphony printed in Vienna), and soon after looked once at the profile of the man now standing stoop-shouldered across the room in an open-collar green wool shirt, remarked that he looked (for all the world) like Mozart. Safe away by a century and a half, this was repeated often, most especially by those who persisted as his friends, wished to say something complimentary about him, and had never seen the frontispiece to the Vienna-bound Jupiter Symphony.

—I know him, the tall one, Maude said. —He's been around a long time.

He looked up, as though he might have overheard her, and he looked offended; but if she had seen him more often, anywhere, and in any circumstance, she would have realized that he always looked offended. Bildow, who was talking, looked slightly offended. So did the stubby young man whose belligerent interest was poetry. They might have been offended by the conversation immediately beside them, a group as unattractive as their own but in another way: crackling with brittle enthusiasm, these guests pursued one another from the Royale Saint Germain (across the street) to the Deux Magots; out to the Place des Vosges and back to the Flore; across the river to the Boeuf sur le Toit and back to the Brasserie Lipp (—It was Goering's favorite place in Paris you know); briefly to the Carnavalet and back to the Reine Blanche (—That's where *I* saw how tough the French police can be . . .).

—And laundry so expensive, eighty francs a shirt . . .

—Of course none of *us* had baths in our rooms, but there was a charming boy from Virginia whose bathtub was always free after eleven in the morning . . .

—I managed very well, just washing in the bidet . . .

Wherever encountered, it seemed that their one achievement had been getting across that ocean once, and getting back to retail wares which they deprecated but continued to offer, all they had in stock at present though a sparkling variety was on order (—Cyprus sounded like a marvelous place, I heard that they have these trumpets there, and at night when they go to bed they put one end out the window and the other end . . .).

—We didn't get time to *do* Italy this time, anyhow it's really more important to get to know *one* place really *well*, we were in Paris for almost a whole week . . .

Each one inclined from wistful habit to say, —Well I've only been back a couple of weeks, and . . . or, —I just got back recently, and . . . or, —Well I've only been back a little while, but . . . , realizing in the back of their minds that seasons had changed since their return, that the same season they had spent there was approaching again here, realizing, in spite of those vivid images which conversations like this one refurbished, that they were back, and their wares not for sale, but barter only, and in kind.

—I guess it *was* Corfu I meant, anyway when you walk down the street in the evening you hear these really mellifluous sounds from these trumpets . . .

—Well *we* were there when our ambassador laid a wreath on the grave of the unknown soldier. He dropped to his knees, and everybody in the crowd was so touched by his reverent act, then he fell flat on his face . . .

—You're talking about my *hus*-band! cried the one who had thanked Esther for her lovewy party, in passing, paused then to make a face at Don Bildow over their shoulders, and went on.

—I never saw anything like *that*, even at the Au Soleil Levant. What was it?

—The Duchess of Ohio.

Bildow turned his unimpressive back. —There isn't a good lay in this whole room, said their stubby companion, with a look as though recalling some severe unkindness done him privately years before. It was, in fact, a look he seldom lost. The tall stooped one undid the next button of his wool shirt, and said, —What about Esther, what about her?

—It's funny you never knew her. She was around a lot, before she got married. That summer your wife shot herself, Esther was all over the place.

—I was at Yaddo, said the critic. He smoothed the hair on the back of his head, but it stood up again immediately he lowered his hand; and the likeness to the Mozart print was remarkable again, not for the heavy and long upper lip, and the prominent nose, but the weight of the hair which he wore as consciously as the eighteenth-century man, though not for reason of that infestation of daunted vanity known as fashion, but for his own unintimidated reason: it made his head look bigger, inferring its contents to be a brain of the proportions which Science assures us we all might have, if we had wings. —I heard you sold out, he said to Bildow.

—What did I have to do with it? You know how much it costs to run a magazine.

He smoothed down and released his obedient hair. —Are you using my Dostoevski piece in this issue?

—Ahm . . . not in *this* one, but . . .

—Jesus Christ, you've had it up there for over a year. I'll finish the book before you print it, probably.

—Well, you know. There's politics up there like everywhere else.

—Who's out to get me?

—Well, you know that piece you did on Rilke last year, a lot of people . . .

—Jesus Christ, whose fault was that? Everybody knows I wrote that Rilke's references were occasionally *obscure*, and that dumb Radcliffe girl I had typed *obscene* when she copied it. I'd like to know who the hell copy-read that. And putting a *t* in genial . . .

—I was at Yaddo, said Bildow.

Someone from the neighboring international set tried to join them, offering, —Just imagine Victor Hugo wanting the whole city of Paris renamed for him! This credential earned cold stares, frightening, not for their severity, but for the very bleakness of the faces engaged.

—I hear you're going over, said Bildow's shorter friend, bleakly accusing.

—Yes, in a month or two. I want to see for myself, said Bildow, fingering his brown and yellow tie, bleakly defensive. Then he added, —It's funny that Max isn't here.

—What's so funny about it? That wise bastard . . .

—He usually shows up at these cocktail parties, said Bildow.

—What the hell ever made you print that poem of his, in the last issue? The one about Beauty disdaining to destroy him, that one.

—Well, we . . . It was . . .

—Did you see his paintings? Crap, all of them, even if he has got a sense of form.

—She looks like a good lay, said the stubby poet. —That blonde over there.

—Do you know who that is? It's that dumb God damn Radcliffe girl, Edna, the one who screwed me up on that Rilke piece, the one thing I've written that's worth everything else put together, because I understood Rilke, I understood him because he understood suffering, he respected human suffering, not like these snotty kids who are writing now . . . He put his glass down empty, saw another, full, and picked it up before its owner had finished saying, —It's like the movies because there's everything spread out for you, and you just have to react, like at the movies you don't have to pay with your *real* emotions, you don't have to *do* anything . . .

—And who's that over there, with all the queers around her? Agnes Deigh? Jesus Christ, I should think she'd get sick of playing mother to every God damn fairy in the city.

Esther had sat down on the couch because it was the only place in the room to sit. At one moment, she had thought that if she did not sit down, she might fall; but even now, sitting, she felt that she was falling, and she forced her back against the back of the couch, raising her chin as though trying to surface, for it was not a sense of tumbling through air, the limbs absurdly extended and unaccounted for, toward sudden impact which would so abruptly account for their ridiculous efforts in an unalterable pattern of incongruous torsions; but of falling in water where no bottom waited to delineate finality. With penetration peculiar to distance, every sound seemed to reach her, though it was perhaps her own doing, trying to escape the sounds nearest her by straining for those beyond.

—Malad*just*ed? To *this*? Well thank God I am. If I wasn't I'd go crazy, someone said across the room, while she listened.

—But you've got to under*stand* New York, it's a social ex*per*ience.

—That's why I like her, she's part woman, came a tittering asthmatic voice; and someone else was whistling slightly delayed accompaniment to a stretch of Handel's *Water Music*. The door opened, and she raised her head in hopeful anxiety, still unaware of how he would appear, the writer whom she had invited, and as afraid that he would not; and she lowered her eyes in disappointed relief, for the man who came in was carrying a baby, and immediately met by the girl with the bandaged wrists. —What did you bring *it* for? she greeted him, then turned to say, —This is my husband. He's late because he's been tight-rope walking. He has one set up in the apartment and he says he can't practice when I'm around and I'm around most of the time . . .

In the middle of the room someone greeted the boy who had been looking for razor blades in the medicine cabinet with, —Charles Dickens, my God, they told me you'd gotten a job as publicity agent for the Hiroshima tourist bureau, Come see the Atom City and all that kind of thing . . .

The kitten tore at the arm of the couch. Esther caught it, and drew it to her, Ellery's voice still the clearest in the room. He was talking to the blonde a few feet away. —Hollywood's through, honey. Why go way the hell out there when TV's right here in town. What do you think, Benny? Don't you like her for a spot in Lives of the Saints when it goes on video . . . ?

Esther realized that all this time the quiet seated presence beside her had been eating. He followed a stuffed egg with a small hot frankfurter, then a fresh carrot. —I beg your pardon, she said. He made a sound, eating. —Are you a friend of . . .

—Hors d'oeuvres. All I ever get, hors d'oeuvres. I keep thinking Benny will take me somewhere where

we'll eat, an invitation to dinner somewheres, but all I get is cocktail parties, all we do is drink, all over town.

—Are you in television too?

—No, God help me. Benny and me went to school together. He coughed, and took another small hot frankfurter, as though annoyed at this interruption in his meal. —Benny and me went to school together, he repeated. —See this suit? This is Benny's. He gave it to me.

—It's a lovely suit, Esther said, looking at the gray flannel sleeve which came halfway down the man's forearm. —A very nice gift.

—Now it's too conservative for Benny, he can't wear things like this any more he says. Honest, you can't imagine a different guy than Benny when we went to school together, quiet and real serious. He was going to do great things then, he was going to design the most beautiful bridges you ever saw, and look at him now. Even a year ago I saw him and he was real, like the guy I used to go to school with. He isn't real any more. The tray was abruptly lifted away, and he grabbed two frankfurters and a stuffed egg. —Look at them, he said, watching casual hands pick up stuffed eggs, frankfurters, an occasional carrot. —You'd think they were hungry, the way they eat. Look at that woman with the white fingernails, does she look hungry? His meal was done, and he turned to Esther for the first time. —Do you know anything about player pianos?

—I'm afraid not, I've never really been interested . . .

—I've written a history of the player piano. A whole history. It took me two years, it's got everything in it. What's the matter with people. What do they want to read about, sex all the time? Politics? Why, did you know, he went on in a spicy tone, —the Crown Princess of Sweden, the Queen of Norway, the Sultan of Johore, all of them had piano players? And Anna Held, Julia Marlowe, President McKinley, they had player pianos. And Pope Pius X, the Wright brothers, the ships of the Russian navy . . .

—If you want something to eat, Esther interrupted, —I'm sure that out in the kitchen . . .

—*Any*thing, he said, but his eagerness was weary, for just then art had taken appetite's place. —Some day I'm going to have it printed myself, on Japanese onion-skin, bound in vellum . . . I don't know. Am I the only one that's hungry? Doesn't anyone else ever eat in New York? He stopped to pick some egg off the flannel sleeve. —White vellum with gold stamping . . .

—I'm sure that in the kitchen . . .

—Well, *here* you are! Benny stood over them, unsteadily, with a dripping glass in each hand. —Are you all right? He leaned over and spoke to Esther in a low tone, —Are you keeping my friend here supplied? He always needs a drink, poor fellow. We went to school together. I've had to take him to every party in town the last two weeks, I don't know what he does with himself when I'm up at the studio.

Esther felt that she had regained her strength, and stood as the arm beside her reached dutifully up for the glass. She did not see Ellery and the blonde, and started toward Don Bildow when Herschel took her arm. —Baby there is a kitchen here isn't there? Because we must have just a little but-ter . . . and baby, has Rudy come yet? You know Rudy don't you? You must, he designed this new Doukhobor dress, the one that comes off with a touch, isn't that fright-fully Tolstoy? And now he's designing sports clothes for nuns. Why, before he's through he'll end up in the Church himself! Isn't that too camp? Why even Agnes says . . .

—Bathysiderodromophobia. And that's only *one* of his troubles.

—But why does simply everyone join the Roman Church? When there are so many other divinely amusing religions around.

—I think sun worship would be the most divinely in*spir*ing thing, why just imagine everyone here running around without a stitch on . . .

—I'd like to start right now . . .

—*I* want a new messiah . . .

—Baby we all do . . .

—That tall stooped one in the open green shirt over there, I'd follow *him any*-where . . .

—And it wouldn't do you a bit of good, said Agnes Deigh, leaning forward with a cigarette in her mouth, looking for a light. —He'd probably break every single little bone in your body.

—How fer-*wo*cious! Agnes introduce me, promise.

Of the three lights proffered, Agnes Deigh leaned over one and then sat back, lowering her cigarette. —Darling he's not any stronger than you are.

—But he looks so *in*-timate.

—He does, Agnes said, looking across the room. —That's because he has myopia.

—Agnes darling you sound *bit*-ter. What's *he* to Hecuba, baby?

—Oh God, let's not talk about it. I spent most of a year listening to his troubles with his wife, with his childhood, with religion, with his work, honestly, nursing him . . .

—Agnes, how angrwy you are!

She had, indeed, got a stern look on her face which none of them had ever seen; but as quick as it had come, it softened to one of weary disappointment. Then she said thoughtfully, not looking at anyone, —The people who demand pity of you hate you afterward for giving it. They always hate you afterward. She watched him plod across the room as though in deep snow.

The front door was opened and closed three times in quick succession, the first draft catching the flower of Agnes Deigh's patronage to detach a frayed petal and waft it across the room. —Buster! —Sonny! —But how did you get here? The second was Stanley; and the third a dark-skinned man about five feet tall in a snappy gray sharkskin suit, who looked round cheerfully, raised his eyebrows, shrugged, and accepted a drink. (He was, in fact, the Argentine trade commissioner, at the wrong party.)

Maude sat with her eyes closed, moving her head slightly in the hand of the man in uniform. —I just don't do happy things any more, she was saying. —I guess because it's easier not to, because when you do, and then remember them, it's much worse than if you never did them, it's much better if you don't have happy things to remember, and then you don't remember them and get sad because you're not doing them any more, it's easier just not to have anything to remember . . . He leaned forward and blew softly into her hair.

—Who's looney now? someone said, as Mr. Feddle worked his way along the wall, with the care of coastal shipping not to venture into the open sea; his cargo was *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, and he sought dockage where he might inscribe it in peace. Benny was approaching the very attractive girl who spoke with Boston accents. The tall woman said, —Then it's your husband who writes. What sort of thing? —God knows, said the girl with the bandaged wrists, —God and the Congregation of the Holy Office. Everything he writes goes right on the Index, and I can't read it. —Then you're Catholic? —My God yes.

The very attractive girl, indicating Benny, turned to Ed Feasley and said, —Tell your friend I'm a lost horizon, will you? —Chr-ahst, Feasley said, —I don't know him. He looks like a brush salesman in that outfit. Maybe I can sell him a suit. She raised her eyebrows. —Well Chr-ahst I've got to do something. Ever since I smashed this last car up I've been living on the free lunch at the Harvard Club, and going through the cushions of the big chairs there looking for change that drops out of those old bastards' pockets. Chr-ahst.

Benny turned unsteadily toward Agnes Deigh; but she had got up and gone to put an arm around Stanley, who shrank away. —Stanley, something awful has happened . . . she began, and looked over his shoulder to see the dark face of the critic. —Hullo, he said. —How is everything, Agnes?

—Well enough, I suppose, she answered, and took her arm from Stanley's shoulders. —I didn't know you knew Esther.

—I just met her, he said. His tone was dull.

—How's your own novel coming along? She sounded impatient.

—Well, I haven't finished it yet, but . . .

—And the autobiography of Dostoevski?

—Look Agnes, don't start that with me tonight, that autobiography crap.

—Relax, Agnes Deigh said. —Have another drink.

—All right. But just don't start . . .

—I'm not starting anything. Now relax.

—You must be having a good time here. I never saw so many queers in one room, queers and uptown fluff and cheap advertising . . .

Agnes Deigh turned her back. —Stanley, I have something I want to talk to you about, she said, and led him back to her chair. Benny walked toward the other side of the room, where Ellery stood with the blonde backed up against a cabinet, his hand in the shadows there, hardly moving. Benny's lip was trembling.

—Lady . . . lady . . . Esther felt her skirt being pulled, and looked down to see the little girl from downstairs. —Mummy sent me up to ask you for some more sleeping pills . . . —Just a minute, she said as she looked, and put her hand on the child's head. —You've got *lots* of friends, haven't you, the little girl said, looking up at her. —Mummy used to too, but not any more . . .

—You must meet Mister Crotcher, said someone to Esther, beside her. It was Buster Brown (whom she did not know either). The pair had approached like a depraved version of body and soul, the one on little cat-feet (as he himself remarked), the other in a brown suit of heavy material, nearer the floor with each step, as though wheeling a barrow full of cement. He shook Esther's hand with an air of great fatigue. —But you didn't tell us what you *do*, said Buster to him.

—I'm a writer, he answered.

—Oh. What sort of thing do you do? Esther asked, dropping the weight of his hand, and looking down as though she expected to see it drop to the floor.

—Write.

—Yes, but . . . ah . . . fiction?

—My book has been translated into nineteen languages.

—I must know it, Esther said. —I must know *of* it.

—Doubt it, said the modest author. —Never been published.

—But you said . . .

—I've translated it myself. Nineteen languages. Only sixty-six more to go, not counting dialects. It's Celtic now. A lovely language, Celtic. It only took me eight months to learn Celtic. It ought to go in Celtic.

—You mean be published?

—Yes, published in Celtic. Sooner or later I'll hit a language where they'll publish it. Then I can retire to the country. That's all I want, to retire to the country. Erse is next.

—It must be an awfully dirty book, said Buster.

Mr. Crotcher gave him a look of firm academic hatred which no amount of love, in any expression, could hope to erase. —It is a novel about ant life, he said.

—Lady, could you take me into the bathroom . . .

—You'll have to excuse me, Esther said, gripping the child's hand.

—Gee, lady, said the little girl as they crossed the room, —you ought to watch out for your baby.

—*What?*

—You ought to change his pants, she said pointing. Esther saw the baby on the floor, trying to climb the leg of a small dark-skinned man in light gray.

On the other side of the room the girl with bandaged wrists was saying to her husband, —What'd you do with it?

—Some girl borrowed it, he said. —You'll know her, she's got a green tongue.

—The baby's all right, if that's what you're talking about, said the tall woman. —A nice-looking man seems to be playing some sort of game with it. She turned to her husband and said, —Who do you suppose that flashy little dago is?

—But that's what's wonderful about France, someone said. —Simply *ev*-rything is for sale.

—We've found the loveliest French restaurant, a girl said. —Everything is flavored with garlic, that's how you can tell . . . She was interrupted by the Duchess of Ohio who asked if her name were Maude.

—Why no. Why?

—They've told me that someone named Maude knows where you can get babies by post from Nor-way!

—Do *you* want one?

—Baby, I feel like I'm going to have one. The girl stared.

—There hasn't been anything like this since the *Morro Castle*, said the tall woman, looking round. —I expect everyone to burst into *Nearer My God to Thee* at any moment.

—Chr-ahst, what a party, said a young man to Esther, stopping her as she came from the bathroom, the little girl dodging obstacles, running for the door. —Could I get you a drink?

—It's my party, and you're very welcome, said Esther, feeling ill again.

—Oh Chrahst, I'm sorry. Ed Feasley was folding together four dirty five-dollar bills. He put them into his pocket. —Damned lucky bit of business, he said. —What? —You see that seedy-looking guy in the green shirt? —Oh yes, I know him, he's . . . —I just sold him a suit. —But . . . he doesn't look as though . . . your suits would fit him, Esther went on, automatically, making conversation. —I wouldn't sell him one of my old things, Feasley said. —I told him to go up and get a suit at Brooks. He can charge it to my old man. What else am I supposed to do? Sell a battleship?

They stood looking over the room. —How do you know all these people?

—I really don't, to tell the truth, Esther said, looking for any she could identify. There was James Leak, who said he had published a book called *With Gun and Camera in Flatbush and Greenpoint*, though no one had ever seen a copy, and was now at work exposing the Swiss conspiracy to dominate the world. There was Arthur, with a beard, who was writing a new life of Christ, to be published under another name, the same name he had used when he reviewed his first book, published under his own name, a satire on the Bible so badly received that he joined the chorus of its detractors and got even with himself by quoting Charles Reade and George Borrow, calling it an excrescence of over-refinement. —Yes, he was saying to a girl named Izarra (she had got that off a liquor bottle; her real name was Minna Vesendorf). —Of course it's going to be autobiographical. All books are.

Someone else was saying, —When I finish this psychoanalytic critique of Mother Goose I'm going right on to the Revelation of Saint John the Divine . . .

Someone else said, —*She* went into a cream dream talking about Ischia last night . . . Nearby, someone asked about a slim middle-aged man just out of earshot, who had been appointed instructor in one of the

better eastern boys' boarding schools. —Well I don't think he really realizes what he's doing, he just lies beside them and kisses them . . .

—It's all right just so long as he doesn't turn them over . . .

—And where did you get those eyebrows? someone in that corner asked the Duchess of Ohio, who was waving an old magazine. —If I didn't have these eyebrows I couldn't look so fer-*wo*cious. The magazine was *Dog Days*, open to the picture of Ch. Dictator von Ehebruch.

—Of course I believe in Art, said a girl with a green tongue, near them. —But not just to look at.

—Chr-ahst, I mean, you know? I mean, Chrahst, don't you wonder what they're trying to do, all of them? I mean, look at this wild-eyed guy that just came in . . .

—God! said Esther, clutched his arm and thrilled him for an instant, left him dumb.

Esther crossed the room, her face flushed, as though this abrupt challenge temporarily suspended the consuming terror which had become the fabric of her own life, just as the flush in her cheeks replaced the transparent whiteness which had come over her face only hours before.

—Look, where's your kitten? Only someone who loves kittens could understand . . .

—Please, let go of me.

—But you've got to hear this. The kitten . . . I mean Pavlov had an experiment with lights, and when he rang a bell . . . whhffft

—Esther . . .

—Darling haven't you had enough? . . .

—Esther darling, the tall woman stopped her, —that music seems awfully loud, even for Bach . . . Darling where are you going? what's the matter?

The music was *The Great Elopement:* a chill horn raised her, twisted her up and exalted her for a moment; and then she was let go, and lowered evenly on strings. —He's here, Esther said, her flush already failing. —He's come . . . here.

—He has? . . . But I don't see anyone, said the tall woman looking over the room with her head cocked back, drawing her eyelids to the level of her lashes which did not move and she looked quite disdainful, —anyone who looks like a Kwa-ker, certainly . . . certainly no one whose picture I've ever seen on a book jacket . . . Then she lowered her face so quickly that the smooth proud hollows where her eyes lay became furrowed, drawn together by the brows, and —Who *do* you suppose? . . . she murmured, watching Esther hurry toward the door and there seize the arm of a figure with neither hat nor coat nor tie, immediately obscured by her back.

—You've come back . . . here? Esther said almost in a whisper.

—I didn't know you had a party. I . . . I won't interrupt.

—But you . . . come . . . Esther drew the arm she had seized to her in a convulsive gesture, then as though shocked at this she almost let it go, but did not, turning, toward the bedroom hall, trapped for an instant in the brown eyes of the critic upon her, a gaze she broke and went on, restraining the tension of the music in the wrist gone rigid in her hold. —Come in, in . . . into the bedroom. All these people, it's not . . . not . . . where have you been? she asked when they gained the cover of the hall.

—In a Turkish bath, he answered promptly.

—Oh no, you . . . I mean . . . close the door. She sat on the edge of the bed, holding with a hand on either side of her, and looked at him. He started toward the closet. Then she said, —You . . . and her voice quavered, so she stopped and made an effort to swallow, trying to draw together the great hollow behind her tongue. —Almost as though I knew you were coming, she said, and then added, —and expected you. At that he turned to her, and Esther shuddered, for his face was drawn in the mild surprise her memory knew so well, for here now, just as there, she had intruded upon him. There he was, in her memory, usually seated but sometimes standing at a window with his back turned, unaware of her approach so that no matter the circumstances or her intentions, she became stealthy, and might even try to retire and leave him there; but he always turned, like this, intruded upon, composing the lines of his surprise into expectation, looking at her, waiting.

But all this happened very fast, and sometimes, before she knew it she'd set fire to his hair, or saw it so, what was the difference? or saw him streaming blood down the side of his face (as he had that morning when they had news that the warehouse, where his early paintings were stored, had burned, and he came in with a razor cut on his cheek), and this same mild expectancy, waiting to be told.

But now he turned away. —I've just come to pick up some things, he said, and he stood there holding one hand in the other before him, looking down. She watched the lines of his face become confused again, and still sitting on the edge of the bed she asked him,

—What things?

—Well, the . . . there must be some clothes. Some clothes. Because this . . . He stopped again, holding a

black wilted lapel, and looked at it.

—It's been so long, she said, starting to get up. But then she only clasped her hands around a knee, and stayed. —Are you going away? she asked him, and sorry she had for he looked bewildered and not at her. —You're not going to stay? she added abruptly.

—To stay? he repeated, and looked at her.

—You haven't come back to . . . to stay? . . . with me? Her knee slipped from her clasped hand.

—Why no I ssstopped in to . . . pick up some things, I . . . there's somewhere I have to go tonight, something I have to . . . do. He spoke each word as though intending another, misshaping them with his lips, and stood there uncertainly. —You see, I . . . he commenced again, but she interrupted briskly as she stood.

—It's all right, I simply wondered. A woman likes to know these things.

—But you . . .

—But you do look better than when you were up here a few days ago, don't you, she went on, her voice with an edge to it.

—Yes, I'm tired.

—Where have you been?

—A Turkish bath.

—All this time?

—No, I . . . yes.

—Why? Why? Why?

—Oh, they . . . do all sorts of things to you there. Heat and cold, and steam . . . and cold water, and they pound you, and you . . . and they . . . they do all sorts of things to you to make you . . . that you feel . . .

He turned toward the closet again, took a step and startled at his brief image in the mirror.

—Oh, but that . . . I'm sorry, she said, laughing, coming toward him around the foot of the bed.

—Well I didn't . . . think it was mine, he said, confused again, taking off the jacket he'd got from a closet hanger. Its bold plaid sleeves came down to his knuckles, the skirt well down over his thighs.

—I am sorry, Esther said and she quit laughing. —It's . . . someone left it here.

—But they're all like this, he said from the closet.

—Your things are in here, in these drawers. She stopped her going toward him, and pulled open a bottom drawer. When she straightened up she'd recovered her impatience. —When you're away for as long as you've been, she began. He was putting back on the wrinkled black jacket from the floor where he'd dropped it. —But here, Esther said, pulling folded clothes from the drawer, —surely there's something in here that will do better than . . . that.

But he buttoned the jacket in front, taking both hands to each button.

—This, she said.

He took from her the suit she held out, plain gray with a diagonal weave.

—Well, aren't you going to put it on?

He folded it and put it on the bed, at the same time making sure of the buttons on the jacket he wore, as though suddenly afraid to lose it.

—Aren't you going to wear this?

—I'll . . . I'll take it with me, and a shirt. Some shirts too. Then with a step he was nearer her, and another; and he stopped, bringing up his head, both hands open before him, open as though to come to grips except that he'd already fallen half a step back, and

She, straightening up with some shirts held forth on the flat of her hands raised her face to his, joining forces with the mirror behind her. —What is it?

But with that half a step back one image retired, and bearing his green eyes on her he recovered, the half-step and another with it so that Esther shrank back against the chest holding the shirts out farther still between them and she repeated —What is it?

The door opened, flung open. Music burst in.

—What do you . . .

—Sorry.

Broken shapes, gray Glen Urquhart mitigated by blond hair in a wild panache, shattered the wall; a peripheral pattern instantly restored as the door bangs, closed.

—What was it?

—Purcell.

—No. Her hands lay in his, under the squared white mass of the shirts, cold nails and soft lined joints against his hard palms.

—The music?

—No. Her thumbs out, and palms up with the weight on them, her shoulders relax, and her hands open further, to draw up as instantly there is no support, first his right hand gone, clearly gone, and then with an instant's paroxysm the left.

And then the weight of those shirts, lifted away, and her hands rise empty, round-fingered, untapering and separate.

The mass of the shirts broke on the bed as he dropped them there, and took his left hand in his right where veins stood out in swollen tributaries rising between the roughed mounds of the knuckles, breaking in detail on the fingers whose severity they articulated.

—That night . . . Esther said staring at his hands, her own withdrawn to shelter the hollows, heels on bone and the round ends of her fingers appointing that soft declivity which rose above them until her thumbs could not meet across her waist. —That night, she repeated, curling her finger-ends in upon the yielding bank, and the tips of her thumbs touched. —When I wanted to . . . manicure you? She looked up at his face, and with the effort smiled until she said, —And you . . . drew away just like that . . . each word draining the smile from her face, and she lowered her eyes, and her empty hands came down to her sides.

She waited, and heard no response, but watching saw his lips go tight. —What have you been doing all this time? she demanded of him, and sat on the bed.

He turned back to the shirts, which he'd just left stacked unevenly on the bed, and commenced to arrange them in a careful pile. —Nothing, he answered automatically.

—Nothing! she repeated, and sat up straight.

—A few things . . . working, sort of . . . experimental things.

—Painting? What kind of things, then?

—Yes, sort of . . . that kind of thing.

—Painting?

He looked up at her, quickly and away, back to what he was doing, squaring the pile between his hands. —Looking around us today, he said with effort, —there doesn't seem to be . . . much that's worth doing.

—Well what good is it then? . . . she burst out at him, —going on only to find out what's not worth doing?

—You find . . . he mumbled, —if you can find, that way . . .

—Are you very ill? Esther said.

—Ill? He looked up pale and surprised.

—Everything is just like it was, isn't it. Only worse. She started speaking rapidly again, as she got to her feet. —You've just got everything tangled up worse and worse, haven't you. Why the way you pulled your hands away from me just now, as though they were something . . .

—Esther . . .

—And your guilt complexes and everything else, it's just gotten worse, hasn't it, all of it. And the way you pulled your hands away from me just now, it was just like when we were first married and I hardly knew you, and the longer we were married the less you . . . won't you talk to me? even now, won't you talk to me?

—Really Esther, I . . . I didn't come here to argue with you. He sounded again himself she remembered, and she pursued,

—You won't argue, you'll say things like that but you won't argue, you won't talk . . . to me . . .

—Damn it, I . . . Esther, I just came in to get some things.

—Get them then! Take them! Take them!

He busied himself folding the shirts up with the gray suit, tightening his lips against the sounds which escaped her.

—Because there's no one, is there. You're alone now, aren't you. Are you alone now?

—Esther, good God . . . please . . .

—Ignorance and desire, you've told me . . . Oh, you've told me so many things, haven't you. All of our highest goals are inhuman ones, you told me, do you remember? I don't forget. But remorse binds us here together in ignorance and desire, and . . . and . . . not salt tears then, but . . . She gasped again, shuddered but would I not give in.

—And what is it now, this reality you used to talk about, she went on more quietly. —As though you could deny, and have nothing to replace what you take away, as though . . . Oh yes, zero does not exist, you told me. Zero does not exist! And here I . . . I watched you turn into no one right here in front of me, and just a . . . a pose became a life, until you were trying to make negative things do the work of positive ones. And your family and your childhood, and your illness then and studying for the ministry, and . . . when I married you we used to talk about all that intelligently, and I thought you were outside it, and understood it, but you're not, you're not, and you never will be, you never will get out of it, and you never . . . you

never will let yourself be happy. Esther was talking rapidly again, and she paused as though to give effect to the softness of her voice as she went on, though her memory crowded details upon her and it was these she fought. —There are things like joy in this world, there are, there are wonderful things, and there is goodness and kindness, and you shrug your shoulders. And I used to think that was fun, that you understood things so well when you did that, but finally that's all you can do, isn't it. Isn't it.

He stood across the bed holding his bundle up before him, meeting her eyes, provoked, and he smiled, ready to speak.

—And your smile, she went on, —even your smile isn't alive, because you abdicated, you moved out of life, and you . . .

—But the past, he broke in, —every instant the past is reshaping itself, it shifts and breaks and changes, and every minute we're finding, I was right . . . I was wrong, until . . .

Esther plundered the fragments her memory threw up to her, taking them any way, seizing them as they rose and clinging to each one until she'd thrust it out between them. —The boundaries between good and evil must be defined again, they must be reestablished, that's what a man must do today, isn't it? A man! Wasn't it? . . . She paused, retaining hold on that for a moment longer, raising her hand to her forehead in fact as though doing so, considering its details and lowering her voice. —Yes, you couldn't have a world in which the problem of evil could be solved with a little cunning, she added, word by word, dully, —and you . . . Oh yes, by confessing, to set up order once more between yourself and the world . . . Esther's voice tailed off as she stared down at the bed between them.

—Yes, go on, go on with it, he said eagerly when she stopped, staring at her.

For as it happened, this point had come from a play she'd read shortly after Otto had sailed for Central America, a play by Silone called *And He Hid Himself*: but even now, looking up, Esther saw these words on the lips before her, slightly parted in expectation. She began again, —I wish . . .

—Yes, you understand, he burst in, —you understand, that's why this is crucial, you understand, don't you. How this is going to expiate . . .

—Expiate! She accepted him again, standing there with his hand out.

—And that it isn't just expiation, but . . . that's why it is crucial, because this is the only way we can know ourselves to be real, is this moral action, you understand don't you, the only way to know others are real . . .

A wave of nausea rose through her body, and Esther gripped the corner of the night table behind her, swaying a little, swallowing again. —If we had had a child . . . she murmured. —Yes, if we . . .

—And you understand it, his voice came on at her, —this moral action, it isn't just talk and . . . words, morality isn't just theory and ideas, that the only way to reality is this moral sense . . .

—Stop it! she cried out. —Stop it! . . . She caught herself, and took up the handkerchief again quickly for saliva was running from the corner of her mouth beyond the apprehension of her swallowing. —Moral sense! she repeated loudly at him. —Do you think women have a moral sense? Do you think women have . . . any morals? that . . . that women can afford them?

—Esther . . . He started toward her round the end of the bed.

—Oh no! she said. —No! Do you know how much she has to protect? and every minute more? And you make these things up, and force them on her, men take their own guilt, and call it moral sense and oppress her with it in the name of . . . She shrank back as he came close to her. —In the name of Christ why didn't you go on and . . . stay where you came from, and be a minister where you came from, instead of . . . coming here where I . . . she shuddered as he took her arm, —have so much to protect.

—Esther, he said to her, that close.

—But now you . . . are here, she said to him in a whisper. The nausea had fallen away, abruptly as it had come, leaving her in his grip with her teeth chattering as she spoke, and her tears did not fall but spread evenly into the wetness of her cheeks. Two of her fingers sought his wrist, and tried to close on it. —You . . . she articulated from a wild breath in his face, —now you are here to . . . stay and protect . . .

They stood there with three senses locked in echo of the fourth, and she licked her lip.

—Sorry . . .

The door banged against the wall.

—They're still there only *talking* . . .

The door banged closed.

—Esther . . . you don't understand? His hand opened.

—You're not . . . going to . . .

—Not yet, because tonight, when I've done what I have to do . . .

—Not yet! She stepped away as though she had broken from him. The clothes bundle fell to the floor. He put a hand out, and then withdrew it slowly, and stooped to recover the clothes.

Esther stared at the wrinkled black of his bent unsteady figure only for a moment. Then she opened the handkerchief, wadded all this time in her hand, and blew her nose as she crossed the room to the mirror, and he backed toward the door.

—I'd better go, he said, from there.

She did not answer. She had picked up a lipstick, and stood contorting her mouth, drawing generous lips. Then a rush of sound broke over her, and she looked up quick as the door came open behind him, and he stood there in the course of the waves pouring in around him, his back to it, not straight but still as a rock secure against the flood, safe until the turn of the tide.

—Because this . . . one thing I have to do is . . . crucial, Esther.

—*Crucial?* she repeated calmly, and still she did not turn from the mirror. —And you think it will work, well it won't. Whatever it is, it won't. She watched her lips as she spoke, paused to draw them in, purse them, separate them so that her large teeth showed, and smudge the handkerchief between them.

And she stopped, dry and silent, as the door came closed where he stood against it. —What are you going to do? she asked him. —I don't mean this . . . thing you're up to now, this crucial thing, whatever it is, I don't care what it is, but after all this what are you going to do? What are you going to do?

—I don't know but I think . . . he started precipitously, and as he went on his voice was strained but for the first time there was no doubt in it, and no effort to control excitement, —if we go on . . . if we go on we're finally forced to do the right thing, but . . . and how can I say, now, where, or with whom . . . or what it will be.

Then he lost his balance and almost went over as the door came open behind him in someone else's hand.

—Rose!

—I saw you here.

—My razor, I forgot that, he said, between them, turning. —A straight razor with black handles, is it in the bathroom?

Rose followed him there. Looking for the thing, he paused half turned to her, seeming slightly confused at the scent of lavender she brought with her.

—Rose . . .

—I heard a poem, Rose said, —"A magnet hung in a hardware shop . . ."

—It's not here.

—Rose, Esther said, —that music is too loud, Rose.

Around them the sounds of voices reached separate crests, broke in spray, and lay in foam awash on the surface of the swells as the music rose and receded, and the faces themselves seemed to lift into a moment's prominence, immediately lost in the trough that followed. So Benny's face was raised, and stood out inflated with effort, and dropped from sight again.

—To find out what sex it is you just spread it out and *blow*.

Esther looked down to see the kitten, unfurled upside down between large thumbs. —Here, give it to me, give it to me, she said, rescuing it. The nausea startled up in her for a moment.

—It's the worst feeling in the world, said the tall woman beside her.

—What? Esther asked, drawing the kitten in to her.

—To know you've laid a cigarette down somewhere.

The little girl tugged at her skirt. —Mummy sent me up again . . . The tall woman laid a hand on her wrist. —You didn't tell me that *he* was coming tonight. Esther turned quickly, startled. —Do you know him?

—No, my dear, and I didn't know that you did.

—But . . . Oh, Esther said. Looking round to where he had been standing beside her she realized that the tall woman was talking about someone else.

—Did you like his book?

—What book? Esther asked, looking where the tall woman was looking, at a man in a tan suit who had just fallen over one end of the couch.

—Now don't tell me you don't know about *The Trees of Home?* Or are you snobbish about best sellers too?

—No, I . . .

—My husband says he stole the plot from the Flying Dutchman, whoever that is. My husband meets all sorts of people.

The man in the tan suit, back on his feet, was saying, —Why should I bother to write the crap for those speeches? I'm lucky I can stand up before the Rotary Club and deliver them. Some faggot writes them for me.

Near him, someone obligingly derived *faggot* from the Greek *phagein*. —Phag-, phago-, -phagous, -phagy, -phagia . . . the voice whined. —It means to eat.

Arny Munk, propped against a wall with Sonny Byron's arm around him, said, —Really ought to tell

Maude, ought to tell her . . . huhhh . . . the University of Rochester has discovered huhhhh how to make synthetic morphine huhhhhp from coal tar dyes . . .

—I think you're sweet, said Sonny Byron, soberly.

Mr. Feddle was standing on a chair, reaching for a book on a high shelf. The swinging alarm clock hit a girl on the back of the head, and she stopped singing *I Can't Give You Anything But Love*.

Esther, listening intently beyond the tall woman's voice to escape it, heard only a whine, —the decay of meaning, and you can't speak a sentence that doesn't reflect it. You're enthusiastic over sealed-beam headlights. Enthousiazein, even two hundred years ago it still meant being filled with the spirit of God . . .

She would have gone direct to the couch and sat down, had not Benny caught her by both hands and turned her to face him. —Where did he go? Where is he? Who was that?

—Why . . . my husband. Do you know him?

—Where is he? What was he doing here?

—He just came to get . . . some things . . . Two or three people turned, curious at the tone in their voices, Benny's excitedly high, while Esther spoke with faltering intensity, as though forced to affirm, and repeat affirmation to this impersonal, circumstantial demand which was Benny. —You're hurting my wrists, she said.

—But . . . I thought I'd never see him again. Isn't that . . . isn't that . . . I never wanted to see him again, and now here he is and I want to see him, I have to see him, where is he?

—I can't believe he's really gone, she murmured as they took their eyes from each other and looked toward the door, saw only the young man whose heavy mustache seemed to weigh his round head forward, looking at them, innocent, anxious at their sudden scrutiny.

—Ellery, did you see him? I mean, he was just here, did you see him leave, Ellery?

—Sorry, old girl. He broke a leg. Had to shoot him.

—Really, Ellery, please. I've got to find him, is he still here? She had taken hold of Benny's arm; and who Benny was, or what he wanted, ceased in her grasp which held Benny forth, a dumb prodigy, to witness that the matter was not hers, but necessity's own.

—A shame to shoot him, a fine blooded animal like that . . . It was difficult to know if the blonde beside Ellery was trying, but unable, to smile, or subduing that smile which is stupidity's cordial greeting to matters which its very nature excuses it from attempting to understand: so she looked, not at Esther, but at the silent phenomenon of Esther's evidence, as though there might be immediately apparent not only the evidence, but the very nature of the case itself, and its disposition not understanding, but dismissal.

—Ellery . . .

—The truck just came around from the Futtybrook Hunt Club, skinned him, cut him up, took him back to the kennels. Dog meat . . . Benny tore from Esther's grasp, and, stepping forward, he said, —Ellery, what's the matter with you, good God Ellery will you . . .

—Hell of an end for a thoroughbred.

—*Stop* it, will you tell us . . . Benny commenced, raising his hands.

—Come on, Benny. You're drunk, Ellery said, grinning and looking at him, and the blonde looked at Esther, no longer plaintiff but witness herself to the relieving and obvious fact that there was really nothing to be concerned about after all. —He's gone, Ellery said easily. —I saw him leave a minute or two ago. He put a hand on Benny's shoulder. —Come on, Benny, Christ. Straighten up. I told you you deserved a drink, but not a whole bottle . . . Benny drew away from him, without even looking at his face; and Ellery shrugged, took a deep inhalation from his cigarette, winking at the blonde as he turned away. Esther and Benny stood silent, as though both listening for denial of Ellery, for explanation of one another.

—That very odd girl with the green tongue has been telling me that it was really the Jews who discovered America, said the tall woman, her back to them. —Isabella's *jew*els didn't have a thing to do with it, backing Columbus I mean, it seems it was Isabella's *Jews* . . .

They both looked up, and both spoke at once. But Esther stopped.

—He was a draftsman, wasn't he. Were you married to him then? He was only a draftsman, and I was a designer. We worked together. He never mentioned me, did he. Well why, why should he, why should he have mentioned me to anybody, why . . .

Over his shoulder, Esther looked up to see the brown eyes of the critic; then she turned back to Benny with a different look on her face. —Don't you want to sit down somewhere? she said.

—He never talked about me, did he. And why should you care, what would it matter to you? And why should I care now, why should I want to see him, because anyhow everything's different now. And it's all different for him too, isn't it. Why should I want to see him now, any more than . . . why should we have even worked together then, what . . . because everything's different now, I'm fine now, I'm getting along fine, and is he? What's he doing now? Is he happy now? Is he getting along fine, like I am? Did everything

change for him too, so that . . . Is he doing what he wanted to do now? or like me, is he doing what he can do, what he has to do . . .

—Why don't you just sit down here? Esther said as they reached the couch. —Can I bring you some coffee? She hesitated, and turned away.

—That's funny. That's funny, Benny said, sitting down slowly. —But you didn't tell me what he's doing now. That's funny. God. Benny blew his nose, and looked round him. He saw the back of his own flannel suit, and heard the voice of the man in it saying, —It's not really my line of work, I'm really a sort of historian, a musicologist, you might say, but I've been trying to get permission from the city to operate a public toilet concession in New York . . . Could you hand me those crackers?

The woman in the collapsed maternity dress said to someone, —And you see that person in the green shirt, you see that scar on his nose? Well I understand that he had his nose bobbed, an expensive plastic surgeon did it and some girl paid for it, didn't leave a mark, and then one night when he was in *bed* a radio fell off the shelf and gave him that scar, there's poetic justice . . . heh, heh heh heh . . .

—What's his name?

—Him? It's . . . I can't think of it, but it's one of those nice names, you know the kind they take, like White, White is a good nigger name.

Nearby, Mr. Crotcher had settled into an armchair, and begun moaning accompaniment to a harpsichord fraction of the *Harmonious Blacksmith*. He stopped to look down, and say, —Good heavens, good heavens, where did *you* come from? Get away. You're going to have an accident, get away, getaway getaway getaway . . . The baby, with a welt rising on its forehead, had begun to climb up his leg. Out of sight, the girl with bandaged wrists was saying, —After all, this is its first birthday, so this is kind of a birthday party for it too . . .

—Started to call himself Jacques San-jay when he went into interior decorating, someone said. —I knew him when his name was Jack Singer.

—So after that, the old man left me with nothing but fifty tons of sugar that I can't unload, and they're forcing me to take delivery. Do you think Esther would mind storing it here?

—Yess, said the dark man in the sharkskin suit, —I was told that the stock market in New York was a complex affair.

—Maybe I ought to have it dumped on the old man's doorstep. Chr-ahst, after a trick like that. Now all I have to do is sell one of his God-damned battleships . . .

—Ah? How fortunate, said the shark-skinned Argentine. —For a moment I thought I was at the wrong party.

—Dear God *no*, the tall woman was saying, —my husband hasn't got any friends. He doesn't have the time.

—Well look, it's obvious to any thinking person. The Swiss have banks all over the world. What's more necessary to a successful war than banks?

Mr. Feddle, concentrating on an open book (it was Frothingham's Aratos) was bumped aside by someone looking for an encyclopedia. —Got to look up a mutt named Chavenay. Sounds French.

—You have to really live there to understand why France has turned out so many great thinkers, and artists, a girl said. —Just live there for awhile and get a load of what they have to revolt against, and anybody would be great.

The boy who had got an advance on his novel said, —I wanted to sort of celebrate, but what the hell. Where are the nice places? They're all business lunchrooms, do you know what I mean? Expense accounts. They're all supported by expense accounts. It's depressing as hell.

—But my dear boy, why should all this bother you? said the tall woman, who had appeared. —*You* don't have to eat in these places all the time. Look at my husband, he *has* to.

—I know. But it's depressing as hell, where can you celebrate?

—I'd suggest Nedick's, said the tall woman.

—I'd suggest Murti-Bing, said the young man with no novel to advance.

—Oh, where is that? said the tall woman. —I don't believe I've ever eaten there.

—Fifty million tons of food a year eaten in New York, what does that *mean?*

—Something terrible happened, Stanley. Agnes put her hand on his.

—I'm sorry, Stanley said. —If you'll just give me my glasses . . .

—No, dear, I'm not talking about that, and that was so long ago, that night . . . She was looking in her purse. —Here, she said, —you'll have to read it yourself. What am I going to do, Stanley? Her hand shook as she dragged the letter from her bag. —It was a terrible thing to do, an unforgivable thing to do to this poor man but he's got to forgive me, and how can I . . . what can I do to . . . so he will?

Stanley unfolded the letter from the Police Department; and Agnes felt a gentle tap on the shoulder, and

turned. —Did you see a kitty-cat here, lady?

—Why there was a kitten here somewhere, Agnes said, looking round her, —but I guess the kitty-cat has gone to bed. What are you doing up so late?

—My mummy sent me up to get some sleeping pills, but I can't find the lady who . . .

—Now don't you bother the nice lady, said Agnes, rummaging in the bottom of her large purse, taking out a French enameled thimble case. —I have some right here. Is three enough? You just take these down to Mummy. And I've already written him. She looked up at Stanley.

—Thank you, lady. Where'd you get the funny watch?

—Why, Mickey Mouse is my loyal faithful friend, said Agnes. —I can always trust *him*.

—What have you got the funny things sticking on your face for?

—Where . . . Agnes raised her hand, to feel the strip of tape at her temple, put there to discourage wrinkles when she lay down. —Oh my God, and they've been there . . . why didn't someone . . .

—What are they for, lady? the child asked as Agnes tore them off, and opened her compact.

—Go along down to Mummy now, for God's sake.

—He would understand, if you went to him, Stanley said, handing the letter back. —If you went to him and . . .

—I couldn't face him. To ask forgiveness . . .

—Is a sublime test of humility . . .

—And he's really rather an awful person I think . . .

—And from your inferiors an even greater trial.

—I want to do something, and . . . but don't you think I might just *send* him something? Maybe some sort of nice gift . . . yes, something nice and you know fairly expensively nice for his daughter?

—I think, Stanley commenced soberly, —that really, for your own good . . .

—Oh, let's stop thinking about it for a little while, she interrupted. —I just get so . . . tired of the terrible things I get in the mail. She smiled up at him briskly, and tightened her grasp on his hand. —Tell me about your music, Stanley, this long whatever-it-is that you've been working on for so long. Oh, and your tooth? I'm sorry, I forgot to ask.

—I think it went away, the toothache, it didn't last, but my work, it's an organ concerto but it isn't finished yet.

—But you've been working on it for months.

—For years, he said. —And you know, I look at the clean paper that I'm saving to write the finished score on, and then I look at the pile of . . . what I've been working on, and, well I can see it all right there, finished. And yet, well . . . you know I never read Nietzsche, but I did come across something he said somewhere, somewhere where he mentioned "the melancholia of things completed." Do you . . . well that's what he meant. I don't know, but somehow you get used to living among palimpsests. Somehow that's what happens, double and triple palimpsests pile up and you keep erasing, and altering, and adding, always trying to account for this accumulation, to order it, to locate every particle in its place in one whole . . .

—But Stanley, couldn't you just . . . I don't know what a palimsest is, but couldn't you just finish off this thing you're working on now, and then go on and write another? She ran her hand over his, resting on the chair arm there; and Stanley called her by her Christian name for the first time. —No, that's . . . you see, that's the trouble, Agnes, he said. —It's as though this one thing must contain it all, all in one piece of work, because, well it's as though finishing it strikes it dead, do you understand? And that's frightening, it's easy enough to understand why, killing the one thing you . . . love. I understand it, and I'll explain it to you, but that, you see, that's what's frightening, and you anticipate that, you feel it all the time you're working and that's why the palimpsests pile up, because you can still make changes and the possibility of perfection is still there, but the first note that goes on the final score is . . . well that's what Nietzsche . . .

—All I know about Nietzsche is that he's decadent, that's what they say.

Stanley withdrew his hand, and it hung in air for a moment, like an object suddenly unfamiliar, which he did not know how to dispose of. —He was, because of . . . well that's the reason right there, because of negation. That is the work of Antichrist. That is the word of Satan, No, the Eternal No, Stanley said, and put his hand in his pocket.

Agnes Deigh looked at her own hand on the arm of her chair. Two of the tanned fingers rose, and went down again; and when she looked over to where the critic had joined Benny on the couch, and sat, smoothing down the back of his hair, her face took the expression of the man she looked at, one of contemptuous, almost amused indulgence, though she did not have the dark hollows in her face, nor the brow and the forehead worn so with this expression that it looked natural; rather she looked uncomfortable, saying, —Those two look like they're discussing the same thing we are, and he should know, that one . . .

—You know what I thought of immediately just now when I looked up and saw them? Stanley said,

earnestly. —I thought of El Greco before the Inquisition, arguing the dimensions of angels' wings. He looks like an Inquisitor, that dark fellow. People laugh at arguments like that now, and how many angels can dance on the end of a pin. But it's not funny, it's very wonderful. Science hasn't explained it, and you know why, because science doesn't even understand the question, any more than science understands . . . You know, Agnes, this concerto I'm working on, if I'd lived three hundred years ago, why . . . then it would be a Mass. A Requiem Mass.

—Einstein . . . someone said.

—Epstein . . . said someone else.

—Gertrude . . .

—Of course you're familiar with Heisenberg's Principle of Uncertainty. Have you ever observed sand fleas? Well I'm working on a film which not only substantiates it but illustrates perfectly the metaphor of the theoretic and the real situation. And after all, what else *is* there?

—Who *was* it that said, "a little lower than the angels"?

—That? it's in that poem about "What is man, that thou art mindful of him." That was Pope.

—Which one?

At this point, Anselm, in a shirt torn at the shoulder, his hair tousled and on end, unshaven, and clutching a magazine and two books, appeared in the door. No one seemed to notice him; and he stood there silent for some time.

The music had got quite loud. —There, you see? said someone more loudly, —I told you. It *is* Handel. *The Gods Go A-Begging,* so there!

Benny's face was fleshy. Moreover, though it was not puffy, it seemed to be flesh recently acquired, and his expressions seemed, if such a thing were possible, to have difficulty in reaching the surface or, once arrived, to represent with conviction the feelings which had risen from within. So it appeared; though it may be that this want of precision pervaded the source itself, and his amorphous façade faithfully expressed confused furnishings, broken steps mounting deep stairwells, rooms boarded up, in disuse, and rooms of one character being used for new and timely purposes in the interior castle, whose defenses were not yet adjusted to the new tenancy but being constantly hastily altered in the midst of skirmishes, before that battle which would be the last.

—God is love, telling that to a Welsh Corgi in labor, isn't that divine? the girl with Boston accents laughed, and Benny, who had heard her remark about a lost horizon, drew away from where she toppled near his end of the couch, pulling the book to him as he did so. It was a book on bridge design, largely the work of Robert Maillart, and his finger marked a picture, diagram and description of the bridge at Schwandbach. He had picked it up after his words with Esther, and sat trying to appear absorbed with it while he collected himself. But he was interrupted by the figure in the green wool shirt who had joined him on the couch with, —I hear you're in TV. Smiling with effort, and already perspiring freely, Benny answered, —That's right, what can I do you for? . . . offering a cigarette, which was accepted without thanks.

They were being watched by the two who remained posted near the door, where they would be the first to greet, and snare, the guest of honor. Don Bildow, apparently supported upright by the lusty design of his necktie, watched through plastic rims. —What's he talking to him for, that television person? —He's just giving him a hard time, his companion answered, the same baleful satisfaction glittering under his brows, that poetic look of inner contemplation, charish, shot through with beams where some, his mirror among them, read a charismatic luster: all very well for the dust jacket of some slim volume (though no such had appeared), or the moment of inspiration itself, reflected in the eyes of someone else's wife, but, for moments like this, scarcely practical, for he could see nothing clearly more than a few feet away. —He said he was going to ask him for a job writing TV scripts.

It was evident that Benny was having a hard time. He'd just given his glass a brave, unsteady toss in his hand, and started to stand up, but he was stayed by the critic's hand, put forth in an annoying gesture as though to soothe where the irritating voice continued, speaking then of television as corrupting tragedy, now of the writer's integrity, of human suffering . . .

Benny had hardly looked at the face of the man who was talking to him: in contrast to his own it was a detailed fortification, every rampart erected with definite purpose, their parapets calculated to withstand repeated assaults from any direction, tried in innumerable skirmishes where many had approached so close as to tumble between scarp and counterscarp, an arrangement so long in the building that, though every bit of it had been erected for defense, in finished entirety it assumed aggressive proportions; inviting strategy, it might only be taken by storm.

All this time, Benny's smile had not failed. His smile was his first line of defense. But even as he'd started to his feet, that defense was being abandoned, and so it remained, unmanned, as empty as gaping

breastworks relinquished before unexpected onslaught.

—So tell me the truth, the harassing voice went on, as its owner came far forth from his walls, openly besieging. —Do you guys really give this same crap to each other you're giving to me, pretending it's a cultural medium? or do you just admit you're all only in it for the money, that you've all sold out.

Benny's smile was gone. He sat silent for a moment, studying the features of this attack. Then he said, —Why do you hate me? Did I ever do you a favor?

The critic straightened up, unprepared for this sally, without time to recover his own walls, he withdrew instantly behind contravallations of mistrust.

—Tell me the truth, what do you want from me, you fine-haired son of a bitch, Benny said to him evenly.

—All right, for Christ's sake . . .

—What are you supposed to be, an honest man just because you don't have a necktie?

—Relax, relax . . .

—I will like hell relax. Who are you, anyhow?

—Now listen . . .

—You listen to me. I've just taken a lot from you. I've taken a lot from people just like you. Just like you. That's tough, isn't it, *just like you*, that this town is loaded with people just like you, the world is loaded with people just like you. The honest men who are too good to fit anywhere. You're one of the people, aren't you. Look at your hands, have you ever had a callus? You don't get them lifting glasses. Who are you, to be so bitter? Have you ever done one day of work?

—Look . . .

—And now I understand. And you talk to me about life, about real life, about human misery, Benny went on. He was not speaking loudly, nor fast, still the cold but vehement and level tone of his voice drew several people to turn around, and listen and watch. The other sat his ground with a patient sneer. —I offered you work, and you were too good for it. We buy stuff from guys like you all the time, writing under pen names to protect names that are never going to be published anywhere else, but they keep thinking they'll make it, what they want to do, but never quite manage, and they keep on doing what they're too good for. It's a joke. It's a joke, Benny repeated, and it was now that his voice began to rise. —I know you, I know you. You're the only serious person in the room, aren't you, the only one who *understands*, and you can prove it by the fact that you've never finished a single thing in your life. You're the only well-educated person, because you never went to college, and you resent education, you resent social ease, you resent good manners, you resent success, you resent any kind of success, you resent God, you resent Christ, you resent thousand-dollar bills, you resent Christmas, by God, you resent happiness, you resent happiness itself, because none of that's *real*. What is real, then? Nothing's real to you that isn't part of your own past, *real life*, a swamp of failures, of social, sexual, financial, personal, . . . spiritual failure. Real life. You poor bastard. You don't know what real life is, you've never been near it. All you have is a thousand intellectualized ideas about life. But *life?* Have you ever measured yourself against anything but your own lousy past? Have you ever faced anything outside yourself? *Life!* You poor bastard. Benny started to laugh. He knocked an empty glass from the end of the couch, and Ellery put a hand on his shoulder. The stubby poet had come up beside the man at the other end of the couch, who was silent, looking at Benny, and the sneer almost squeezed from his face. Most of the people in the room were aware that something was happening, and had half turned, giving it half their attention, waiting to see if it deserved all. Benny started to stand up. —Come on, we'll get a drink, Ellery said to him, an arm across his shoulders. —All right, Benny said. Then suddenly he swung around again.

—Go on, you lush, said the stubby poet; but Benny did not regard him. He stood over the man who as quickly recovered his sneer to look up.

—How do you make your living? Benny demanded.

—Come on, Benny. Leave the poor bastard alone.

—I just asked how he makes his living.

—The hell with him. Come on, Ellery said.

—I just want to know how he makes his living, is there anything wrong with that?

—He's a critic. He writes about books, or some God damn thing. Now come on. But Benny pulled from Ellery's grasp on his shoulder. —How long is it since you've seen the sun rise? he demanded. Then he went on, —How you would have done it. That's the way everything is, isn't it. How you would have done it. Not how it should have been done, but how you would have done it. When you criticize a book, that's the way you work, isn't it. How you would have done it, because you didn't do it, because you're still afraid to admit that you can't do it yourself.

—Ellery, please . . . stop him, Esther said, in a low voice beside Ellery. He turned and looked at her, and he did, just then, have an expression very much like Benny's, one of tense impatience, which in that instant

of exchange between them seemed to direct everything Benny had said, and was saying, at her. Everyone, within the bounds of what each considered either manners or sophistication, was watching; and most were watching the man on the couch. —Oh Chrahst I remember him, he's the guy that married Deedee Jaqueson, and they kicked her out of the little black book for it. Chrahst, what a coincidence, Ed Feasley commented.

Rudy consoled a frightened group in one corner, with, —You know, he's the kind who knows art but doesn't know what he likes.

Don Bildow watched apprehensively from the other side of the room, where he had retired, and did not see Anselm who watched, silent and attentive. Mr. Feddle, clutching a book, had gained the front row. The back of Maude's neck was being manipulated by strong fingers, stronger perhaps but not so vigorous as those twisting Stanley's hand. He looked at Agnes and looked away quickly, as though afraid to provoke the tension in her face to burst in confidence to him.

A high voice broke the silence as Benny paused for breath. —So *there!* And that goes for your cat *too!* It was the Duchess of Ohio, who scurried back to cover.

The tall woman told someone that she and her husband were going to Spain in the spring, though she had hoped to be in Hawaii right now; someone said, —She rubs you the right way, does she? talking to someone else about someone else; Sonny Byron said, —Wake up, baby, the floor show's over, and stroked Arny Munk's forehead; the author of the best seller *Trees of Home*, who had kept his back turned to the room all this time, pretending conversation with Mr. Crotcher who was singing, said, to someone else, —How can I respect my readers when I know they're just trying to get a cheap psychoanalysis at my expense? and was told that they probably thought that he was getting one at theirs; the dark man in the sharkskin suit said, —Yes, I was warned about this sort of thing in New York. Now about these battleships . . .

—A dreadful crime she did commit, did all the world surprise, sang Mr. Crotcher to the baby, whose chin rested on his shoe, which he jarred in approximate 2/4 time. —Black beetles in walnut shells . . .

—And that dumb bastard's starting in again.

Ellery was holding Benny tight by one shoulder. —Come on, relax, forget the dumb bastard, he said. —Come on, Benny, take this. He held a full glass up, and Benny took it, and drank it down steadily and carefully. Then the empty glass hung in his hand like a weight.

—Get where I am, and then you can be bitter, Benny mumbled, staring into one of the few empty spaces in that room. —Do you think I like these clothes? Do you think I like double-breasted snappy clothes, like . . . Do you think I like this God-damned awful necktie, do you call it a necktie this thing? These glasses? He reached for them twice, and the second time a finger caught one of the broad bows and they fell to the floor. —I'm a success, that's why I've got a right to be bitter. God damn it. God damn it. How long do you think it is since *I*'ve seen the sun rise?

Though Mr. Feddle moved slowly, Benny raised his face as though the space before him had been materialized into an apparition. —Go on, said Mr. Feddle, hungrily. —Go on. I understand you. Go on.

—Isn't that right? Benny said to him, reaching an arm to him which made an irregular arc and dropped between them.

—Come on, forget that jerk, you'll be all right, Ellery said, supporting Benny. —You're making a fool of yourself.

—Why? *Why?*

—Go on. I understand you.

—That's what I've got a right to do, I've got a right to haven't I? Haven't I? Isn't that why I've worked, and worked, and . . .

—Go on . . .

—*Why?*

Mr. Feddle darted in and embraced him. —Do you remember Fedya, in *Redemption?* in Tolstoy's *Redemption?* he said, the alarm clock swinging between them. —"And you know . . ." His voice lowered, and he spoke more slowly, —"it's a funny thing, but we love people for the good we do them, and we hate them for the harm . . ." Do you remember?

Benny stared into his face, as they separated and Mr. Feddle braced himself with excitement. —Go on . . . !

—But . . . dishonest . . . then, but now? Now? I got into this and I found everybody believed what they were doing. They all believe it, and after awhile you believe it too. You live with it for awhile and you believe it too. Friends. Do you think I have any friends? Everybody I know . . . I . . . they want something from me or I want something from them. Somebody asked me if my wife is here. My wife? I go home and we just sit and look at each other. Home? My home looks like a cocktail lounge. I read all the books. I read all the books about self-improvement, master yourself, develop your personality, be a good God-damned

Christian and get something for nothing . . .

—Go on . . .

—Forget . . .

—If you're doing something you hate, quit it while you still hate it . . .

—Go on . . .

—Relax . . .

—Because you were right the first time . . .

—Ellery, *please* stop him. Ellery looked down, to Esther hanging to his arm. —What can I do, he's . . .

—And you . . . Benny turned to her, —He was your husband, wasn't he. And you know, don't you. *Don't you.* You know who designed the bridge at Fallen Ark Gap . . . and the Cooper City viaduct . . .

—Why, I . . . Ellery, please. There's something wrong.

—Go on . . .

—That's what I wanted to do, that's all I ever wanted to do. Where did he come from, sitting there at a draftsman's table, and he could draw it as though he was making a sketch, but every tension was perfect, the balance was perfect, you can look at those bridges with my name on them and see them leap out to meet themselves, see them move in perfect stillness, see perfect delicate tension of movement in stillness, see tenderness in suspense . . . with my name on them, *I* designed them. Like hell I designed them. Do you know why? Benny looked into their faces, and suddenly took Mr. Feddle's arm. —It was like a part of me working, like part of myself working there. Do you understand?

—Yes. Go on . . .

—And I couldn't do it. He could do it and I couldn't do it. Do you understand?

—Yes, yes . . .

—I couldn't do it, Benny said; and for a moment the only sound was the ticking of Mr. Feddle's clock. And called upon, not by alarms but by this insistent and accurate silence, several people turned to hear Mr. Feddle say, —Yes, yes, do you remember him? Fedya? In Tolstoy's *Redemption?* "There was something terribly lacking between what I felt and what I could do . . ." Do you remember? Mr. Feddle had both hands on Benny's shoulders; but Ellery thrust his hands aside. —Come on, Benny, you'll be all right.

Benny had gone limp. He stood with the book on bridge design open, a page went over, and he was staring at a picture of Maillart's bridge at Salginatobel, a glazed distance in his eyes as though he were indeed gazing the full ninety meters to the foot of the valley below. Then his eye caught something, scribbled in the margin, *The arch never sleeps*. —Look . . . ! he said, and read it aloud, stared at it silently and read it aloud again. —He wrote that here, didn't he, I remember, I've heard him say that, he . . . yes . . . Suddenly he turned to Esther. —Could I ask you something? a favor? a gift from you? The pages of the book trembled in his hands. And if her tone was, —Yes, anything to silence you, to send you away . . . he did not notice. —Because this book . . . this book . . . ?

—Yes, she said. —Yes.

—Yes, he repeated, staring at it, he whispered —the arch never sleeps.

—Relax, Benny. You just need a drink, Ellery said. —You'll bounce back.

—Ellery, let him . . .

Benny stopped, and looked up at Ellery. —I know, he said. —That's what I can't stand. I know I'll bounce back, and that's what I can't stand. He looked at them all three. —Don't worry, he said. —This only happens once. That's the world I live in. You make one show, and when it's finished you throw it out. You give everything you've got to make one show, and then it runs for twenty minutes and you can never show it again, so you throw it out. This only happens once . . .

—Look, Benny . . .

—But could I have this? he went on, in the same loud tone, holding up the book. —Do you understand? Because I'm sentimental. That's why I have my job, because I feel what other people feel but more, the same things but more, but not too much, not too much like he did . . .

—Benny . . .

—Not too much. He relaxed against Ellery. —You're O.K., Benny. You just need a drink.

Benny looked up at him. —Don't you get tired?

—Yeh, we both need a good night's sleep.

—I mean tired of the whole thing.

Ellery looked at him. —I'll get you a drink, he said, and bumped into the tall woman, who had turned from this scene to say to her husband, —Now, do you see what I meant about Hawaii?

She was interrupted. —Do you see what I mean? But the man who made this demand turned from her to look at Esther, and looking at Benny he said to Esther, his forearm extending its own length from the gray flannel sleeve which Benny looked at with glazed familiarity, —Do you see what I meant? Do you see what

I meant?

—That's what I hate. That's what I hate. That's what I hate.

—Do you see what I meant?

—Merry Christmas, someone said, raising a glass. —If you'll pardon the expression.

—Great God. Whatever made you think of *that?*

The girl with Boston accents looked at Benny and said, —What's he high on, man?

The stocky man in army uniform looked at the critic, still seated on the couch, and, saying, —A guy like that is dangerous, was, as usual, right for the wrong reasons.

—And the Swiss Guard at the Vatican? I suppose you know that the Pope has given them permission to practice shooting at a target range? And in plain clothes?

—And they say that the food in Spain is in*edi*ble, that is if you're used to eating like a civilized person, and so I'm taking *scads* of these marvelous reducing pills that simply take your appetite away.

—I finally got this new Cadillac, said the author of *The Trees of Home*, filling a hypodermic syringe with whisky. —I've just always wanted a brand new car, there's something about the way a brand new car smells inside, that new smell. It's something I've always wanted, it's been a regular phobia of mine.

The person with him was garnishing an unseasonal martini with Pernod from a pocket bottle, muttering —Just a drop in each one, there's some chemical reaction. But what's that? he added, looking up to see the needle fitted into place.

—You take it this way, you get just as drunk and you don't get hangovers, said the author of the best-selling book. —My analyst told me about it. He rolled up a sleeve. —Did I tell you about this new Cadillac I got? It's been a regular phobia with me . . .

Esther stood looking round her, nervously as though for something to demand her attention and relieve her of going where her attention was demanded: from the doorway, Don Bildow directed a plastic-rimmed appeal over the shoulder of a paunchy man whose familiar face had been so many times, and she realized now, so inadequately, photographed. At hand, the collar of the green wool shirt and the dark head above reared over the back of the couch. The critic and his stubby companion were looking in the same direction. —Christ . . . It was difficult to tell, from behind, which of them was muttering. —The guest of honor. Why can't he stay home to get drunk?

Across the room, Stanley had looked up and interrupted himself to say, —Look, he must have just come, isn't that . . .

—Somebody said he was coming, Agnes Deigh said. —Oh God, I don't want to listen to his soul-searching . . .

—But if we . . .

—Not from him. Not tonight. She looked up at Stanley.

—Black beetles in wal-nut shells, bound round her baby's eyes, Mr. Crotcher sang. —Do you like that?

—The Boeuf on the Roof . . .

—I haven't seen *her* since *Is*chia . . .

—It's in the Vatican, if you call *that* art . . .

—And don't let those medieval costumes fool you, you can carry fifteen rounds in a good codpiece, a grenade if you're underdeveloped . . .

—*She* says it happened right there in the Cappella Sistina, but you know *her*, it might as well have been the Cappella Paolina . . .

—I wonder what ever happened to old Deedee, Ed Feasley said to no one, and then, to the sharkskinned Argentine, —What was that about battleships?

Don Bildow brought his shoulders up to a hopeful slope as Esther approached, but they sagged again as her eyes and her smile passed him to embrace a haggard, red-eyed, rash-looking young man who had just come in.

The two on the couch watched her, though the shorter one did not stop talking. —I got a look at the manuscript, he said. —It's called *Wild Gousse Chase*, and I swear he's got you in it. A character named Hawthorn, and I swear it's you, just about the time you were mixed up with that same blonde, except he's got her having *you* psychoanalyzed just like she had him analyzed when he was trying to get rid of her and couldn't because she was paying for the analysis, so he's got this character that I swear is you screwed up like that with her. You could sue that wise bastard.

—Yuh. Hand me that glass, will you?

—Who's that that Esther's got her hands all over now?

—A stupid kid named Otto.

—He looks like a truck ran over him.

Benny was talking to the man in his old suit. —I'm going back tomorrow, he said. —I haven't been home

for eleven years. That's a long time, to go back and try to take up where you left off. I haven't seen anything grow for eleven years. You forget that things grow. The vegetables you get in restaurants, you can't believe that they ever really grew anywhere, and the flowers, you never think of flowers growing, you see them one way, cut, and you can't think of them any other way except posing, dead. The trees here don't grow, they're ready-made like furniture, that puts on new slip-covers in the spring. My God, you forget, you forget . . .

—Benny . . .

—Why, I'll be there tomorrow morning, I'll be out on the side porch watching the sun come up Christmas morning, you see if I'm not . . .

Benny raised his head, looking around the room. Then, standing beside the door to the hall leading to the bedroom, he saw Ellery talking to the blonde; and when the man before him said, in the same tone he himself had been using a moment before, —Benny, would you take me along . . . ? Benny said nothing.

Behind him, a girl said, to someone else, —So I started this personalidy course where they have you stand in front of a mirror and repeat your name over to yourself in a nice gentle tone . . . and now I'm Mister Wipe's personal secretary . . .

—So I said to her, you just go ahead and *be* pathological . . .

—So I said to them when we got back to Florence, of course there's no place I'd rather live than Siena if I had my analyst there with me . . .

—So he said to me, Oh, Sappho, he was queer too wasn't he . . .

No longer the garden, but, as Benny said, cut flowers posing dead, without past or future, in as great a variety of jealous identities assembled as the tenants of an expensive florist's window, lacking the careless grandeur of indigenous plants, arranged instead in that slightly frantic symmetry which dazed passers-by call artistic, and move on, never hazarding the senses to violation by wire and the treachery of paper petals. Even now, Herschel, perilously erect, posed blossomtime. —Of course, baby, I've never been better in my life . . . but *no*, I couldn't *show* you the tattoo. Since you must know, the two friends I met that night played a *vile* trick on me, at least it seemed so when I saw it in the mirror, what they had tattooed on me I mean, I never saw *them* again. But now that I've lived with it for awhile I'm quite fond of it. It's *me*. Do you like foxes? I can't even tell you, it's so naughty, but it is rather cute, would you like to see it? Come into the bathroom . . .

Anselm watched all this in silence. Occasionally his lips moved, forming isolated syllables which were words in themselves, most often one which drew his lower lip under his front teeth, and released it on a sharp *k*. People made way for him, turning their backs, as he moved about the room with none but immediate goals, the half-emptied glasses put aside carelessly, and raised, empty, with surprise, when he had gone on. Someone, turning upon him too soon, challenged agreeably, —Why don't you ask for a full one? Anselm handed over the glass he had just emptied and said, —Why don't you ask for eight more inches? you'd still have a hole in your belly . . . and went on, the magazine rolled in his hand advertising trusses on its back cover.

—I don't know, Stanley, but it's as though everywhere I look, there's something, or someone . . . that I've failed to . . . Agnes Deigh paused, looking round. —Unintentionally maybe, even betrayed . . .

—It's because we've been led to believe today that we are self-sufficient, Stanley commenced, —that no transcendent judgment is . . .

—There, even there, do you see him? she said, starting a little in her chair. —The boy who just came in? He brought me a play he'd written, and I never got a chance to read it but I told him . . .

—Agnes, you . . .

—Stanley, I . . .

—*Esther* . . .

—Now listen, you're the lady with the kitten aren't you? . . .

—Esther, have you seen? fairies in the bottom of your garden? hehehe

—But this time he wasn't trying to teach the kitten to salivate . . .

—*Otto* . . . I'm so glad you're here.

—But I didn't know you were having a party, I just came up . . .

—But you're here, she said, and took his arm. —I knew you were back, she said, leading him slowly through the room, but not pausing. —But you look . . . I even heard you had your arm in a sling. Where have you been?

—I just got out of jail, he said rather jauntily.

—Out of what? jail? She did stop, and looked at him.

—It was nothing, he said to her. —A fifteen-dollar fine for . . . you know, fooling around. I was celebrating. I was lucky, I had just sixteen dollars on me . . . With a shock of anxiety, his hand went to a breast pocket, found the sharp confirming corner of the packet inside, and dropped. —I was lucky, I'd left

all the rest of my money in a hotel-room bureau drawer, I was terrified it would be gone by the time I got back there, I . . . Esther was looking at him, as though not listening, simply waiting for him to finish. —What's the matter? he asked uncertainly.

—You haven't said you were glad to see me.

—Oh but, I mean, of course I am, I just, everything's been so sort of . . . you know, and I, and maybe . . . someone's mentioned to you? about my play, I mean? he blurted out. She shook her head. —Well I mean, it's nothing, nothing really, but . . . But she did not interrupt him, or no more than with the look in her eyes, waiting for him to ask what it never occurred to him to ask: about her, how she had been all of this time, how she was; what would have given him what he sought, had it occurred to him: the chance to bridle this runaway apology, which she did not require, this hazardous insistence, which he did not dare halt in this race with himself. His jauntiness was falling away, giving place to exhaustion and mounting anxiety. —And then, I met my father finally. I had dinner with him. I mean, do you remember how you used to ask me why I didn't look him up? And he . . . so I did.

Esther's hand rested on his arm, she seemed to have wilted a little before him, and she asked quietly, —What was he like?

—Well he was fine, he was sort of stern, but I mean he was really very nice, and . . . well sort of stern and brusque. And he was a Catholic, I mean not that that should make any difference, but it sort of surprised me, and . . . well I don't know, to tell the truth I'm sort of mixed up . . . Otto was rummaging in a pocket, and he brought out a note. —When I got back to the hotel finally, here was this note waiting from him. It's sort of pathetic, asking me to call him as soon as I can, and then he says he hopes I haven't been worried about him, right after I'd just seen him for the first time, maybe he means on account of his eyes, he didn't . . . he doesn't see very well, and . . . I don't know, I mean when I think of him that's what I remember, his glasses, the dust on his glasses, Otto persisted. And now, as the appeal in her face became more manifest, reaching further back, through unrelated privacies to the last embrace they had abandoned, the more he retreated, dodging among irrelevant images of himself. —And I haven't called him, I sent him a fancy robe this morning for Christmas, it seemed the least . . . I mean, I thought I should do something like that, you know, for Christmas, he finished, running a finger of his pale hand across his smooth lip.

—Esther, Don Bildow interrupted them, giving Otto a bare glance, sufficient only to dismiss him. —I think you might come over and greet your guest . . .

—That man standing over near the door, Otto commenced, recovering somewhat, —isn't that . . . ?

—In a moment, Esther said to Don Bildow, who retired a polite step and waited. —Do you want to come over and meet him? she asked Otto.

—Well, I mean, I don't know . . .

—Do you remember? she asked, both hands on his arm now, —when you lent me his book? When we first knew each other, that first day at lunch?

—Yes, yes I remember, of course I remember, Otto said quickly, and then paused uncertainly. —But now . . .

—After all, Don Bildow recovered from his momentary lapse of politeness, —he is the only halfway interesting person here tonight, Esther. He started to turn his unimpressive back upon them.

—Wait, Esther said, and then to Otto, —You don't want to meet him?

—I guess not, Otto said, looking beyond her at the paunchy figure near the door, who had just covered his mouth with a handkerchief and looked like he was going to be sick into it; and the tall woman, who had just said, —*A*theism! . . . that charming word, I haven't heard it in years, turned looking for her husband murmuring, —Oh dear . . . have I said something wrong again? . . . —I guess not, thanks Esther, I mean what would we have to say to each other? he went on, as Esther was turned away on Bildow's urgent arm. —I used to . . . wanting to meet the poet, or the painter, or the writer or the tight-rope walker of the minute, as though you could sop up something from them in a handshake . . . Otto had lowered his eyes, over her thighs, and his voice until, having made a discovery in his own words, he was talking to himself. At that he raised his face, and with the brave refusal of one rejecting revelation for fear of examining the motives which conspired to breed it, went to seek a drink.

—Chrahst, I thought you'd gone to Peru.

Otto looked up to see Ed Feasley. —But I just saw you, a day or so ago.

—I know. Chrahst, wha'd you do, fly both ways? I mean, what are you doing here?

—I just heard there was a party here, Otto answered, and added, —I don't know, picking up a glass.

—I know, I mean Chrahst, you know? This crazy spic has been following me around all night. What's that they're playing anyway? He cocked his head numbly to a fragment of Handel's *Royal Fireworks Music*, which was being accompanied by Mr. Crotcher singing *Bye Bye Blackbird* from his armchair. —I mean I wish they'd play *On the Sunny Side of the Street*, you know? There's been somebody tagging around after me all

day, this marathon walker, I met him in a bar. Forty miles a day, you start at four A.M. and you get there at three P.M. and eat. You just have to have a destination, he told me. A marathon walker, I mean Chrahst, how unnecessary. And now this spic. I heard you sold your novel.

—My play, I . . . Otto commenced.

—Yes, Chrahst, you ought to try selling a battleship.

And the two young men finished their drinks and stood silent, staring vacant-eyed on the room, vaguely jarred by the words spattering around them.

—The one about the lady from the First Unitarian Church of Kennebunkport, M.E. who orders monogrammed napkins for a church luncheon and . . . Oh, I've spoiled it.

—And even barely more than a hundred years ago there weren't ten bathrooms in all the private houses in Paris . . .

—In a hundred years the population of Europe has tripled, what does that mean?

—And have you heard the Far Rockaway locker room story?

—I said to him, if you really believed what you wrote there, you'd be morally obliged to blow your brains out.

—Well *whis*ky's all right, said the girl with the bandaged wrists, —but for God's sake don't give it gin, gin stunts the growth, we tried it on a kitten.

Nearer by, the woman in the collapsed maternity dress said, —Cross-eyed people bring me bad luck.

—Not just cross-eyed, the tall woman went on, —but with a withered hand, on crutches, and an idiot. Can you imagine *one* person having all those things? *And* in a suit with a pleated, belted back?

—An embarras des richesses, or they would be for that woolly-headed boob over there on the couch. His main trouble is that he never finished his analysis, some girl was paying for it of course . . . There was a tug at her skirt. —And what do *you* want?

—Mummy sent me up for some more sleeping pills.

—What *are* you reading . . . ?

—Oh I'm not readin this, the little girl said, holding up *Toilet Training and Democracy*. —Some man . . .

—Here, said the tall woman, opening her bag. —I have some right here. She took out a Chinese toothpick box, and worked with its intricate catch. —Oh wait a minute . . . my God, I almost gave you my Seconal. A friend of my husband's brings it from Mexico, she went on, rummaging. —Here you are, dear . . .

—Now you'd better march right downstairs and . . .

—Don't hurt the poor child's feelings.

—Another sensitive minority, children? If I hear once more . . .

—I mean Chrahst, sensitive minorities, you know? Ed Feasley took up, turning to Otto. —I mean it's really people like us, you and me, we're the persecuted minority. White, Protestant, male, over twenty-one, I mean we don't belong anywhere, you know? And finally we're all just parodies of each other. I mean Chrahst sometimes I wish I'd studied something in college. What's the matter? he broke off, seeing Otto's expression.

—Nothing. That girl, that blond girl, for a minute I thought . . . nothing.

—Her? I know her from somewhere, you want me to introduce you? Otto mumbled something, and reached for a full glass nearby. —You don't? I don't blame you, Chrahst why start all over again? I mean, it's just like that marathon walker, you know? What do you do when you get there? You eat and go to bed.

—I know, Otto said dully, looking at the floor. —It's funny, I used to think that to go to bed with a girl older than I was or bigger than I was, that made it all right. Then you know, when I was in Central America, it was funny, I thought that if you paid a girl, that made it all right, but if you paid a lot it was more sinful than if you paid a little, but it seemed more honest to pay with money than . . . than with pretending that you . . . than paying with . . . yourself, he finished vaguely, still looking at the floor.

—I know, you know? I mean imagine just starting in now. My old man says you're not a man until you're the head of a family. He's had it, Ed Feasley went on, as vaguely, looking at his shoetops. —There's this great big old house up in the Hudson River Valley. Cornwallis had his headquarters there, or maybe it was Lafayette or General Sherman, I don't know, but you can't go into the place without thinking about the parties they've had in it, ambassadors and presidents, you know, I mean it's historical as hell. And now my mother sits up there opening packages, that's the only thing she ever thinks about, whenever a package comes for anybody she gets so excited. I mean even the laundry. Even the groceries. You know? And now they've built this state hospital three miles away, it's full of feebs, feeble-minded people, and some niggers are building this crazy religious camp right across the river. I mean I've got nothing against niggers but Christ, you know? Ed Feasley finished his drink. —Whenever I go home, it's like everything's wearing out. I mean just imagine being the head of a family in that place now. Just starting in now. I mean Chrahst everything wears out, you know? People wear out, friends wear out, cars wear out, sometimes it's easier to

smash them up while they're still new, and you don't have to watch them wear out.

They were being approached by a short shiny figure in a gray sharkskin suit who was, himself, being hounded by someone saying, —Are you the guy who's telling people that our company puts drugs in its dog food so dogs get addicted to our brand . . . ?

—Oo, coño . . . I was warned about this sort of thing, the Argentine said, escaping in Ed Feasley's direction. —Excuse me, do I intrude? We became separated while speaking of . . .

—Battleships, said Ed Feasley wearily, and taken in charge, he left Otto staring into an empty glass. He did not even raise his eyes when someone beside him said, —She told me there was food in the kitchen, but I went in and there are two lunatics in there, one of them's almost naked and the other is buttering him.

Stanley's voice droned steadily as a distant undercurrent, —Yes but just let me finish . . . to Agnes Deigh. —I'm not trying to say I'm exempt from it, this modern disease, he went on with an insistence which prevented him from seeing that she was more than tired, was in fact exhausted in a sense so severe that it was physical only in its trembling expression. —That's what it is, a disease, you can't live like we do without catching it. Because we get time given to us in fragments, that's the only way we know it. Finally we can't even conceive of a continuum of time. Every fragment exists by itself, and that's why we live among palimpsests, because finally all the work should fit into one whole, and express an entire perfect action, as Aristotle says, and it's impossible now, it's impossible, because of the breakage, there are pieces everywhere . . .

Suddenly Otto's hand shot up to his inside breast pocket: one might have thought he'd been bitten, so involuntary had this reflex become.

—A nation of watchmakers, can you imagine any country better qualified to make atom bombs?

—Oh God, to be in Europe, anywhere in Europe, even in France . . .

—Maude, is this yours? Big Anna was wearing it under her shirt.

—Even in Mauberge, even in a coal mine.

Otto's face expressed nothing: unobserved, his features apparently had no reason to arrange themselves one way or another. His brow was level and without lines, his lips together and even. But slight marks of agitation drew up round his eyes when he raised them toward the door, where Esther stood with a woman wearing an orchid upside-down, and two or three others clustered about the guest of the evening, who afforded a spectacle of sartorial sloppiness and postural dilapidation consistent with the humility which he offered, in his soul-searching best-selling book, to share with others. At that moment Esther caught his eye with a querulous look which drew Otto's face up in immediate confusion, and widened his bloodshot eyes; though why, he could hardly have said, as he turned and pretended to be speaking with the woman in the collapsed maternity dress who had just said, —Monasteries are a good thing for America, they help keep the homosexuals off the streets.

Then Otto saw Anselm, who was whistling with soft harshness through his teeth, and watching Stanley. Otto looked away quickly, as though fearing to be recognized, and accused of something; but Anselm kept whistling, and watching Stanley.

—This self-sufficiency of fragments, that's where the curse is, fragments that don't belong to anything. Separately they don't mean anything, but it's almost impossible to pull them together into a whole. And now it's impossible to accomplish a body of work without a continuous sense of time, so instead you try to get all the parts together into one work that will stand by itself and serve the same thing a lifetime of separate works does, something higher than itself, and I . . . this work of mine, three hundred years ago it would have been a Mass, because the Church . . .

—But dear man . . . came from across the room, the woman with the orchid upside-down.

—And it would be finished by now, because the Church . . .

—But my dear Mister . . . Pott is it? her voice came on as she stood spilling part of her drink on his shoe and burning Don Bildow's sleeve with her cigarette, —*I* am a *birth*right Friend.

As Anselm approached behind him, Stanley heard the vague harsh whistle, half turned, and then talked more rapidly and more directly to Agnes Deigh, who listened with strained attention. Anselm walked with slow careless indifference, bumping people as though they were pieces of overstuffed furniture. —Come on baby, one more glass of nice gin and we'll find you the cutest doctor, why you look good enough to eat! . . . oww . . . Anselm bumped, bumped the girl with the bandaged wrists who went on, —We've been thinking of getting a two-toed sloth instead, they just hang on the shower-curtain rod all day and you don't have to do a thing.

—Hey Stanley, where's your instrument? Anselm asked coming up behind him. He'd taken out a dirty pocket comb with some teeth missing. —Here, middle C is missing, but if you can find some toilet paper I'll accompany you in "We hasten with feeble but diligent footsteps" . . . didn't you bring your instrument?

—And I don't read Voltaire of course, Stanley continued, his voice quavering as he forced it, —but

somewhere I came across some words of his, “If there were no God, it would be necessary to invent him.” That may sound irreverent, but . . .

—It sounds downright God-damned heretical, Anselm said behind him.

—But . . . even Voltaire could see that some transcendent judgment is necessary, because nothing is self-sufficient, even art, and when art isn’t an expression of something higher, when it isn’t invested you might even say, it breaks up into fragments that don’t have any meaning and don’t have any . . .

—You sound like Simon Magus, *invested*, for Christ sake, Anselm said, putting a dirty hand on Stanley’s shoulder. —Why don’t you go see his heart, they’ve got it in the Bibliothèque Nationale. You might understand him. By osmosis.

—Simon Magus? Stanley said, turning, confused.

—Voltaire, for Christ sake. He patted Stanley on the shoulder. —How’s your crack, Stanley? he asked him. Two people turned, raising eyebrows in shocked interest. Agnes Deigh pretended to be looking for something in her large pocketbook.

—Why, what . . .

—The crack in your ceiling, what do you think I mean.

—Oh, I didn’t know you . . . it’s a little longer, three-eighths of an inch longer, I . . .

—What the hell have you got in your pocket? Anselm said, nodding at Stanley’s side jacket pocket, which bulged, and weighed the jacket down on that side. —I’ll be God damned, Anselm said, reaching into the pocket before Stanley could step away, —a cold chisel. I heard this but I wouldn’t believe it.

—Well, I came up on the subway, and . . .

—Bathysiderodromophobia! What did I tell you! said an onlooker. Anselm looked up, his eyes narrowed. —And what’s that in *your* pocket?

—A stethoscope, Anselm said, —what does it look like.

—Anselm! What are you doing here? They looked up to see Don Bildow. —Where is . . . you’re supposed to be taking care of . . .

—I took her to a movie, and left her there until I come back.

—To a movie! But . . . what movie, where, where is she, how could you . . .

—All right, I’ll tell you the truth . . . well, don’t worry about her. It’s a good show, it will do her good.

—But you can’t . . . couldn’t do a thing like that . . .

—Don, an excited young man interrupted, grasping his arm, and nodding at someone across the room, who stood looking at a copy of the small stiff-covered magazine. —That poem, that poem by Max, he says it isn’t by Max at all, he says . . . well come over, quick.

Anselm said, —What poem? and followed them across the room, rolling his magazine now with the cover outside (*Pin-Up Cuties*) with one hand, picking up a drink with the other, and already showing the yellowed edges of teeth in a grin.

Stanley looked after them bewildered; then he saw Esther, whom he did not know, approaching Otto, and attempted an irresolute signal, saying —There’s Otto, I still have the twenty dollars he lent me, I haven’t needed it . . . His signal went unseen; he listened at a strain of music, and returned to Agnes Deigh, whose eyes were closed. —And do you know what Handel had inscribed inside the cover of his harpsichord? Musica Donum Dei . . . they still have it, he finished in desolate consolation, looking up, embarrassed at the prospect before him, the flesh abandoned by the lights of the discriminating will.

Very near him, the tall woman had just caught her husband in time to prevent him from confessing (to some “total stranger” as she would tell him next morning) that he had two psychoanalysts, neither known to the other, whom he played off against each other and managed to keep ahead of them both himself. —Our bene . . . one of our dear friends, she interrupted, as Stanley attended with fugitive interest, —has the most exquisite Queen Anne sofa which he’s hinted he might be willing to sell, for a *price* of course. Of course there’s nothing we need less than a Queen *Anne* sofa, she went on pleasantly, including the total stranger and, with an icily cordial smile, Stanley’s gape, and then she turned a rueful look on her husband, —but it might rather help things along, to buy something tonight from your employer . . . ?

The total stranger mumbled something about a Cadillac that smelled like a phobia inside; and Stanley, again abashed by the cordial dismissal in the tall woman’s smile, and the weary bravery in the superciliary shadow of her look, sought refuge in more immediate terrain, anticipating it as unlit as he’d left it, and so doubly startled at being so sharply fixed in the illumination of both eyes upon him.

Beyond, someone was engaged in writing a criticism of a work which contained forty-nine one-syllable words to seven of two syllables; thirty-one words of Anglo-Saxon origin to five of Latin and one-eighteenth of Greek. It was *honest*, this person said.

And beyond, Otto fled himself from one of Esther’s eyes to the other, and found himself in both. —You don’t look well, she said to him. —Come, where we can talk . . . leading him across the room toward the

door of the bedroom. —It's as though I knew you were coming . . . The bedroom door was locked. She turned to the other door, still holding his arm. —Oh Herschel, I'm sorry . . . She closed the bathroom door and they turned back. —What did you say?

—Like a jungle, Otto repeated, looking into the room beyond her. —A jungle where you've lived in the dry season, and you come back in a wet season . . . His voice tailed off and he stood there trying to assume no expression at all as her eyes searched his face, to find no betrayal but a quirked eyebrow which started to rise, and did not.

—What's happened to you? she asked him.

—Nothing, I . . . I'm tired.

—Nothing! She caught breath. —You're different. You've changed.

—I guess I'm just tired, he repeated.

—Do you want to stay here tonight?

—Here? he said, looking at her as though not understanding.

—Here. With me.

—But Esther, I . . . I don't think it would be . . .

—All right.

—I mean I just think it might . . .

—All right, I said.

—But . . .

—Please. If you don't want to then don't talk about it.

—Oh damn it Esther, I didn't come here to argue with you, he said in a hoarse whisper. —Why are you looking at me like that?

—Where have you been all this time? She asked him that gently, as though prompting him to the question he should have asked about himself, of her: for she had the answer ready enough, as he may have known, looking down at his own thumbnails instead of into her eyes where he might have read it.

—Just . . . around, he mumbled.

—But what have you been doing to yourself? she came on, forced to recover the moment.

—Nothing really, not much of anything, I . . . He looked up at her with an attempted smile. —Looking around, there just hasn't seemed to be much worth doing.

—Is it worth going on like this, alone? just to find out what's not worth doing? she demanded with an involuntary abruptness, and as he looked down again, —Even your smile isn't alive . . . and she stopped, lowering her own eyes as though someone else had spoken. Then she looked up quickly, as though to ascertain him there, before she went on, —And you, I suppose you have something . . . crucial, something crucial you have to do before you can . . . But Esther stopped speaking again, for in his face, she saw that he had not.

The place did present aspects of foliage, shifting and dank, the florist's window flooded perhaps, its tenants afloat in slithering similitude; or the jungle: for at that instant the room was pierced by a raptorial cry like that of the bird descending.

—That? that's Max's poem? Anselm laughed, crying out, —"Wer, wenn ich schriee . . ." that?

They looked toward the door, saw only the paunchy guest of the evening moving toward it, in an unsteady rasorial attitude as though following a trail of crumbs to the great world outside. Mr. Feddle approached, looking rather reckless, gripping *The Vertebrate Eye and Its Adaptive Radiation*.

Otto's hand jerked, and then moved furtively to his inside breast pocket as half a step back he looked frankly down Esther's figure. Her eyes drew him up quickly. —I just thought . . . remembered, you? are you all right? I mean, I heard . . .

—What?

—I don't know. Nothing. You hear things.

—What are you talking about?

—Well you, that you needed a doctor?

—A doctor came this afternoon, and . . . I saw him.

—But, and then, you're all right?

—I'd rather not talk about it.

—But all right, I'm sorry, I didn't mean . . .

He had started to move away from her but Esther was speaking to him, her voice going on as though she had not stopped, —Because you've done the same thing, you've spent all your time too, you've put all your energy up against things that weren't there, but you put them there yourself just to have something to fight . . .

—Esther . . .

—So you wouldn't have to fight the real things. She spoke with great rapidity at him. —And now you say you're tired? At your age, because you've been trying to make negative things do the work of positive ones . . .

—I wish I was an old man! he burst out at her, and then lowered his eyes again, his pale hand inside his coat holding the thick packet there. —Because . . . damn it, this being young, it's like he said it was, it's like a tomb, this youth, youth, this thing in America, this accent on youth, on everything belongs to the young, and we, look at us, in this tomb, like he told me it could be, like he said it was . . . And Otto raised his eyes to see nothing moving in her face.

—Yes, you came here for him, didn't you, she said quietly. —You only wanted to see him, didn't you. And you came here hoping to find him? Well he isn't here. He was here. But he isn't here now.

—Where, he was? here?

—I said he was, but he isn't here now, she answered steadily, watching Otto look everywhere round the room, waiting calmly until he brought his bloodshot eyes back to her, to say, —He's gone.

—Where, do you know where?

—No, she answered and paused, looking at him for seconds, before she said, —Yes I knew, you'd come for him, because, from the first it was like that, and you took me to get closer to him, to take what you thought was the dearest thing he had, and you . . . trusted him, didn't you . . .

—Do you think it's you I mistrust? he said suddenly looking up to her face; but then he looked away slowly, as from the light of a candle after knowing the light of a self-consuming indestructible sun, carefully as though in fear of extinguishing that candle, though it flare up in determined self-immolation, demanding to be saved from itself. —If I did then, he went on trying to speak clearly, —if I didn't trust you then, I mean mistrust you, then, I wouldn't have learned to mistrust myself and everything else now. And this, this mess, ransacking this mess looking for your own feelings and trying to rescue them but it's too late, you can't even recognize them when they come to the surface because they've been spent everywhere and, vulgarized and exploited and wasted and spent wherever we could, they keep demanding and you keep paying and you can't . . . and then all of a sudden somebody asks you to pay in gold and you can't. Yes, you can't, you haven't got it, and you can't.

—Where have you been asked to pay in gold? she asked quietly, when he finished the outburst which left him breathless staring down, as if uncertain if he knew what he'd said, and sought to recover it at their feet. —Otto? He looked up and stared at her. —Tell me, who's done this to you?

—I . . . he mumbled, looking away again, —I guess I've done it myself, he answered in a whisper, as Mr. Feddle bumped him, passing in the other direction, empty-handed.

And though aware of someone at her side demanding her attention, she waited, looking at him, waiting for his eyes to return to her.

—Esther, have you got a copy of the Diuno Elegies? Rilkey's Diuno . . . ?

—"Wer, wenn ich schriee, hörte mich denn aus der Engel Ordnungen?" Anselm repeated, in a rapture of delight, —"und gesetzt selbst, es nähme einer mich plötzlich ans Herz . . ."

—Shut up, Anselm.

—It can't be, Don Bildow repeated, staring at the open page of the small stiff-covered magazine in his hand, as the words of the first line under Max's name formed on his lips, "Who, if I cried, would hear me among the angelic . . ." —He wouldn't have dared.

—"Ich verginge von seinem stärkeren Dasein . . ." Hahaha, that's Max's poem? Die erste . . . haha, hahahahahaha, from the *Duineser Elegien* von Max Rilke, hahahaha

—Esther, have you got a copy of Rilke? these . . . elegies?

—I have, she faltered (for it was not true), —but I've lent it.

—But not Rilke, he wouldn't have dared, Don Bildow repeated, as though it might be a matter of opinion, or a rumor which, traced down, might yet be retracted.

—Ask him to show you his *Sonette an Orpheus*, you'd love it.

—Shut up, Anselm, said the stubby poet darkly, motioning to the man in the green wool shirt.

—*You* should have known, Bildow cried out at him as he slogged toward them.

—Whut?

—This, this . . . poem, this thing of Max's, you wrote that essay on Rilke last spring, you . . .

—Rilke, but that was on Rilke, Rilke the man, an essay on Rilke the man . . .

—Max Rilke. "Weisst du's noch nicht?" . . . Anselm howled, waving his magazine in the air, wrapping something around his neck. —Christ, don't you know Max by now? Like that shirt he cut up and framed, he called it a painting, "The Workman's Soul"?

—Shut up . . . was repeated, but Don Bildow was staring at Anselm dumbly. Then, —Shirt? he whispered.

—And these pictures he's showing now, the abstract paintings he's selling now, don't you know where he

got them? Max Rilke Constable, Anselm went on, laughing. —Didn't you know where he got them? that they're all fragments lifted right out of Constable canvases?

—My God, my dear, excuse me, said the tall woman, —but that creature has my furpiece . . . She set off toward Anselm, sundering numerous conversations as she crossed that room.

—D'you know what happened when Caruso died? Science cut open his throat to see what made him sing. D'you know what *that* means?

—Do we know even half of what's happening to us?

—And do you know why the French are so honest? because there are so few words in their language they're forced to be.

Otto had moved slowly across the room, vaguely, sideways, steps backwards, picking up a glass half full, getting nearer the door of the studio, as though in that darkness might be the figure hidden there working, still there and silent from two years before.

—Hello, Rose said looking up to him with a smile.

—Oh! he startled, to see her there sitting on the floor. —And . . . you?

—Yes.

—And you, then you're Esther's sister?

—Rose. And she continued to smile while he looked at her almost wincing as though seeking something there in her face. Then, —You look like the doctor, she said. —Except the doctor was not so old.

—The doctor? You mean the doctor who came to . . . to see Esther?

—Yes, Rose said, and turned her face away suddenly. —To kill her beautiful baby.

—But the . . . I mean, they told you about it? Esther, about . . . a baby?

Rose looked up at him. She was smiling again; but it was a different sort of smile. —Not a real baby, she said, in a low tone of confidence. —For Esther made it up, she only made it up.

—Made it up? But I mean, is that what he said? the doctor? that it was a . . . I mean, what do they call them, a hysterical pregnancy? Is that what he called it?

—Yes, Rose confirmed after a thoughtful moment, moving her lips as though fitting the words to them in recall. —So he said, when he killed it, for so he killed it. Those are the best babies, she said, as Otto looked away from her and stared out into the room. —Are they not? the best babies, for they do never grow up, she went on, —and when they die they go where nothing happens, and there they remain in suspense forever . . .

Her sigh lingered as he stared out into the room, listening to the tall woman, watching her attentively as though every word and movement of hers were extremely important, though he did not hear a thing she was saying, —Aren't they charming? Baby's breath . . . taking a jeweled spray from her purse and fixing it to an earlobe. —My husband gave them to me, he says a woman can lie so much more convincingly when she wears jew-els, she went on, affixing the other. —I just gave him some money and told him to go out and buy himself something and promise not to look at it, she finished, snapping her purse. —We have to go on to another God-awful party later. She cleared her throat, looking round, and took up again, —Did you meet that very . . . healthy-looking Boy Scout master? Except for his nose, possibly. I overheard him say that the Boy Scouts had hit him with a sidewalk.

Maude Munk had not moved. She said, —I haven't seen Arny for hours.

—Late hell, it's morning, said the man in uniform.

—It's always morning somewhere . . . She looked at a windowless wall.

—That's Longfellow. I may not be an intellectual, but I know my American poets.

—Is it? she murmured, surprised without interest.

—That was *Hannah the Horror of Hampstead*, Mr. Crotcher intoned from his armchair bastion, to no one. —Shall I sing something else?

And the woman in the collapsed maternity dress, who had been talking to the tall woman, went right on to the girl with the green tongue, —You see all the fat ugly little men with beautiful girls? All the wrong people have the money now, that's because ugly people make money because there's no alternative. When you're ugly nobody spoils you, you see reality young and you see beautiful things as something separate from you you're going to have to buy. So you start right out thinking money. Since the old aristocratic system where you inherited looks and manners and taste with your money . . .

—Quick, gimme a piece of paper quick, Anselm said grabbing Otto by the shoulder. He wore the furpiece circling his face, knotted under his unshaven chin. —Hahaha, did you hear what just happened? I want to write something down, quick. He had jammed his rolled magazine into a hip pocket with the stethoscope. He was too excited with pleasure to notice Otto's face, an anxious expression, but a vacant anxiety, and the more abandoned for being features inured by conscious arrangements where, only now as in sleep, nothing happened. Otto's pale hand delved in his left jacket pocket, came up with his father's note, some papers,

—Wait! . . . wait a minute, not that . . .

—Gimme that picture! . . . Everything about Anselm changed in an instant.

Papers dropped between them. And Otto stood staring, at the pale, quivering, empty left hand so long out of use.

—Where did you get it? Anselm demanded, half in a fury and half in a rage, as though he'd never seen, never before tonight, what was able to take his breath away: he picked it up from the floor staring at the glossy surface as though unable to contain the whole figure in his apprehension, seizing at details, the chair, the wallpaper, finally the delineating blemishes on the shadowed white, in a manic silence of search which led him to her face and left his own in a helpless show of fury and dismay. —I'd . . . you! . . . he hissed, looking up at Otto.

—Esther, I've just heard the campiest limerick about an a-*mee*ba and the queen of *She*-ba . . . a frail voice cried.

—You . . . Anselm hissed.

—But, listen . . . you can't . . .

—Are you the lady who wanted to hear about Pablo and his kitten?

—You . . .

—But how do you think I felt . . . ? Otto burst out at him, and reached to catch his naked trembling lip under a yellow forefinger.

—Pablo was this scientist . . .

—And it murmured, ich liebe, ich liebe.

Then Anselm laughed, a choking hysterical sound, broken for an instant with a whimpered, —Sssuccubus . . . until he got his voice, —And when they took her to Bellevue and she knew they were going to undress her, she stopped screaming long enough to take out her falsies, and then she started in again, there, there, there! . . . his face was almost touching Otto's.

—In . . . she in, Bellevue? The whisper burned both their lips.

Then a word ruptured Anselm's mouth in a concussive sound which laid them at arm's length: for both had brought up hands and stood so until, only Anselm did not move but followed his words with his eyes only, —yess, find her, find her, he hissed at the face gone in profile, and then that lost to hair and collar, and the soft convolution of an ear, —find her and be damned.

Sounds rose about him; still Anselm did not move. With another look at the likeness in his hand, he shuddered and stuffed it into a pocket, then stood there alone gazing with an expression of revulsion at the orchid wilting upside-down on the graceless trunk of the figure moving like something afloat, bearing the signature of the jungle deeper among its shadows.

—But nobody's ever physically proved that the earth *is* in motion.

—Einstein says *he* can't believe God plays dice with the universe.

—Well I have a friend who's a physicist, he's been converted. He writes songs now.

—Claims he's a serious musician. Be-bop, if you call *that* music.

—Just so what she writes rhymes, she calls it poetry.

—One of them goes, "With the Father, the Son, the Holy Ghost and you-hoo-ho-hoo, What wonders the five of us could do . . ."

—Painting like she was having an orgasm, if you call that art.

—If you call *this* living . . .

—If you call that love . . . ?

Sounds echoing, not from the vibrant reaches of the jungle, but the jungle floor itself, constrictions in the peat bog, the specimens themselves in motion: —I feel like we've been here for simply ages, said the tall woman. —I feel like I was born here, murmured Maude. But neither plaint nor query sounded in their voices, and neither made a move to go. Those who had disappeared were gone silently, leaving only faint traces or none on their minute contributions to the origin of species: the others remained with the tenacity of creatures bound to work out natural laws of survival, thus prove the superiority of their various equipment in adapting to conditions which no memory was long enough to find anything but nature.

The dark poet reared his head with reptilian vigilance, looking from the dead orchid to Herschel, who had just come from the bathroom and posed, flourishing, in the door, an unfamiliar bloom sprung from the jungle floor, watched by these resentful close-focused eyes, turned away, at that moment, to a sound and flutter across the room, where the Duchess of Ohio soared on an outburst of tittering. The critic approached, moving with the steps of one in a familiar medium, disdaining claims of time past and future, both contained in this limicolous present.

—They're moving Father's grave . . . Mr. Crotcher sang, sunk in the armchair, indifferent as the oyster which, despite the evolutionary excursions going on above, has found no reason to change in two hundred

million years. While all around, less abiding varieties kept in motion, as though this might in itself be proof against time. Arny Munk's head lolled in several directions, its sensory equipment unnecessary for he was being led by Sonny Byron whose tender voice belied the firm grip of his hand. —Come along, baby, be sweet, just for a minute, she'll never miss you . . . And they passed under the eyes of the Paleozoic poet, glittering open from features whose prehistoric simplicity was faintly shadowed with apprehension at the sight of the opportune mutations going on around him, denying, by their very existence, the finality of his old-world wisdom, and suggesting, as they took to the air manipulating the baubles so helplessly evolved with a pretense of having designed them themselves, that perhaps, for all his belligerent co-operation with environment, that environment itself was changing, and not only he, but the entire species upon which he depended while living, and rescue from anonymity, perpetuation afterward, was to become part of the sodden floor, and the mat, and finally only traces on the crust itself.

—Derive venereal, and see what you get, if you don't call *that* decay, said someone near the hunched critic, who turned away, looked down at his large hands, and shrugged.

Beyond, like some creature opportunely equipped to cope with situations which have not yet arisen or, indeed, even been suggested, Mr. Feddle scooted up a tier of shelved books, beyond the reaches of hagfish and lamprey, and other jawless progenitors babbling in apparent contentment below. From the surface there, the critic watched him, bringing up a hand to smooth his hair and for that moment betray the size of his head. His expression was as simple as resentment without understanding can be: now like plesiosaurus laboring all four limbs for the paddles they were, lifting a small head to see pterodactyl raise its absurd body on more absurd wings and with cumbrous scaling gain the sky, a ridiculous place to be, certainly, but for that moment he watched, disconcerting to plesiosaurus, to whom no such extravagance had ever occurred and who, by no feat of skill or imagination, could hope to accomplish it now.

—As for your Emerson . . . ! someone said: and indeed, there were those to satisfy that eclectic digger too, gliding not to eat, nor for love, but only gliding.

Esther, advancing, searched the shadows, but the speechless kitten was nowhere to be seen. Then looking for Ellery she raised her eyes, but their light remained untenanted until Benny's flickering image filled them, and he asked with forced cheer, —Have you seen a little blond number named Adeline?

Several people turned to see Mr. Feddle fall clattering to the floor; and in keeping with that refusal to be ruffled by disturbances, which they called good breeding, no one offered to help him up. For even those present who considered good breeding a pretension affected by a class they were vocationally in revolt against, substituting for it an obtuseness which they called honesty, watched with honest laughter.

—My dear, it's been lovely, the tall woman said to Esther. —I do wish I could give parties like this, but my husband . . . With one hand she was attempting to dislodge her husband from the shoal of furniture, where his hapteric glass anchored him. —But you're not upset? You have to learn to be philosophical about those things, my dear, just don't think about them. Now *I* have a real problem, just look at my furpiece . . . well it is insured, thank God. I spoke to him about it but I honestly don't believe he understands English. I can't repeat what he said to me. There is something almost prehistoric about him, wouldn't you say? . . . something almost attractive . . . wouldn't you say?

The furpiece had, in fact, lost the quality of being an assumed decoration. Nature's hand (which we are now assured is experimentally inclined) might have worked here to produce one of those severe mutations which (so Science goes on assuring us) are opportune, chancy arrangements with no particular purpose, included in the calculated risk of being born. Nonetheless, Anselm wiped his nose on a mink tail as casually as though the thing had grown there for that purpose. But his expression retained a livid suspension, as the lower lip was held sharply under an uneven yellow line of teeth. He was watching Stanley. From Rose's darkness came men's voices borne on music, *Judas Maccabaeus*. On one hand, Chavenet turned out to be the man who had first proved that the eye which forms the image could not possibly have worked until after it was complete. Seated on the other, that xenophobic accessory to monosyllabic criteria in honest writing, overheard the word hapteron from above, and swore. Anselm watched Stanley. And behind him, Don Bildow approached mustering as vengeful an expression as plastic rims would allow.

—There must be some place to hide for people who make mistakes, Agnes Deigh said holding Stanley's hand in both hers. She was staring there, where Mickey Mouse semaphored annul with yellow mittens. —It can't be that early, she murmured.

—But Agnes, the Church . . .

—That glass, the full one, could you hand it to me? she asked him then, looking up.

He did, hesitatingly, —But don't you think, for your own good?

—Isn't it when we make mistakes that we need love most? she said abruptly. She'd raised the glass in a quivering hand but did not drink, waiting.

—Yes but, he answered unsteadily, pretending not to see Anselm's approach as his voice picked up. —But

not finite love that's as weak as we are, not just that, not . . .

—Stanley, she interrupted firmly, though her voice was faint. —I'm sorry. I'm sorry now for . . . about what I said to you that night, that night when you ran away Stanley, it was my fault, I shouldn't have said that to you, should I . . . He waited for her to go on, unable to answer. —It . . . I . . . I didn't know, Stanley. I didn't know you didn't want to hear it, God knows I do, I mean . . . I thought we all did, I thought it was all anyone wanted, to hear that . . .

—Yes but . . . well, it's . . . I mean love has to be something greater than ourselves, and when it is then it is faith, and the Church . . .

Bildow clenched small fists, at the ends of his long arms. —I demand that you tell me where my daughter . . . he said loudly to Anselm.

—Shut up, this is a conversation about love. Did you ever read the great poet Suckling? Here's a poem of the English Cavalier poet Sir John Suckling for you, Stanley. "Love is the fart Of every heart; It pains a man when 'tis kept close; And others doth offend, when 'tis let loose." Do you like that? Hey come here, where you going?

Stanley looked helplessly at Agnes Deigh. —I have to . . . excuse me a minute, he said. She continued to stare at Anselm, who shifted his eyes from hers in sudden discomfort, finally said, weakly, —I'm . . . I mean he's scared . . . Isn't he . . . and turned away to where Bildow pulled him.

All this time, a figure had been moving about the room like a shadow, but a pale shade, if black light could cast such a wan shape in darkness. Occasionally Anselm had fixed inflamed eyes upon him, and looked away after a fiercely vacant exchange. He spoke to no one, hardly anyone had spoken to him, and fewer of him, until now the woman in the collapsed maternity dress noted, —Yes, the boy with the silver plate in his head, he looks like a sensitive minority of one to me. And that woolly-headed boob is trying to convert him, that's the trouble with converts . . . what is it, child? Mummy sent you up . . . I know, wait a minute, here . . . Wait, I almost gave you my Pubies . . .

—What are they for? the girl with the green tongue asked.

—I forget, but they help . . . And she looked back hungrily to where the hunched man in the green shirt had just said, —Just the same, you ought to get wise to yourself . . . when he was swung round with a dirty hand on his shoulder. Anselm looked him square in the eyes.

—Don't you get tired of hanging around like a spare prick?

—Why, why you . . . The hunched man quivered throughout his body, as though it were suddenly an unfamiliar arrangement which he could not call upon, at such short notice, to fight.

—Just don't give Charles a hard time, Anselm said to him calmly. —You'd be a God damn lot worse off than he is if you'd been through what he has. I heard this crap you were just giving him, your . . . and you can't argue that way, you can't discuss absolutes in relative terms. That's what screws you God-damned smart intellectuals up, trying to discuss absolutes in relative terms.

—I'll discuss it any way I want to, the critic said sounding firm because he spoke quickly.

—God damn it you will not! Anselm said desperately. —You can't, you can't do that with absolutes, you either accept them or you tell them to go take a flying fuck but you can't do what you're doing . . . Anselm stopped, breathless, close upon the man. Behind him Bildow stood where Anselm had broken from his grasp, looking at the pale face beyond them both. —And . . . and leave Charles alone, just . . . leave him alone, Anselm finished.

The other shrugged, taking green elbows in his heavy hands. —I was just trying to get a razor away from him, he said sullenly, turning away.

—A what? Anselm demanded, got no answer, and turned to the pale fading figure. —Did he? Have you? He grabbed a shoulder and shook him. —Where'd you get it? Give it to me. Give it to me. God damn you I said give it to me! He watched the thin wrist with its exaggerated rasceta disappear, and snatched the black-handled thing from the thin hand as it drew out of a pocket. —You . . . stupid bastard, you . . . what were you trying to do? Anselm went on, but his own voice was unsteady as he put it into his own pocket, and he did not look into the empty face before him. —You have no . . . God damn right to try things like this, you . . . stupid bastard . . . he finished bringing his voice to a whisper where he could control it. When he did look up their eyes held one another, Anselm's burning into that vacant embrace until he tore them away, and turning away himself sniffed and wiped his nose with his hand, muttering. Don Bildow stood in his path but did not interrupt him when he saw the orchid, fallen to the floor from an earlier caress, and went to pick it up. With it dangling between two fingers, Anselm turned, recovering, —Hey lady, he said, but the woman who'd worn it was not to be seen. —The lady lost her nuts, Anselm said to no one. He mumbled, —That's the world we live in, the ladies wear the nuts . . . choking forth convalescent laughter, coming on toward Stanley who had found the bathroom door locked and was returning to Agnes Deigh the long way round the room.

—And Pablov had this kitten . . .

—But Carruthers had a mare . . .

—Well she says she got pregnant by taking a bath right after her father, but I say . . .

—Omychrahst, I mean, youmeanyoureallywanttobuyone?

—Cómo? qué dice . . . ?

—You. Really. Want. To. Buy. One.?

—That is the purpose of my trip to your country, in addition for picking up something of artistic for the Jockey Club in Buenos Aires.

—Oh Chrahst now look don't go away, I mean I haven't got one with me. Look tomorrow morning I'll come to your hotel and you come with me. I mean, you're not drunk are you?

—Drunk? I?

—Chrahst I'm sorry maybe I am, I mean I was, but I mean people don't just go around buying battleships.

Maude had been fumbling at her throat. —What's matter, you spilled something down your dress? The hand on the back of her neck stopped, the man leaned forward and looked, with her, down the front of her dress. —What's matter? But her fumbling hand failed, and she was staring at an encumbered limb before her. The attractive girl with the Boston voice, whose leg it was, looked down too. She had just said,

—It's not a bad kick, take two strips of benny and two goof balls, they get down there and have a fight. It's a good drive. She shook her leg. —Is this yours? she accused, looking up at Maude.

—Why I . . . I'll take her, Maude said reaching.

And the Boston girl pulled up her skirt at the waist and went on, —If you want to score tonight I know a connection uptown we can probably catch.

—Yes, I'll take her home now, Maude said and held the baby up before her, cupping one hand to the head, and she murmured, —A leader of men.

—Huuu, may I take you home? the uniform asked, still trying to gaze down into where Maude had sought what she had now forgotten.

—Where do you live? she asked vaguely, looking up at his face.

Agnes Deigh had taken Stanley's hand to say, —And every time people meet, they seem to just get a little further away from each other.

—These gulfs everywhere between everything and everybody, Stanley took up immediately, —it's this fallacy of originality, of self-sufficiency. And in art, even art . . .

—Didn't you know him? He died in my apartment in Paris when I was having my first one-man show.

—When art tries to be a religion in itself, Stanley persisted, —a religion of perfect form and beauty, but then there it is all alone, not uniting people, not . . . like the Church does but, look at the gulf between people and modern art . . .

—When I go abroad I want to see countries, who wants to see people? You can see people on the B.M.T.

—Damn fine music, Mozart, said the Big Unshaven Man. He had just finished making a whole pitcher of martinis, which he poured into a large pocket flask. —I tell you true.

—Well doesn't it seem to *you* like everybody's changing size?

And in spite of the torn orchid which lowered, and was dangling before his face, Stanley went on, —It isn't for love of the thing itself that an artist works, but so that through it he's expressing love for something higher, because that's the only place art is really free, serving something higher than itself, like us, like we are . . .

And behind him, in a hoarse riot of whisper, —Oh this is mine! this is mine!

—And that's why you must stop staying outside Agnes, because the Church . . .

—Yess, this is mine! . . .

—There's no more to drink, said the woman he spoke to, but looking beyond him to that thin broken face. There yellow teeth tore sound into laughter.

—Tell them to fill the waterpots. Fill them up to the brim . . .

—Anselm . . .

—Mine hour is not yet come, Anselm returned, controlling the ragged edges to form words in Stanley's face, then getting breath, over Stanley's shoulder, he still laughed, —Woman! what have I to do . . . Stanley bumped him, turning now his whole body against the shudders he shared, locked so as those yellowed teeth bit words out of the air between them, —For I am come to set man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter in law against her mother in law . . . and a man's foes shall be they of his own household . . .

Stanley licked his lips against the fever upon them; and he blinked against the burning eyes.

—Yes, there's your gulf, the hand of your everloving Christ!

With daring tenderness Stanley's hand came to the warm wrist, where a vein's blue ridge coursed the

bone. —Why do you fight it so hard?

—You, you . . . Anselm pulled away. Then he looked around frantically for an instant, pulling up breath before he could speak, —Yes, what a lousy time to be alive, yes isn't it? Yes, I . . . and don't you wish it was the good old days, when Pope Urban sold his toenail parings as relics? and the . . . yes, when you could choose between three assorted foreskins from the Lord's circumcision . . .

—When I get drunk it means something, broke in upon them, broke long enough for Stanley's hand to reaffirm its hold, a frail enough articulation though, in closing so, it brought the veins on Anselm's hand to bursting prominence. —It doesn't help to talk this way Anselm, why do you do it?

—Because you can't . . . I, yes . . . Anselm threw his hand up, breaking the grasp with no effort. —These lousy apologies, these refuges from being alive, art and religion and God damn it you . . . and philosophy, I . . . and I was born with a veil over my head.

—With what? I don't . . .

—Yes, a caul, God damn it, read an old cookbook, I, yes well what the hell, never mind. I studied medicine. I had a good lay this afternoon, Anselm went on disjointedly, pulling the stethoscope from his pocket. —I just go up to the hospital and I . . .

—Please, don't talk about . . .

—No but listen, I've got to tell you, I go up to this hospital and they think I'm a special physician from outside, the nurses do, that's what I tell them, so then I go in to look over patients who think I'm connected with the hospital, that's what I tell them and you should see some of the handfuls I've had that way. This afternoon was the best yet. He brandished the stethoscope, the end flew past Stanley's chin. —This blonde, this terrific blonde, I gave her a three-and-a-half grain shot of sodium amytal and then I climbed in and gave her the business . . . Uninterrupted, he stood there staring at the uncoupled caducei of the stethoscope; then twisting them closed like metaled snakes in his hand he whispered, —That's what it is, that's all any of it is . . . But he could not break it, and he looked up and away, instantly found the blond girl earlier accused of putting a *t* in genial, made up, composed, as pretty (she would never be beautiful), as inanimate and stale as a photograph, once accused of taking the *v* out of live; now, of putting an *f* in lie: —Arse gratias artis, he muttered, —that's all any of it is.

—Anselm . . . Stanley put a hand forth to him again, —if . . . suffering . . .

—Yes, God damn it, my scars, do you want to see them, they . . . where's Otto? He'll show you his scars. Otto, hey Otto, come here, you, where the hell are you? Where the hell is he? He'll show you, he . . . he'll put up a real maudlin raree-show for you, he . . . maudlin! Yes, Mary Magdalene crying her eyes out for Christ. That's great. Can you see him crying his crazy eyes out for Christ? . . . Anselm shuddered. —Suppose you never see me again? he burst in Stanley's face. —Yes, what would you do, you wouldn't have, yes but Christ didn't have any friends did he? Is that what you mean? Yes, well you wouldn't even have a witness, you . . . because that's all He had, He . . . where the hell is he, he'll show you his scars, is that what you want? The Five Sacred Wounds. How would you like that, you could bleed all over the place. You might even get a good set of punctures with the Crown of Thorns, you . . . how about the Ferita? the real bloody heart-wound. Or a good sweat of blood in Gethsemane? you could out-Lutgarde Saint Lutgarde, you could out-pussy Blessed Catherine of Racconigi, if you want to suffer why don't you go somewhere where it will do somebody else some good instead of being so God-damned selfish about it like these crazy saints. Get a little cross with mirrors in it, that would be the nuts if you want to suffer your way, for Christ sake . . . Where the hell is he? yes, with his scars . . . ? Anselm looked frantically round the room, clutching the stethoscope out before him, for some tangibility among the pale presences.

—If it is fear, Stanley whispered to him in confidence.

—Yes look! Anselm rescued the palest shade of them all in his gesture. —Look at him, look at Charles for Christ sake, look at him! Love? I've heard you talking about love. He can tell you about love, about spiritual love, about your kind of love. Tell them, go ahead for Christ sake tell them, about your mother and the Pekinese that the pile of folding chairs fell on, she picked it up and breathed into its mouth, she kept it alive breathing her own life into it but for him? Would she give him one, breath of love? Or a lot of gas about love that has nothing to do with either one of them, for the love of Christ, for Christ sake, she left him here to cut his throat for Christ sake . . .

Figures had started to gather round them, and Anselm lost in his weight with every word, retreating in fury from every hand though none dared touch him. He tried to jam the twisted stethoscope into his pocket, instead knocked it and the rolled magazine to the floor, and came up with that. —Your sick . . . Lupercalia, he was muttering, as though the weight of words would keep them at bay, and the magazine came open on its back cover. And he burst out at Stanley for the last time, —Yes here, here's your peace and salvation, "If it slips, if it chafes, if it gripes, THROW AWAY THAT TRUSS! . . ."

—Shut up, the hunched critic said to him, close.

—"Literally *thousands* of Rupture sufferers *have* entered this *Kingdom of Paradise Regained* . . ."

—It doesn't help to talk this way, Anselm, Stanley said to him.

—Yes, here's your salvation, yes, thousands "have worn our Appliance without the slightest inconvenience. Cheap—Sanitary—Comfortable . . ."

—Anselm, it doesn't help to talk like this. Why do you do it?

—Because the one God-damned thing I can't stand is your God-damned . . . confidence. *Pin-Up Cuties* fell to the floor between them.

—But it's not confidence in myself, Stanley said quickly, —but faith, not confidence but faith in something greater than any of us.

—Why don't you shut up and get out of here? the critic said.

Anselm turned to him slowly, and formed his words slowly when he spoke, —Fuck a duck and screw a pigeon, that's the way you'll get religion. Then he spat in his face. —That's for your side-show conversion, he said.

—Leave him, Stanley said quickly. —Let him be. He put an arm around Anselm's shoulders.

Anselm hung there for a moment, or part of a minute, then came up in a shock, —And stop this damned . . . this God-damned sanctimonious attitude, he cried, twisting free, and they stood face to face. —Stanley, by Christ Stanley that's what it is, and you go around accusing people of refusing to humble themselves and submit to the love of Christ and you're the one, you're the one who refuses love, you're the one all the time who can't face it, who can't face loving, and being loved right here, right in this lousy world, this God-damned world where you are right now, right . . . right now. Anselm stood panting; and Stanley had withdrawn a step to stand with his insensible hand on the arm of Agnes Deigh's chair.

Anselm came toward him, crushing the orchid under foot, pulling in a pocket without moving his eyes from Stanley's. —Afraid of this, he came on, his voice lower, —this . . . ssuccubus, he came on, sibilant, —thiss, beast with two backs. He brought out the crumpled photograph. —This is it isn't it, isn't it . . . He forced it in Stanley's face. —Isn't it . . . ! And then it crumpled in his hand, as though drawing itself in upon its own blemishes of betrayal while his hand closed on it, drawn by the loded hieroglyphs coursing the flesh blue in selfish sympathy. —If you should never see me again? Anselm's voice broke. —Do you know what it is? he came on, almost inaudible, looking at no one. —Und wir bewundern es so, weil es gelassen verschmäht . . . uns zu zerstören . . .

He stood with the orchid crushed underneath his foot: even Don Bildow could swing him round.

—Where is my daughter?

—Your daughter? Anselm repeated, and sounded about to gag. —She's all right.

—Where *is* she?

—She's in church, Anselm said. —I left her in church, he repeated helplessly. The critic advanced on him as he stood with his head rolling from side to side. —Go on, that's enough of you, you . . . go on, get out . . .

Anselm threw himself at the man but Bildow, clinging to his arm, afraid to let go, held him back. —Get out, get out, Anselm cried. —Go home alone. Alone. Alone . . .

—Shut up, you . . .

—Alone. Go home with your lover, old mister five fingers, haha, haha haha . . . here, he went on, snatching the magazine up from the floor and thrusting it in the face of the other, —here are some girls for you. *Here!* Do you think I don't know? do you think we all don't know, let's see the calluses on your right hand, old mister five fingers, hahahahahahahuhhhph . . .

Bildow let go of him as he sank to the floor from the comparatively light blow, an effort which had, nevertheless, exhausted his antagonist who stepped back and in the moment it took him to realize that Anselm was down, composed himself, in triumph.

Maude's voice was faint, but clear in the silence. —This isn't the way I remember Christmas Eve, she said.

Someone laughed.

—The Lord wouldn't like this . . .

—Well if this is the cultural center of the world you can give it right back to the Indians . . .

Someone else laughed.

—And so that one said to me, just ask God, baby, She'll protect you . . .

—Hehe, hehehe . . .

—*We* know what love is, don't we baby . . .

—Stanley, please . . .

—Just wait a minute, I want to . . . I have to help him.

—Leave me alone.

—Where is my daughter?

—Leave him alone for a minute. He shouldn't have hit him.

—Stanley please . . .

—Leave me alone. God damn you, leave me alone!

—But Agnes . . .

—Stanley . . .

—Chr-ahst . . .

—Yes I was told to expect this sort of thing in New York.

—Yes but I mean Chrahst don't go away, or we'll both go, let's both go to your hotel, I'll stay there tonight.

—But in another room.

—Chrahst yes.

—I was warned about that sort of thing in New York, his companion commented, adjusting his perfectly adjusted tie.

—Oh Rose, Esther said to where her sister sat on the floor in the dark with the records. —Aren't you tired?

—Are you having a nice party?

Esther put her face in her hands, and felt her sister's arm round her neck. —Oh Rose. Rose.

The hand under her became rigid, the paralysis ran up her arm, through her shoulders and neck, her face yellowing as the blood drained from behind its bronzed canvas. —Stanley! . . . Agnes Deigh whispered, staring at him bent over Anselm, an arm around Anselm.

—You see, it's all right now, Stanley said gripping his shoulder but unable to raise it from the floor. Anselm opened his eyes.

In the hand she drew from under her, the white nails clutched a limp cinnamon-colored body. —I thought . . . it was something, Agnes Deigh said weakly to herself. Then she looked around quickly, opened her bag and pulled handfuls of things out which she stuffed in her coat pocket, to snap it closed a moment later upon the lifeless kitten. She summoned her voice in, —Stanley . . .

—And now, you don't have to fight it any more, you . . . Anselm's arm was flung around him, and Anselm's unshaven face tore at Stanley's cheek with the kiss.

—Stanley! . . .

—You've got to listen carefully because it's very complicated, said someone dangling over her from behind, —Pavlov had dogs who salivated, but this time . . .

—*Stanley!* she cried out. Stanley looked up to her. —Stanley, please come here.

—But . . . Stanley said, rising and releasing Anselm, who sank back to the floor. —I can't leave him now, he said, taking a step toward her.

—God help me, Stanley, you must. She reached out and caught his wrist. —I think I'm going to be ill.

—But I can't leave him now, Stanley said, appealing to Don Bildow who stood beside them.

—Stanley, you can't leave *me*.

—But Agnes . . .

—Help me up.

—Where is he? Bildow burst out. —He's gone, he's gone, and where . . .

They looked around. Anselm was not there. Stanley staggered and braced himself as Agnes Deigh stood, clinging to his arm. His voice broke when he spoke. —But he was almost . . . I almost . . . what will he do now, alone?

Maude found the baby heavier than she had expected, when she stood with it. —Help me, she said.

—What's matter?

—We're going home.

—But that thing, you better leave it here, you better not take it, it might belong to somebody.

—Please, just . . . open the door.

—Calls himself Tree, does he? I knew him when his name was Tannenbaum, someone said.

—Spain? But everybody in Spain's been dead for *years* . . .

—I'm sorry, I'm going home with this gentleman, he's going to help me write a novel. I don't know *what* Mister Wipe will say . . .

A girl was being sick behind a bookshelf. —You gotto excuse her, she's not used to this. And the bathroom door's locked. Mr. Feddle, clutching *The Razor's Edge*, got to one side.

—That philodendron, that God damn cut leaf philodendron, that's the only thing I've seen growing in eleven years, if you call that growing . . .

Nearby someone obligingly derived philander, —Philos, *loving*, plus andros, *man* . . . the voice whined.

—It's my wife's, she pays more attention to it than she does to me . . . that's why I thought about the scythe, that's why I couldn't understand it, breaking a scythe . . . but tomorrow morning . . .

—You'll take me with you? Benny?

—She and Iphigenia, they're beginning to look like each other.

—Who's Iphigenia?

—The philodendron.

—What's that funny smell, I been smelling it all evening.

The heat, and the numbers of people, seemed to have heightened the scent of lavender which came from the dark doorway and pervaded the well-lighted room, except for the fragrant shade left by the tall woman, the trace of *My Sin* still clinging to the chair Agnes Deigh had left empty, and a sweet pungence rising in one corner where someone said to the Boston girl, —Don't smoke that stuff here, for Christ sake.

The music had, by now, become a fixture in the room; it was as though it had combined with the smoke and the incongruous scents into a tangible presence, the slag of refinement rising over the furnace, where the alchemist waited with a lifetime's patience, staring into his improbable complex of ingredients as dissimilar in nature as in proportion, commingling but refusing to fuse there under his hand, and as unaware of his hand as of their own purpose, so that some sank and others came in entirety to the surface, all that as though nothing had changed since the hand sifted the scoria of the Middle Ages for what all ages have sought, and found, as they find, that what they seek has been itself refined away, leaving only the cinders of necessity.

Esther started toward the dark doorway. Then across the room she saw Ellery coming from the bedroom passage. She turned toward him, but he appeared not to see her. When she got there the blonde was coming out. She smoothed her dress and smiled at Esther as she passed. Esther started to speak, but the blonde went on, smiling pleasantly, unhearing, fretting the quiescent cat that had swallowed whole the fled canary as she walked away.

In the bedroom Esther entered with her hand pressed against her belly, and turned on the hot light beside her mirror. She looked at the powder spilled on the dressing table. Then she turned, the heels of her hands buried in her eyes and sat down for a moment before she could look: the bedspread had been straightened with quick carelessness so that one corner hung to the floor, and the pillow lay half uncovered. She ran her hand through her hair, and looked up to say, —Rose? with dull loudness. From the next room all she heard was, —I've put a cigarette down somewhere . . .

—Rose?

—Well *I*'m proving that *Einstein* doesn't exist . . .

She got up and went back into the room.

—A million people a year in this country try to disappear, what does *that* mean?

—Pony boy, I feel light enough to skip all the way home.

—Aren't you going to even say good night to her?

—I stopped knowing *her* years ago.

—Oh Chrahst, Chrahst, you haven't seen a greasy-looking guy with shiny hair have you, because I mean Chrahst I can't have lost him.

—Is your name really Adeline? Herschel was asking the blonde as he left her. —Because baby I had a nurse once who looked just like you, I bit her . . . you-know-where! But you're going to Hollywood? Baby so am I, maybe I'll see you there and we'll have a nice teat-a-teat over old times . . . He was backing toward the roseate misery of the Swede, who was holding his swollen nose. —Now it's all right, baby . . .

—But those Boy Scouts! I'll never speak to a Boy Scout again.

—Don't cry, baby. Think about Rudy, I *know* something terrible has happened to *that* one, but I gave him this address when he called and said he was in an auto smash . . .

—Where's Bildow?

—He went to the police station.

—Why doesn't somebody just tell the French they're through.

—You'll like this song, said Mr. Crotcher to no one.

—This shiny-looking little guy with greasy hair, I mean Chrahst I can't have lost him, Chrahst.

—We'll just go where they've got some gone numbers on the box. We can order coffee and get high on benny.

—Come on, Ellery said to him. —I hate to see you like this, Jesus Christ Benny, you're my best friend, you're the best friend I got.

—That's all it is, Benny went on. —What's tragedy to you is an anecdote to everybody else. We're comic. We're all comics. We live in a comic time. And the worse it gets the more comic we are.

—Benny you're going to take me with you aren't you? the figure with flannel sleeves to his elbows broke in. —You are really going aren't you? We're really going, aren't we?

—We're comic because there isn't anything else that . . . that has to . . . anything else that has to be.

—Benny, relax, forget it, look, that church gimmick, you're in, you're made Benny . . . Ellery was supporting him, but he wrenched away when he saw Mr. Feddle who had just finished inscribing the book he held, *with best wishes from Benedict Arnold*.

—What happened to him? Benny demanded. —To him, Fedya, the one you told me about. What happened to him? he pressed.

—Why, he killed himself, of course, said Mr. Feddle with relish. —He was Russian. Benny had a hand on his wrist. —Yes, right after he said, "No need to ask! I did it all myself. The design was mine, and the deed was mine . . ." The hand fastened to his wrist loosed and fell away. —Right after he said, "When the claw is caught, the bird is lost . . ." Mr. Feddle went on, muttering, withdrawing, looking at his own hand. —Or was that *The Power of Darkness?* Nikíta, in *The Power of Darkness* . . . ?

—Benny, tomorrow morning Benny . . .

—In Rome I'll be at the Dingle. —The Dingle? —The Dingleberry, baby. —What are you sailing on? —One of the Queens of course . . .

Esther did look in need of aid, returning across that room; so everyone avoided looking at her. They renewed their assaults on one another instead.

—I can't imagine cutting my wrists in Pokheepsie.

—Hemingway? Well he said he's staying at the Ritz, but I say the Ritz was torn down simply years ago . . .

—He joined the Church? I knew him when he joined the Yale Club.

—Then do we all get scared when we get old?

Esther reached the bathroom door as Arny Munk came out led by Sonny Byron, who was saying, —We'll find her, and she doesn't need to know a thing about it. Now tell the truth, wasn't it nice? while Mr. Crotcher sang, —Today is the day they give babies away . . .

In the bathroom Esther leaned against the wall and wet a washcloth. She stared at her mirror face until she realized that it could do nothing but stare back, and then thrust the washcloth between her eyes and their image; as she drew the wet cloth across her skin the bloodlines on the whites of her eyes claimed the eyes for flesh, the firmness of the bones softened, the lines of life, and the insistence of the mouth, all of it fused into one soft inanimate flesh. She had already asked him to stay the night; now she turned to seek him.

In the room the critic turned, to the hand of the Duchess of Ohio. —I can't just listen to this prwetty music without dancing, will you dance with me? . . . The critic left him sprawled on the floor where he'd pushed him.

—And the oddest joke about the Pope, I don't understand it at all.

—I mean Chrahst, I can't have lost him.

—Flo-flo?

—Florence, baby.

She was not really surprised, in the bedroom, to see him lying there in the green wool shirt, that and nothing else. She turned quickly to close the door and bolt it: it seemed to take her an age to reach it.

—President McKinley had one

—I can play *The Stars and Stripes Forever*, or *Violets* lying *under* the piano

—The far lockaway rocker room story

—And the garbage cans

—The Pope

—The Swiss

—The Wright brothers and the ships of the Russian navy

—Loved *him*

—This time it was a kitten

—*Hated* her

Most penetrating, just outside the door she closed, unmocking, —Some sleeping pills that my mummy sent me up for, I know which bottle it is if you'll just lift me up.

Esther held to a corner of the bureau stepping out of her shoes, and she pulled off her skirt. Then she reached to turn out the light.

—Don't. Leave it on.

The woollen sleeve scratched her uncovered shoulders, her legs gave, soft against the hard tense muscles where she strained her hollowness to him. —Are you going to . . . take this off?

—Yes, in a . . . minute. His cold hand wrenched her shoulder down.

—But now, I don't know . . . whether I dare . . .

—No, you just . . .

—But what are you, I thought only little boys,
—It's all right, I,
—But what am I supposed to do? she cried.
—You, just . . . watch, he said breathlessly.

•

The long streets were straight tunnels of wind charged with snow which bit the skin of any out struggling against it, the paving hard-packed with that snow, its whiteness gone under a thousand dirty wheels, spotted and streaked from leaking oil-pans, dug here and there by a desperate heel. The undisciplined lights, most of them red for they hung before bars, shone through it, instructed by the tireless precision of the traffic lights turning green to red, red to green, halting precarious passage, releasing it.

Down the subway steps came a figure on all fours, and those who glanced at it looked away, or stopped to stare, almost as little able to stand up themselves though, if they had gone down like he was, they would have been as unable to move with his forceful ease, down, to drop his coin in the slot with his lips and pass through the stile, out onto the platform and, with hardly a minute's wait, onto a train.

—Arthur! What are you doing? Get up on your feet.

He turned his head, to look up and see a small woman in a black silk dress, tight up to her throat, a woman three times his age, who had lived twice the years she had given him since she gave him birth. He looked at her.

—Get up on your feet, I say. She clutched at the black-and-gold book in her lap, and nothing else moved but her thin lips as she spoke in low intensity, —Get up this instant. Where did you get that furpiece? You stole it! Get up this instant. Suddenly she reached out, and though he was very near her thin knees, with a motion as slight as an animal's evasion, and as seemingly careless, he avoided her hand. She clutched the book again. —Get up on your feet this instant, I demand. The train roared on. He looked at her.

•

Mickey Mouse semaphored annul. —It can't be that late. She held it to her ear. —I think it's stopped, she said. —He can't have stopped, she said, halting under a streetlamp.

—Wait here. There's a cab. Abruptly, she was alone, and she sank back against a building, watching him run toward the curb at the corner, where he slipped and fell. Behind her, one of the indistinct shadows articulated itself.

—Oh no, *stop!*

—What happened? he asked, brushing snow from himself with one hand, supporting her with the other.

—He stole my purse . . .

—But let me go, I can catch him . . .

—Oh no, she said, clinging to him. —He stole my purse. He stole my purse, she cried, all of her weight on him, laughing and crying at once.

He looked round desperately; then his whole expression, and his bearing, changed. He murmured something, and without much difficulty guided her up the cathedral's steps, and he took her in.

—Can you kneel? They were struck down by that vast silence, dropping like a weight from stone arches out of all reach; they struggled to the surface again, and it was penetrated with a bell's ringing like a rapier through stone. —I can't breathe, she said. She fell back in the pew, pulling at the front of her dress as her coat fell open.

He stared before him at serenity which, transfigured in light, seemed to move for him. —Could you take communion? he asked her, shaping the silence which lay between them, cutting a hard bit out of it to pierce her.

—I . . . it isn't . . . not now, she whispered, hacking his silence into shreds of shale, irregular fragments of its weight thrown against him. He started her to her feet, toward the liberation of the nave's channel which flowed in one direction from which the silence seemed suddenly to be gathered and hurled back with all its weight upon them.

—qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis . . .

She fell over against him, dead weight.

—miserere nobis . . .

He supported her, as she regained her feet.

—dona nobis pacem . . .

He turned and followed her, where she ran from the rapier that struck behind them, out through the gigantic doors which spilled them together into that unholy night.

He might have caught her had he not fallen on the steps, a thing which she, for all her gyrations, somehow managed not to do. He did not reach her again until almost a block away where she stopped, breathing hard, under a red-lighted doorway. Even then, before he could hold her, she was inside the bar, where a battered man ran his hand over his uncared-for chin and stared at them, and the bartender came forward.

—Now I'd like a martini, she said, speaking clearly, seating herself.

—But Agnes . . .

—And you, sir?

—Nothing. A glass of water. Agnes . . .

She looked at him, glazed, without recognition.

—Agnes . . .

The bartender tapped his fingers on the bar, waiting.

—Agnes . . . He looked up at the bartender, surprised. —Oh, here, he said then, and handed over the twenty-dollar bill from his pocket. —I'm sorry, that's all I have. Agnes . . .

The bartender walked slowly toward the back of the bar, looking idly at the bill. —What'sa matter, you never saw American money before? said his battered client. —I see it alla time. I'm Santy Claus.

—Agnes, please . . .

—I'm going to a hotel, she said, straight before her, to no one, a she set down her empty glass. —I'll write him a letter.

The bartender had taken the bill over to hold it under a desk lamp which he turned on beside the cash register.

—Agnes, wait a minute . . . She got down from her stool.

—Wait a minute here, you two. Stanley turned. The bartender had him by the arm across the bar. —Wait a minute. Stop her.

—Agnes, *wait* . . .

—I can't stop her. I'm Santy Claus.

—Agnes, my glasses. You forgot to give me my glasses . . .

A few minutes later Stanley stood, eyeless enough in this reduction of Gaza, waiting for a patrol car. —You could tell it a mile away, the way the front of it's smeared, said the bartender to the patrolman who held Stanley's arm. —He had a dame with him, but she beat it. Thanks, Mac. He went back inside; and the patrolman turned his attention to his charge, to where the falling snow clotted the mustache, and gathered in the folds of hair on the back of the round head, silently, with a tourist's dull curiosity, the patrolman gazed as a tourist might upon the pitted figure of a saint in indefatigable stone, left insensibly exposed in the weather a century too long.

•

Roaring alight where the night never ended, underground, she said, —Arthur, get up on your feet. Don't you know me? Don't you know who I am?

He looked at her.

The train halted. Its doors opened, and before she could move they closed behind him and left her, recovering from her moment of indecision, seated and staring straight ahead.

On all fours, he trotted down the emptied platform. He paused for a moment and raised his head to look round him; then he went on, and bumped open the door to the men's room with his head. It was empty. He rose to his knees and reached into his pocket. The crumpled picture he threw into a toilet. With his other hand he undid his clothes, and opened the razor. He paused so, staring up at the dim illumination of the weak electric bulb, his voice audible only then, —In nomine . . . though his lips continued to move, without a tremor, as his hands worked quickly, with deft certainty, unseen.

•

—Why you could tell it a mile away.

—And the broad with him . . .

—The broad with him . . .

—You could have told her a mile away. Hello Jimmy. Merry Christmas. Come on in and have one for Christmas.

—Happy Yom Kipper. What're you doin.

—I'm drinkin, what's it look like I'm doin? Set one up for our friend here, Barney.

—It's a free country.

—Cozy fan tooty.
—The same to you. What does that mean?
—That's fuck you in Latin.
—That's not Latin.
—O.K., so why should it mean anything? Cozy fan tooty, that's just an expression.
—Well here's good luck. Happy Yom Kipper.
—That's how much you know, "happy yom kipper." Happy Yom Kippur was around Hallowe'en.
—So you're meine Yiddische Sendy Claus?
—That's no joke now, that's no joke. If it wasn't for the Jews there wouldn't be no Christmas.
—So you're a Jew?
—So I'm a Jew. Tell him Barney, ain't I a Jew?
—Come on, you're no more Jew than my dick.
—Quiet down, now. Quiet down.
—I been pissed off at him for five years.
—Yeah, well you ought to be good and wet then.
—Quiet down, now.
—O.K. Barney. Thanks for the beer. Just tell Santa Claus here to hold his water.
—You both better quiet down or go. It stopped snowing.
—It finally stopped snowing?
—You're not being a perfect host, Barney. You're supposed to be the perfect host.
—It finally stopped snowing? Well I'll be damned.
—Merry Christmas,
—And it finally stopped snowing,
—Happy Yom Kipper,
—Well I'll be damned.

VIII

> *Then Adam, seeing Enoc and Elias, says*,
> Say, what maner men bene yee,
> That bodely meten vs, as I see,
> And, dead, come not to Hell as we,
> Since all men damned were?
> When I trespassed, God hett me
> That this place closed always should be
> From earthly man to haue entry;
> And yet fynd I you here.
>
> —*The Harrowing of Hell*

Undisciplined lights shone through the night instructed by the tireless precision of the squads of traffic lights, turning red to green, green to red, commanding voids with indifferent authority: for the night outside had not changed, with the whole history of night bound up in it had not become better nor worse, fewer lights and it was darker, less motion and it was more empty, more silent, less perturbed, and like the porous figures which continued to move against it, more itself.

Mr. Inononu turned from the window and walked, apparently aimless in the suit which billowed silently about him, toward the fireplace, where something smoldered.

—Fas et Nefas ambulant, pene passu pari . . . He cocked his head for a moment and listened. —Prodigus non redimit vitium avari . . . He studied the face before him, as the words came on, —Virtus temperantia quadam singulari . . .

Mr. Inononu's nose was no more than two inches from the Vulliamy clock on the mantel. He stood peering into it as he did every face, an intent scrutiny of clinical exactness, brevity, and disposition. Then he raised his eyes to the gilt cupid, sniffed silently, lowered them to the fire smoldering in the grate, at which he sniffed audibly, and went on to the desk to examine its furnishings, the twitching fingers of his hands folded behind him the only signal of the agitation which the distant voice of his host provoked in him. Basil Valentine's voice continued, the book held in white hands above the clear water, reading in his tub.

Mr. Inononu stood a stolid five feet and four inches from the ground, draped in a brown suit which was some shades lighter, or at least softer, than his skin. His face reared in enigmatic blossom from the calyx of a sharp black beard. His brows were heavy and as black, doing little to hide or even temper the blacker eyes beneath them. The dark skin kept its patina to the back of his crown, where a black fuzz, gradually nourished into distinct hair, collared the back of his head and rose in slight peaks above his ears. Full face, as the Vulliamy clock had had him for a minute, there was something distinctly oriental about Mr. Inononu.

As he went on around the room, silent on the carpet, he seemed to have difficulty resisting putting out a hand and touching things. He was touching the gold egg atop the column near the couch when Basil Valentine entered, a book closed in one hand, the other holding closed the untied front of the blue dressing gown. —An egg?

—It's damaged, obviously, Valentine muttered.

—You are very nervous this evening, Mr. Inononu commented, turning from the column with a look which another face might have matched to his tone of solicitude, but his own reflected merely passive curiosity. His clothes were cut full; and for all the quiet alertness of his manner he seemed to billow in a wealth of folds and creases, moving to a bookshelf where he stood reading titles and touching the spines as he did so. —You are in the nineteenth century, he murmured running a thumb down *Az igazi pozitiv filozofia*. —And Móricz, side by side with Gárdonyi? . . .

—You came to discuss literature? You've already kept me waiting . . .

Mr. Inononu made a deprecative sound with his lips. —*A Véres költö* . . . you are fond of Kosztolányi? he asked, returning to the couch. —I would recommend to you Bródy? I do not see him on your shelf. His *Faust orvos*, his *Don Quixote kisasszony* . . .

—Have you looked at these papers? Valentine interrupted him impatiently. —You've already made me late for an important . . .

—I did not know which ones . . . still, you are not ready to leave yet.

—Which ones! They're right there in front of you, on the table there, if you'd simply looked, instead of poking around . . .

—I disturbed nothing on your desk, Mr. Inononu said, watching him look sharply over the books and papers spread out there. When Valentine turned, having difficulty inserting a cuff link, Mr. Inononu picked up the papers from the marble-top table and said, —This information deals with a Rumanian, Yák is his name?

—Among other things, Valentine answered shortly.

—He is presumed to be in Spain now?

—So they think. I think he's here, myself.

—You have information you have not communicated?

—I have no information, Valentine dismissed it quickly, going on to the other cuff link. —Even if he is, it will take them long enough to find him in this . . . chaos, he raised his eyes to the window. —Whatever name he's using now, he's certainly sold his passport, or burned it by this time if he has any sense, any sense of . . . you, Valentine brought out harshly under his breath. He stood there abruptly motionless, staring at the glass without seeing through it, his eyes fixed on the reflection, the pacific image of this guest who sat as though occupied with an academic treatise. —He's a scholar, you know, this Rumanian Yák, a scholar, and that means nothing . . . to you? he went on in dead monotone. —A scholar, a, a man you've never seen?

Mr. Inononu shrugged, turning the pages in his short lap. —You do a most neat job of the decoding, most orderly, he murmured, taking a notebook from his pocket. —Some of the information I am given . . . Then he commenced to read, closely and with extreme rapidity, pausing to make notes, or read aloud phrases which struck him with what appeared to be pleasure. —Yes, an accomplished scholar, of course . . . Coptic, Aramaic, of course . . . authority on the Demotic . . . Saite period, mummies . . . yes, something may be arranged around this . . .

—Will you do that too yourself? Valentine recovered irritably. —And you could have had this information in the usual way, he added, affixing a collar. —They know I don't like you coming here.

—I do as I am told.

—One would think you'd been told to keep an eye on me.

—This is entirely possible, Mr. Inononu agreed calmly, without looking up from his notes.

—What do you mean? Valentine's voice was as calm, but he'd spoken too quickly.

—Exactly as you suggest, Mr. Inononu said looking up at him.

—Yes, most likely! And if it were true, you would sit there telling me about it, eh?

—One never knows who will win.

—Who will win! what do you mean, who will win. Basil Valentine stood over him, a black tie strung tight

between his hands. —Come, you've started this, now. What is being said?

—So many things, as always, said Mr. Inononu, closing the notebook and putting it in his pocket. —Stories, rumors . . . He paused; but when Valentine urged him with no more than the cold blue eyes, went on, —Of yourself? Of course, there have always been so many stories, as you know. Why, I have even once been told that when you first came to us, you could not bear friction of any sort? Soaking the feet in warm water and trimming the nails, and put on heavy socks before going to bed? But there are stories about all of us, of course . . .

Basil Valentine had turned away, and speaking with apparent calm, repeated, —What is being said now?

—Quite simply, that though the Roman Church believes you still to be acting to its interests, you came to us from the Jesuits some time ago. And that now, though we believe you to be in co-operation with the present regime, you are in truth working with those who would attempt to restore the monarchy of the Hapsburgs. Mr. Inononu folded the papers together. He had spoken disinterestedly, and did not even look up, as though to save Valentine the trouble of contriving some sign of indifference to this intelligence. —Of course, stories, rumors . . . he added.

—Oh yes, Valentine said then, wearily, pulling off the dressing gown. —First they expect me to work like, what was his name, the seventeenth-century primate, Pázmány? . . . converting the nobles first, sure that the people would follow. Now they say this. He shrugged, drawing the tie round his collar. —Come, there are stories about yourself, he went on agreeably. —One to match my abhorrence of friction "of any kind" as you say. I was once told that the reason for your rather oriental visage was, that a bank fell on you in a Japanese earthquake some years ago? An American bank, of course. And there were none but the local surgeons to operate on your face, who knew only the faces to which their own mirrors had accustomed them . . .

Mr. Inononu stood. His trousers, fully pleated at the waist, broke their crease two or three times before the shoetops, and almost touched the floor at his heels. He held forth the papers to Valentine, who motioned him to the fireplace, where he stooped before the grate and tried to prod the fire into life with the rolled papers before thrusting them in. —And I understand you shall go to Rome, yourself very soon? he asked, stooped there.

—I believe so, Valentine said. —How do you know?

—As I say, one hears things. Also I believe there is work contemplated there for me. A priest, though I am told far more important than the simple priest he pretends, perhaps you know of him, the name escapes, it is something Martin? Or Martin . . .

—Yes, I know of it, Valentine cut him short, and stood motionless looking at the floor until Mr. Inononu straightened up from the fire to say, —It is a very disagreeable smell, this smell of paint burning.

Basil Valentine glanced up at him and smiled for the first time. —Yes, isn't it, he said, commencing to knot the black tie.

On the mantel, the Vulliamy clock struck softly behind Mr. Inononu, who stepped away from it and picked up a book. —*De Omni Sanguine Christi Glorificato*, John Huss? You have curious reading habits, he said, and put it down again, his eye catching the newspaper clipping thrust in as a marker, as he did so.

—A personal matter, Valentine said, undoing the knot to pull one end slightly longer.

—And this? Hungary to Sell Famed Paintings, from the local newspaper?

—A tragedy, Valentine said thoughtfully, —an . . . absurd tragedy, as Inononu pushed the book away and sauntered billowing toward the windows.

—Of course, to say something like that, he began.

—Yes, put that in your report then! Valentine broke out abruptly, at his back. —Anyone who would say what I've just said, eh? must be working against the . . . present regime, eh?

—Do not be upset, Mr. Inononu said, without turning or pausing his slow course toward the windows. —You are a critic of art here, of course you are interested in such affairs. Tell me, is it enjoyable, your pose of the art critic in this culture?

Valentine cleared his throat and raised his chin, folding the knot. —There is always an immense congregation of people unable to create anything themselves, who look for comfort to the critics to disparage, belittle, and explain away those who do. And I might say, he added with slight asperity, —it's not entirely a pose.

—Still, other interests come first.

—Oh yes! . . . yes! And they send a . . . hired assassin to look after me, to make sure they do! Yes, like this Rumanian scholar, eh? A man you've never seen? and you're sent out to find him and kill him. Without asking questions, just find him and kill him. And if I say . . . there, does it surprise you? if I talk like this to . . . a hired assassin?

Mr. Inononu stood motionless before the windows. —And it should surprise you that I am? he brought

out after a moment. His fingers twitched behind him, until his hands clasped one another. —Because I am a dead man already, he added quietly, and then, turning, —Like yourself . . . with an expression near a smile.

The knot broke in Valentine's hands; and a tremble touched his lip as he lost one end. He caught it up immediately, and at that moment the doorbell rang. Mr. Inononu stepped away from the windows instantly, and his hand went into the full breast of his jacket.

—It's nothing, Valentine said. —Someone downstairs. He was hurriedly gathering together the papers still spread on his desk, which he took, with the plainly bound book, through the door to the bedroom. —I'll just be a moment . . . And a moment later he appeared in the door pulling on a dinner jacket. —You're coming tonight then, are you? to keep an eye on me, eh?

—Let us say I come simply as an Egyptologist. I have in my leisure developed quite a monologue on the prophecies contained in the Great Pyramid of Cheops. At such a party, I might even encounter someone familiar with Egyptian culture. A Rumanian, familiar with the early dynasties? . . . I should think myself to be Turkish, since it is a culture with which I am familiar, and of course since, as you say, I look rather . . . oriental? But when he turned, Basil Valentine was not there. Then he heard running water, from the bathroom; and then Valentine's voice, —We'll go separately, you go along, I have an errand first.

The fingers of his clasped hands twitching behind him, Mr. Inononu returned to the window and stood looking out on the city. —You live very nicely here, he said, —it is very civilized. But most of these people live in squalor. I have been in the apartments of very respectable people, and they are squalor. He paused, and then his fingers still moving behind him he said, —Did you see what they did with our Molnár? what happened to *Liliom?* That was a beautiful thing, a beautiful ragged thing, *Liliom*, and they made it to music that sounds like all the other music I hear here, everything is smoothed round like everything else, it is sugar-coated suffering of the spirit here.

The doorbell rang again, in a long peal, and his hands stopped and held one another tightly behind him. As it went on, they relaxed.

—I have heard the radio, he said. —But since I can understand it, it is very depressing. It is spiritual squalor. Does it surprise you that I can talk this way? if you thought me no more than . . . that, he said and his hands came apart to gesture behind him, and fell together again.

—Do you know the novel of Mikszáth, *Szent Peter esernyoje?* Of course, if Saint Peter could come out today upon these streets below he would find all he could wish, voices from nowhere, music from unpopulated boxes, men ascending divine distances in gas balloons, and traveling at the speed of sound, apparitions from nowhere appear on the screen; the sick are raised from the dead, life is prolonged so that every detail of pain may be relished, the blind are given eyes and the cripples forced to walk, and there is an item which can blow a city of the beloved enemy into a place where their sins will be brought home to them, with of course as much noise as the trumpets on the walls of Jericho . . .

There was a heavy pounding on the door. Mr. Inononu swung round as he had before, his hand inside his coat. Basil Valentine came quickly from the bathroom, drying his hands on a linen hand towel. His coat and hat were laid out, and he picked them up. —Come, there's a back staircase, he said. Mr. Inononu got his own hat and coat from the deep chair near the windows.

The pounding continued on the front door as they went through the kitchen. —Do you know, there was a funny story about you that I heard, in the hospital in Székesfehérvár? They told me you had a radio transmitter sewn inside of you.

—A transmitter? Mr. Inononu demanded at the head of the service stairs. —A receiver perhaps, but a transmitter?

•

By the time that Basil Valentine appeared, it had all been going on for some time; and the voices of guests lay in monotonous layers on the pestilential heat, rising into the lighted regions, falling away to the dark beds of shifting infested silence. Someone had already remarked that Bruckner had been Hitler's favorite composer, someone else, that there was something wrong with any *young* person who really en*joy*ed the late Beethoven; someone had already confided that the soap business in America amounted to seven million dollars a year, someone else that advertising amounted to seven billion. Someone had already turned the radio on, and someone else turned it off though not before Mr. Schmuck (of Twentieth Century-Schmuck, here from the Coast on business for the holidays) had heard a catchy phrase of music, demanded of his assistant the name of the composer, been told, —I think the announcer said Kerkel . . . and finished, —Have him in my office Monday morning. Mr. Sonnenschein (here from the Coast for the holidays, on business) had already told his story about the girl who had dramatized a suicide attempt in the apartment next door to where he'd been invited to dinner the night before, —to get my attention for herself . . . had, in fact, told it four times and was finishing the fifth, —So I can't even finish my Baked Alaska. M. Crémer (here from the

Continent, on business) with a cigarette end stuck to his lip like a sore, had already remarked the uncivilized lack of public toilets in New York, and a number of people had already remarked that the tall woman wore too much perfume. In one corner, under the Patinir, Miss Stein (she was with Mr. Sonnenschein) had already settled the future of American art with Mr. Schmuck's assistant, who had already developed his late-evening stammer which bespoke sincerity; just as the past of German art (—There was none, properly speaking, before Dürer) had already been settled in another, under the massive Christmas tree, a Norwegian spruce, reared before the critical eyes of the wart hog, which gave the impression that the host might have been ashamed of a tree grown of earth, for any natural green that could betray such coarse origin was obliterated in one grand festoon of tinsel, sparkling under three hundred twenty blue lights which Fuller had spent nine dizzy hours in arraying.

And something else had happened, as every face (except a few that had come after, like the tall woman) revealed in strained attempts to show, to one another, that it had not. (Though Mr. Schmuck had seen fit to repeat a number of times since, —Wherever you got art you got cranks, we got the same trouble out there.) All of their momentary discomposure, however, had accumulated, and remained unmollified in Fuller's face, as Basil Valentine saw directly they met when Fuller took his coat in the hallway.

—What is it, Fuller, he's been here already? he asked quickly.

—Yes sar.

—What happened?

—He accomplish very little, sar.

—Come now, what happened?

—Very little occur to happen, sar, Fuller commenced, having at first seemed eager to escape, and now as he talked unable to stop. —He enter a lit-tel wile ago, comportin himself very calm as he go about among the guests talkin very diligent to them, though I can tell in his eyes that he is in great extremity for they become very green, the eyes of each mahn, sar bein the windows of his soul . . .

—Come, get on with it, Valentine cut in, looking back from the great room beyond to Fuller, who stood before him staring at the hard surface which had come over the watery blue of his eyes.

—So he restrain himself very peaceable, all the wile wearin one suit atop the other one as he go about addressin the dignitaries gathered in there until no one take notice of what he so carefully speakin to them about, and then at long last so it seem to me he arise very excited to proclaim he can prove all this what he so perseverinly try to inform them of is the truth, and upon hastenin his departure say he goin in search of you, sar.

—And Brown? Brown, what about Brown? . . .

—Mister Brown, sar, Mister Brown behave quite vexed which is not altogether surprisin, though I try to wahrn him Mister Brown goin to be vexed . . .

—What do you mean, you tried to warn him? Valentine demanded, his mind already in the other room. Fuller had gone on as though he had forgot to whom he was speaking, which he probably had.

—I try to wahrn him . . . he drew himself up again, faltering, —such a projeck destin to no great success . . . He paused, and then added as a revelation, —Mister Brown behavin like it is not my fortune to see him heretofore. Seem like Mister Brown incline to drink quite heavily tonight, sar . . . But Basil Valentine had already turned away, and Fuller stood immobile holding his coat, and watched him out of sight into the great room beyond.

Someone had turned the radio on; and as it warmed to the finish of the Jupiter Symphony, someone else turned it off.

The tall woman returned across the room to her husband, looking affronted. —That rather . . . oriental creature told me that there were no female sphinxes in Egypt before Greek times, imagine! Is this drink for me? Good heavens but it is hot in here. Always the same people, or they look the same to me. There! who *do* you suppose that flashy little dago *is?*

—We want a goverment that will do something for Americans, said Mr. Schmuck, to the right, —and I don't mean the Indians.

Three men stood over the low table before the fireplace as Basil Valentine entered, fingertips suppressing, at that moment, the vein standing out at his temple. He approached them. Two of them were European, and the third was Recktall Brown.

—There is no place here for history to accumulate, said the tallest of them, taking the cigarette and pausing the lighted match as though to illuminate his synthesis, —and you call this progress.

—Good evening, Basil Valentine said as they turned to acknowledge his arrival; and while courtesies were being exchanged, he looked straight across the table.

There was something reckless about Brown's appearance. He had had his glasses on and off a number of times, and though they were on now, slightly crooked, the pupils swimming behind those thick lenses

seemed to be wary of that constant renewal, sharpened to points, each time the glasses were removed, and nervously alerted against it. He was perspiring; and the cigar he held in his mouth burnt on a bias. At that moment he noticed it, taking it from among those uneven teeth, and threw it into the fireplace behind him. He had another out very quickly, unwrapped, and stood, vaguely marsupial, delving for the penknife in a pocket of his vest.

Basil Valentine wasted no manners in getting round beside him. —What happened?

And M. Crémer politely turned his back on them, and speaking to the tall man beside him managed to continue a conversation which had not yet begun. —Mais cette peinture-là, je veux l'acheter, vous savez, mais le prix! . . . bien sûr que c'est Memlinc, alors, mais le prix qu'il demande, il est fou!

—Pas si bête . . . that one murmured, and together they crossed the room to look at a painting recently hung in the neighborhood of the vast tapestry. A lantern-jawed young man with a low forehead stared at them dumbly as they passed without a glance for him. He was quite used to being annoyed in public as a movie star. Now, hearing French, he muttered, —Fairies . . . and went for another drink.

—*Him* Byronic? Miss Stein demanded.

—I said *mo*ronic, said Mr. Schmuck's assistant. —We have to keep a tank of straight oxygen on the set to sober him up . . .

—What happened, I asked you.

—Nothing. Not a damn thing happened. Not a God-damned thing, Brown threw back unsteadily.

—You're in splendid shape this evening. Valentine stepped back, looking him over. —Splendid, he rasped.

Brown would not look round at him. Finally he did say, —He wants to buy that Memling.

—Who?

—This frog that was just here, he wants to buy it for nothing. Crazy frog.

—He is an idiot, I agree, Basil Valentine said, and supporting one elbow drew the hand up to his face, his chin lowered so that he seemed to kiss that gold seal ring, and they stood side by side, sustaining a perilous abeyance between them, and weighing the room before them in the balance.

Fuller entered, bearing glasses on a tray suspended at nose level between white hands, and altogether a harried look about him. They both watched Fuller until he arrived, without the mishap he appeared to expect, at the bar; but even when he'd set the tray down there safe, his expression did not change: it even seemed to summon itself to an exaggeration as he looked round to see them watching him from across the room, and the sounds and the movement about him fell away in the suspense of his own paralysis, an intolerable moment while they three were alone in the room, surrounded by shades, and waiting.

—Hey George, where's the can?

Fuller turned to Miss Stein. —I will direck you to the tilet, madam, he said, and set off before her.

Like undersea flora, figures stood weaving, rooted to the floor, here and there one drifting as though caught in a cold current, sensing in a greater or a less degree what one expressed as —Something submarine, as he paddled the air before him, and went on, —Agnes should be here, this is her world. Then he touched the beard which dripped to a point at his chin with two fingers, smirked at the stolid figure across the room whose somber presence he caricatured, and whined, —Where *is* that black Ganymede? . . .

Fuller was sitting on a white stool in the kitchen, bolt upright pretending to read a cruise guide he had found in a street trashbin. On the floor, the dog watched him. She swallowed. He did not move. She was watching him as though to see if the intent strain on his face were for his reading or tense suspension, waiting, for a sound from her. She growled. At that, as though it were a signal of relief from restraint, he brought a hand up to hide the intent corner of his profile, and peeked at her through his fingers. Sometimes this went on for what seemed hours to them both; though tonight the surveillant might be justified: she had seen him selling the evening's emptied liquor bottles, with their undamaged expensive labels, to a furtive shade at the service entrance.

Miss Stein returned to hear the lantern-jawed young man finishing what was apparently a familiar joke, for she laughed before it was done while the tall woman listened with polite anticipation to, —So one nurse says, And did you see he has the word swan tattooed on it? And the other nurse says (here Miss Stein burst into laughter), —That word's Saskatchewan.

The tall woman waited politely for a moment more, then she said agreeably, —Oh . . . that's in Canada, isn't it? They quit laughing and stared at her. —I'd better go look after my husband, she said. And turning, she gathered her features to return in kind an expression of vaguely startled curiosity from a tall white-haired man in gray, who was turning it everywhere in the room, though apparently in conversation with the hapless creature before him, to whom he had just said,

—Eh?

—Ail séd, ouî mest keep gôing ouor semmhouer naoû olouezz azz a séfté valv it izz valyouebel, ouith

provijenn it dezz not spredd.

—Good heavens yes, daresay you're right, eh? Now if you'll just . . .

—Semm aoutt-ovv-dthe-oué pléce houer it dezz not interfîre ouith dthe civilise oueurld.

—Good heavens yes! Excuse me, there's a good mpphhht fellow.

—Ouonne ouor . . .

Nearby, someone overheard mention of Tuthmosis in another conversation, and going on, found it immediately useful in still another, —This is for your tomb-like little ears, *she* has something contagious called . . .

—Tuthmosis third, eh? Good heavens yes, remember him well, the white-haired man went on, now deep in confusion with a sharp-bearded "oriental sort of chap" as he would say when he escaped. —Probably the greatest Pharaoh of them mphht all, I daresay, eh? Had a very low forehead I remember, curious thing, eh? Looked a bit like this mphht chap here somewhere, works in pictures they tell me. Pitiful sort of mppht way to live eh? He finished and glanced up, startled again at the sharp eyes fixed on him.

—Ah yes . . . and the child princess Ink-naton, is she perhaps familiar?

—Ink . . . mphht . . . Ikhnaton, daresay that's who you mean, eh? Good heavens yes, very interesting chap he was, Ikhnaton. Put down the mphht what-do-you-call-ems, don't you know. Religious reform, all that sort of thing. Good heavens yes, had them all running round worshiping the sun. All very well, that sort of thing, don't you know, pushing out the mphht old gods, eh? But keep an eye on politics, eh? Keep an eye on politics. Not like this fellow what's-his-name we're talking about, building his temple out there on the edge of nowhere, eh? Spending everything he could get his hands on out there worshiping the mphht visible disc of the sun, eh? Won't do, won't do at all.

—This is perhaps your field of interest? Because it is mine also.

—Interest? Good heavens no, my dear chap, don't care a damn for the whole lot of them.

—You are very well informed, nevertheless?

—Oh, pick things up, don't you know, pick things up. Old school chum of mine, Lord mphht the devil, what the devil was his name, dug up old King Tut don't you know, not so long ago. Tutankhamen you know, the son of this fellow mphht Ikhnaton don't you know, who built Akhetaton out there on the edge of nowhere for his sun-worshiping, and let his politics go out the window. Go-od heavens yes, this white-haired man paused to grip his lapels and stare up with an air of recollection, —before the whole thing went to pot, don't you know, the Nineteenth Dynasty, eh? Too much gold, that was their difficulty, gold kicking around all over the place, and vulgarity everywhere, eh? Yes, that's what happens, that's when the decadence sets in, eh? Same damn thing running around today from the look of things, eh? Wasn't like this fifty years ago, eh? Good heavens no, people then who had money inherited it don't you know, knew how to spend it. Some sense of responsibility to their culture, eh?

—Nevertheless, I hear on the radio that gold to the amount of three-hundred fifty-six thousand dollars will bring a million dollars on the black market? . . .

—The radio? . . . good heavens yes, total loss in this country, don't you know. Turned it on meself and had some brazen idiot ask me how was the color personality of my house, eh? Who the devil puts up with all that nonsense do you spose. A pound a year we pay at home, don't you know, a pound a year to keep the airwaves clean, you might say. Cheap enough, eh? to keep that kind of infernal rubbish out of your house.

—Of course. But now, in the field of Egyptology, have you ever encountered a gentleman by the name . . .

—Good heavens, not my field at all, don't you know. I say, I've gut to get over and have a word with that chap, d'you mind? That offensive little Frenchman don't you know.

He almost stumbled over the Argentine Trade Commissioner, who had been worrying his way about that vast room for some time, and now approached the elbow of a man whom he apparently took for a countryman.

—Con permiso, señor . . . conoce Usted el Señor Brown?

—Iført den uovervinnelige rustning . . . eh?

—Nada . . . nada, gracias . . .

Even the tapestried eyes above avoided him.

At the foot of that sylvan enterprise, M. Crémer took out a blue coarse-paper packet, offered one of the harsh cigarettes, and took it himself when it was declined. —Oui, à vendre *à l'aimable*, vous savez, au prix d'un retable de . . . Hubert van Eyck. They turned again to look at the painting, hands in trouser pockets bunching the jackets behind. Crémer blew a steady stream of smoke at its surface. —Memlinc, bien sûr, he murmured again. —La force, voyez vous, encore plus la . . . tendresse.

The white-haired gentleman approached, side-stepping the argument going on behind them which went

something like this,

—Roughly, .0000000000000000000000006624

—Roughly! It's nearer to .00000000000000000000000006624

—Good heavens, eh? Lots of odd ducks here this evening. Crémer straightened round to him. —Just met some wog over there who talked me ear off about mphhht lot of dead Egyptians he carts about with him. You're buying this thing, are you? He leant over Crémer's shoulder to look close at the painting.

—I am interested in it, Crémer answered him, and then he introduced the two. The white-haired man was identified with a London gallery of some prominence, and Crémer was careful to add an R.A. after his name.

—Odd bit of business we had here earlier, eh? the R.A. said to them.—Funny sort of chap, storming in here like that, eh?

Crémer shrugged. —There are madmen everywhere.

—And he really had a go on this, didn't he, this Memlinc here, almost tore it from the wall, don't you know. I was standing nearby here, almost expected him to . . . attack me, don't you know, no reason on earth.

Crémer's shrug still hung in his shoulders, and he emphasized it with a twitch, throwing the exact lines of his neat blue suit off, for it was a thing of careful French construction, and fit only when the figure inside it was apathetically erect, arms hung at the sides, at which choice moment the coat stood up neat and square as a box, and the trousers did not billow as they did in walking, but hung in wide envelopes with all the elegance that right angles confer, until they broke over the shoes, which they were, fortunately, almost wide enough at the bottoms, and enough too long, to cover. —I saw him only this distance across the room, you know. But these spectacles, these spectacles you know . . . Crémer waved a hand before him as though he were going to take the cigarette from between his lips. —In America they are not uncommon. And this Memlinc, you know, it is beyond a doubt. He jerked his head back, dropping the long ash on the carpet, to indicate the painting hung behind him. —I am familiar with the origin, you see . . . et surtout, vous savez . . . there is no test to which it has not been subjected.

—That mmph what that curious fellow had to say about the sky here, don't you know, eh? Prussian blue, don't you know. 'T's what it is.

—Bleu de Prusse, alors. What difference?

—Mphh eighteenth-century color, don't you know.

—Bien alors, Crémer said wearily, —the hand of a restorer, you know. It is not uncommon. He shrugged again. The R.A. had been leaning over his shoulder, and straightened up now with a glance at Crémer which, if he had given himself to rudeness, might have been one of extreme distaste. Nevertheless, he said,

—Nevertheless, don't you know, a lovely thing, this. Ought to pick it up meself, I spose. Eh?

—I have no intention to bid against you, said Crémer, staring straight out into the room.

—Eh? Mphh . . . nothing like that, of course, I mean to say, don't you know. Good heavens! Quite out of my reach right now. I mphht special sort of taste for these Flemish things meself. So cleean, don't you know.

Crémer almost smiled, at that. Still looking across the room he murmured, —You should enjoy what Michel-Ange has to say about these painters, perhaps. Les tableaux flamands plaisent aux femmes, surtout aux vieilles et au très jeunes, ainsi qu'aux moines et aux religieuses . . .

—Mphh . . .

— . . . et enfin aux gens du monde qui ne sont pas susceptibles de comprendre la vraie harmonie . . .

—Mphht . . . The R.A. started to turn his back. —Eh? Don't keep up on these things much any more. Modern mphht attitudes, don't you know, modern art and all that sort of thing, eh? They try to say their paintings are the spirit of the times, don't you know, but good heavens aren't the times bad enough without having pictures of it hanging all over the place?

But M. Crémer, with the cigarette gone out and stuck like a sore on his lip, was looking across the room. —Your Monsieur Brown, you know, he is exceptional?

—Not mine, old fellow. Good heavens, not mine.

—See his feet behind the table, so small they are as he moves on them, it is a wonder he can find equilibrium. How he sways this evening. Pffft. On va faire des zigzags, eh?

Behind them, to one side, someone said something with the precise care of a radio announcer mispronouncing something from another language.

—Excuse me, said their companion, silent all this time, to their right now as they stood facing momentary exposures of the delicately detached balance which their host had broken, and restored, and maintained again with the man beside him across the depths of that room, —I am not here early for this . . . contretemps? What happened?

And the guests drifted past on courses which left no more trace than water, glassy-eyed, with as little purpose apparent as movement undersea but, as there, interrupted by swift predatory sweeps, and darting search for cover. In striking differences of shape, and protective coloration, exotically helpless, deceptively dull, distinct varieties fed together in clusters, or tended to move separately, here and there raising wide-open eyes, and bumping the sides of the tank.

—We're shooting *Faust* now, a sort of bop version, we've changed him to this refugee artist, and Mephistopheles is . . .

—But it's funny seeing pictures of yourself everywheres, starin out at you eatin things and drinkin things and smokin things you never heard of . . . went on the one with no more forehead than a black bass; and in spite of the shocks of sound that broke the surface, a pelagian quiet drenched the whole place.

So the sprays at the ears of the tall woman shone like growths of some special nature, antennae perhaps, or merely lures, as she said to her husband, —You might ask him now, about that Queen Anne table? or was it a chair.

—And that . . . person over there? with the beard?

—Oh yes, carries art to the masses, women masses, you know. A pontificator in . . . Oh! Oh *that* one, calls himself Kuvetli, an Egyptian . . . And where they turned their eyes, that denizen lurked and caught their glances instantly, though he went on talking to the person before him, and though, until that moment, he had not been looking in their direction at all.

—Of course, I do not concern myself with politics, or such triumphs of scientific ingenuity as your atom bombs and hydrogen bombs. All that I leave for the newspapers, it is so necessary to their self-importance to have all the answers. For me this war will be no more than a matter of academic interest, of course, a confirmation of the prophecies contained in the Great Pyramid of Cheops. As I say, we have entered the period . . . ahm, symbolized by the King's Chamber, in 1936, and it is only last year we have entered the period of final woe at last. But at this moment, he went on, pulling a stream of tinsel from the tree and winding it around his finger, —I am more interested in this mummy of which I speak, the mummy of Inknaton. Of course she died when only twelve years of age, the Fourth Dynasty . . . of course it is too much to hope that I may encounter here someone who will be able to assist me with information? . . . And here he returned his black eyes, not to the man before him, to whom he spoke, but beyond him, directly across the room.

—What happened! What do you mean, what happened.

—You know very well what I mean, Valentine answered after all these minutes of silence which Brown was, finally, unable to sustain.

—You've seen him, Brown broke out, suddenly turning on Valentine.

—I give you my word, I haven't though.

—Your word! Recktall Brown muttered, turning away once more. —He went after you. He left here to go after you.

—So I understand.

—There! What do you mean, you didn't see him.

—My dear man, I haven't seen him in some time, please get that straight. Fuller mentioned that he'd gone off looking for me, why, I cannot imagine.

—You can't imagine! You God damn well can imagine. Valentine has the proof, he said to me right square in my face, I left it with him . . . so what the hell did he mean? Recktall Brown turned his heavy face up again; and Basil Valentine faintly smiled, and as faintly shrugged.

—You expect him back then?

—How the hell do I know. Sure I expect him back. Don't you?

—And nothing happened when he was here earlier? No one . . .

—Nobody would listen to him. Brown lowered his eyes again to the table before him. His cigar stood out between fingers as thick as itself in his left hand hanging beside him; and he raised his right hand to wipe his mouth.

—Still, it is rather embarrassing. You know, Basil Valentine said, falling into his familiar caustic tone, —you do sound rather disappointed?

Recktall Brown did not move. He did not even raise the cigar; but stood, staring down at that table. His forehead glistened.

—Now listen, Brown, I don't know what's got into you tonight besides a gallon of liquor, but you . . .

—That last picture he did, Brown interrupted, raising his cigar and looking over the room, —there's some people here who I want to have a look at it.

At that point Brown started round one side of the table, and Basil Valentine came rapidly after him round the other.

The cigarette in Crémer's mouth had gone out at about a thumbnail's length, and stuck there as he discussed a contemporary French painter, who was, he said, —Racinien, vous savez . . . le goût de l'en deçà. L'instinct de . . . de l'atticisme, alors. Comme Corot, comme Seurat, vous savez, il est racinien. Comme je viens d'écrire, suprême fleur du génie français et qui ne pouvait pousser qu'en France . . . With that Crémer stopped, raised an eyebrow, and carefully removed the blemish from his lip with a thumb and third finger, in anticipation of his host.

Recktall Brown swerved, as Valentine grabbed his arm when they met coming round the foot of the low table before the fireplace.

—Wait a minute now . . .

—Let go! . . . let go of my arm.

—Wait, listen! . . . you can't do this . . .

—God damn it let go of my arm. Recktall Brown stopped abruptly, and Valentine swung around almost before him.

—What's the matter with you tonight? What the devil's the matter with you?

—Not a God damn thing the matter with me . . .

—Listen now, listen to me, Valentine said, trying to take him by both arms now. —Don't be an idiot, you can't show another one now, you can't show this one so soon . . .

—Get out of the way.

—Do you think these men are fools? do you think they're children? And after what's just happened do you think you can take them in there and show them another van der Goes without . . .

Several people turned at Recktall Brown's laughter, which rose about him there in the middle of the vast room in an eructation of smoke. —And show them your face, hey? You think they'll laugh at your face, hey? Get out of the way.

Basil Valentine stepped back quickly. He opened a white handkerchief and paused to cough into it, as Recktall Brown went on. When he caught up, Crémer was saying, —Tell us, Monsieur Brown, for you which is the most beautiful . . . objet, in your present collection.

Recktall Brown stood before them with the cigar in one end of his mouth, uneven teeth discoloring his grin, the pupils of his eyes filling the lenses. He did not pause to consider but threw a hand up. Those before him startled back at this gesture; but Basil Valentine, arriving beside him, did not, and got the blow square in the face.

The handkerchief reddened as he held it up to his lip; but Brown did not even pause to look at the diamonds. —That! he said, pointing; and though they had started immediately to solicit Valentine on his injury, he had excused himself and was gone, and each of them was staring up at the balcony, and the suit of armor there, before he knew it.

Crémer recovered quickly. He took a loosely made cigarette from the battered blue packet and returned his eyes to his host. —Quelle drôlerie!

Recktall Brown looked back to see their eyes upon him, slightly quizzical, only Crémer looking at him with a penetration equal to that of Basil Valentine, whom, in a dismally obvious, badly dressed way, he rather resembled.

—You don't like it? Brown burst out, addressing himself directly to Crémer.

—Ah mais oui, mais . . . c'est charmant . . . Nevertheless Crémer took a step back now, and the smile faded from his face as he looked at Brown's.

Recktall Brown looked up at the other two men in quick turn, and then he suddenly took off his glasses and startled them all three with the sharpness of his eyes, which he lowered then, and wiped his forehead with the ends of his fingers. They were silent and attentive while he put the glasses back on, and said, peremptorily, —Come with me, I've got something to show you. He turned, signaling three or four other people with his nod, and they followed him toward the panel door in the other end of the room. Mr. Schmuck joined them, halfway across, Mr. Sonnenschein three-quarters, and Basil Valentine reached them before they were all through that door, and closed it behind him.

—They've gone in to look at dirty movies, said Miss Stein, watching them. —Art pictures the boss calls them. Too late, she had taken a step to follow.

The tall woman was deflected from her course by a plump hand which hit her in the breast. She did not pause for an apology; and the bearded youth did not pursue her to offer one. He went right on with, —No, the story was published over there, and of course I have every right to sue her, she's *ru*-ined my London reputation.

—But you've never been in London, have you?

—Well I might go . . . so there! No, don't you touch me . . . I'm going right over and discuss Martin Schoongauer's etchings with that exquisitely fifteenth-century-looking person.

The tall woman interrupted her husband, who was absorbed in saying nothing to anyone. —Oh dear, I always say the wrong thing, I just don't stand a Chinaman's chance . . . Then her voice stopped, as her eyes were halted by the man at her elbow whom she had met as Mr. Kuvetli. —A Chinese person's chance . . . she faltered on, bravely, —Oh dear, I do try . . .

And at the far end of that great room the panel door opened to upset someone who was depending upon it as part of the wall.

—Don't tell me that advertising does a cultural service by reproducing art, confusing the art and the product in people's minds, it corrupts the art by exalting the . . . ooops!

—Pardon, said M. Crémer, stepping back while this speaker picked himself up and renewed his attack. —So your hair oil reproduces the *Mona Lisa*, that's patronage . . .

—A magnificent work, Crémer went on, coming out, —bien entendu, le visage de la Vierge . . .

—Yes that, of course, said the white-haired man behind him, —but most obviously the work of some restorer. Rather serves to show up the excellence of the rest of the thing, though, you might say.

—Un sacrilège, ce visage-là, archaïque, dur comme la pierre, voyez vous, sans chaleur, sans cœur, sans sympathie, sans vie . . . en un mot, la mort, vous savez, sans espoir de Résurrection.

Last in the short line, Mr. Sonnenschein came out saying, —It's a price. It's a price. He looked over his shoulder, and started to say something, but the door closed in his face.

The white-haired man bumped Crémer, who'd stopped abruptly, one foot full on an Aubusson rose, to say, —Your Monsieur Brown, he is . . . typical?

Here the sharkskinned Argentine approached, to excuse himself and ask if any of them were Mr. Brown?

—He's right here . . . ummph . . . somewhere, the white-haired man said looking round over their heads. The Argentine looked, anxiously, with him.

—You are here on . . . business? Crémer challenged him.

—My official commission is completed earlier, the Argentine answered, —but I am here with the hope to secure something of . . . artistic? . . .

Crémer turned his back. —Il va sans dire, he said, pausing to chuckle, —comme tout le monde sait bien, les grands tableaux de Goya qu'on trouve dans le Jockey Club de Buenos Aires sont des . . . faux.

—A deodorant company reproduces the *Madonna of the Rocks* in an ad, and you call that . . . ooops!

Recktall Brown came through the panel door, with a fresh cigar in his mouth. He strode into the room and looked around with expectation, holding one heavy hand in the other behind him, and then the second in the first, his back turned to the direction he had come from, passing Crémer and the others so fast he had not seen them.

—A laxative company reproduces the portrait of Doctor Arnolfini and his wife in full color, and that's supposed to be . . . ooops!

Basil Valentine came through the panel door, and stood there, pulling it closed behind him slowly as he looked over the room, pale, his lips tight but moved by the tongue which caressed the broken tooth.

—Look, come on over to a safe corner, because I want to tell you that if there's one single cancer eating out this country, it's advertising.

Basil Valentine cupped his hands to light a cigarette, for the one he had held up with a match was quivering.

—But Doctor . . . Kuvetli is it? in the Fourth Dynasty the process of embalming and mummification . . .

—I beg you to excuse me for a moment . . . Valentine watched him approach, the cigarette poised at his mouth, where he pressed his upper lip with a fingertip.

—What is the trouble? what is happening?

—Nothing, Valentine answered in the same low tone.

—But there is something, you are very upset. How did you injure yourself?

—An absurd accident . . .

—But you must tell me what all this is, there is something very wrong here tonight . . .

—There is nothing wrong with anything but . . . with anything that concerns you, Valentine answered quickly.

—Ah, but you cannot . . .

—I can do anything I wish, Valentine said heatedly, turning his back on the room.

—I am most concerned to see you lose . . . to see you so disturbed, said the other, backed against the wall there. —It is never a good thing.

—I've lost control of nothing.

—And you expect some trouble?

—Nothing that . . . with which I am not familiar.

—Are you armed?

—Armed? Good heavens, do you expect someone to . . . attempt my life?

—Ah, but not so loudly . . .

Valentine backed a step from him. He looked the man up and down. —What the devil is all this . . . ? Do you think you're here to . . . keep a watch on me? All this, I assure you, he went on, —I assure you it has nothing to do with any but personal concerns, do you understand me? And that man over there . . . he started to turn, nodding over his shoulder at Brown's heavy back. Then he suddenly closed in again. —And you, are you armed? he demanded. He had only a smile in return, a smile which did not spread beyond the lips, nothing else moved from the point of the beard to the sharp black eyes. —Give it to me, Valentine said.

—But if, as you say, this is all no more than a personal affair . . .

—Give it to me, I say.

—But in matters of this sort, your authority does not extend . . .

—Damn you! hand it over, and stop . . . The vein stood out, pounding in Basil Valentine's temple. —My authority extends where I take it, he said, opening his dinner jacket and shielding the figure before him as the square weight of an automatic pistol passed between them. —And now . . .

—Ah yes of course, I have read the book, a charmingly cynical thing of its kind. It is written with such . . . freshness . . . He stroked his beard with one finger, as Basil Valentine composed himself quickly, buttoning his dinner jacket and stepping back to allow the intrusion of a man whom neither of them appeared to know, —such naïveté, that one may imagine the author himself quite innocent of comprehending the full meaning of the deceit implicit in the scandalous behavior which he recommends, in order to win friends and, as it follows, influence people. Did you not have this feeling, Mister . . . Mister . . . ?

Valentine had retired a step, and then another, about to turn. But he said, —Valentine. And now . . .

—Of course . . . He had not taken his sharp eyes from Valentine's face but for an instant. —Of course I have implicit faith in your judgment, in matters of this sort.

—Thank you, Valentine said, bowing quickly from the waist and excusing himself, —I must see our host for a moment.

—Of course . . .

—It proves no more than that the ends justify the means, and that eventually connivance is necessary to the accomplishment of good, said the intruder, carrying on with some perspicacity what he believed to be a conversation. —I believe that we can call its success in a society supposedly based in reason, as logical an outcome as the pragmatic approach of modern American psychoanalysis, he went on, though the man to whom he was now talking had favored him with the briefest scrutiny, and stood now looking over his shoulder toward the center of the room, where Basil Valentine collided with Fuller, who was retreating backwards with a loaded tray.

—You idiot! Idiot!

—Oh yes sar, yes sar . . .

—Here, what do you mean calling Fuller an idiot?

—Oh Mister Brown sar, Mister Valentine sar . . .

And if Basil Valentine was surprised, Fuller was astonished; if Valentine was discountenanced, Fuller was thoroughly alarmed at this guttural defense from the last source either of them might ever have expected.

Recktall Brown stood with his hands flattened across his belly one upon the other, the diamonds hidden beneath the thick joint of a finger. And as Valentine's eyes turned to the pools floating rash defiance in those thick lenses, Fuller made good his escape.

On the shifting surfaces of voices, rising, hesitating, and breaking, rolling deeply and fading away, moving in even swells, shattering in conflict, figures moved around them, as Recktall Brown took out a cigar with one hand, found the penknife with the other, and stood there, waiting.

—Whatever this game of yours is, it's gone far enough, Valentine got out finally.

Recktall Brown just looked at him. He began to trim the end of the cigar. Finally he said, —It's my party.

—But you can't . . . you can't . . .

—I can't what. Brown did not raise his eyes from what he was doing.

—Good God . . .

Brown raised his eyes at that, to stare at the face before him. He looked very tired: that was the only way to explain the expression on his face which he lowered quickly, as though his features, so familiar in the daylight of triumph, or wrath, or satisfaction, might betray him. He finished trimming the cigar, and folded the penknife closed in his hand. —What did you do that for? he asked quietly, as he raised his face, and with it the cigar, —about the money in the account? Like you just told me in the back room . . . the money I'd already paid him like he earned it. With the last word, he bit the cigar.

—What do you think I did it for?! Valentine stared. —And what are you suddenly so . . . My God, what's come over you?

—What did you do it for?

—To slow him down a little, to make him think twice before he went on with this . . . idea of his . . . But you . . . you . . .

—And he's trying it anyways. Recktall Brown turned away. Valentine got round in front of him, and broke out again,

—What's come over you? Why you . . . and that picture you just showed, in the back room, they know something's wrong. They won't say anything, they won't even say anything to each other but they know something's wrong. You couldn't have chosen a more stupid moment. What are you trying to do, see how far you can push them?

Recktall Brown lit the cigar, and then laughed in his face. —They know something's wrong all right. Who the hell told you to paint that face on it? They loved that, didn't they?

Then a man appeared before them and said, —Merry Christmas, Brown . . . holding out a glass across the table of the Seven Deadly Sins.

—What's this? Brown said, taking it.

—I don't know. Whatever you're serving.

—Listen, you go find Fuller, and tell him to bring out some of that good brandy, the ones with the blue ribbons on.

Whoever that was, was gone.

There he stood, staring, as his vision shrank from the gold and the wealth of colors and delicate forms of Hieronymus Bosch to the mass of his own hands. As Crémer and a few others came up behind him, he stood back and made a gesture with the spatula shape of his thumb. —That's a beautiful thing, he said.

—Sar?

—What does Ds videt mean?

—Sar? breaks in upon him again.

—God sees . . . or is watching, Valentine murmurs with a sharp breath.

—Fuller?

—Sar a gentlemahn whom I do not recollect enter demandin me to open the bottles you keep so close with the blue ribbons upon them . . .

—That's right, Fuller.

—Yes sar. Fuller stands before him, finally able to move his hands, which he takes one in the other, clasped before him, and with a wrenching motion turns his sagging figure away.

—Fuller!

—Sar? Fuller startles, with a flash of gold. Recktall Brown stands looking at him, the full of his lower lip moving as though behind it the tongue is searching for something on the face of the gum. And finally, —Stand up straight, Fuller, Brown said, and turned away.

M. Crémer was finishing a conversation as they approached. —Enfin, there is so little of fine art in the world, one should not question too closely . . . ? As said Coulanges . . . pictures are bullion.

Someone had turned the radio on; but there was still enough noise in the room to keep it unnoticed. Here and there, a few guests departed.

As they came up they were, in fact, again discussing the painting they had been shown privately a little earlier; discussing, that is, not the painting itself, but the face of the central figure, as though in that portion they had found a mutually satisfactory repository for peripheral doubts. —It is done with some taste, certainly, the R.A. mumbled.

—Taste! Crémer exclaimed, smiling at Brown and Basil Valentine to include them in the hind end, at any rate, of this conversation. —Taste is one thing, and the genius to create quite another. Eh? . . . He glanced up, and stopped at the expression on Valentine's face which, whatever it might have been, was exaggerated by the swollen lip into one of extreme contempt.

And the white-haired man, who was not looking at Basil Valentine, took up agreeably, —Yes, when I was young, you know? I recall considering my work . . . as a sort of mmph . . . disciplined nostalgia for the things I umm . . . might have done. Eh? Yes. Yes . . . mmmph, he mumbled, looking down as Basil Valentine's expression turned upon him. Then he went on to break what he would later describe as an "awkward silence" with, —That face in there, don't you know . . . the face on the . . . ummph the figger in the van der Goes, the highlights round about the eyes, don't you know. Won't do, won't do at all.

—Won't do? Valentine demanded abruptly.

—Eh? Oh dear no, won't do at all. Zinc white, don't you know. Zinc white. I think you'll come upon that when you make an analysis of the pigments, don't you know.

—Zinc white?

—Oh dear, yes. An umm eighteenth-century color, don't you know.

Then (after what Crémer would later describe as un silence de mort) the older man bumbled on with, —Odd sort of fellow you had in here earlier . . . eh! Damned odd, eh? Bit of a lunatic, you might say, eh? Prancing about with mmph two suits of clothes on him, eh? I mean, you know? Rather . . . mmph. Ever seen the fellow before?

—Oh yes . . . Basil Valentine came in, his voice very level, and even and cutting. He offered a cigarette from a packet of Virginia. —Mad, of course, as you say. He drinks, you know . . .

—Oh yes, drinks, eh? Ummph . . . shouldn't be surprised.

—A morbid condition aggravated by drink, I suppose would be more to the point. He has all sorts of delusions about himself, Valentine went on, turning to Recktall Brown. —He's been quite a problem for some time, hasn't he.

—He wasn't drunk just now, when he was in here, Brown answered looking up at each of them.

—He wasn't eh? Oh dear, I shouldn't like to run on him drunk then, eh? Ho ho, hmmph . . . Oh dear no. Can't have that sort of thing.

—And if he comes back? Valentine's tone rang with a summons.

—If he comes back . . . Recktall Brown commenced, looking down before him.

—One has the police? . . . Crémer said with a shrug. —Après tout, chargé de défendre . . .

—Shouldn't hesitate a moment . . . mmph, calling them in. Might get about it right now. This sort of thing, don't you know. Can't have it, don't you know.

Basil Valentine murmured something, smiling with the slight distortion his lip compelled, and started to turn away. Recktall Brown swung on him and demanded, —Where are you going?

—If you can spare me for a moment, Basil Valentine rasped, —I thought I might put some ice on this . . . swelling. And he touched the lip with a fingertip and left them.

—My, he's a bit . . . mmph . . . rather touchy tonight. Eh? Mmhp . . . yes. We all are a bit . . . mmp . . . eh? I beg your pardon, miss. Eh?

—Is it true the British Museum has a toupee that George the Third had made for himself out of his mistresses' . . .

—I daresay . . . mmp! What was that, young woman? Ghood heavens! Ghood heavens! . . . He towered over Miss Stein for a moment and then got by her, though from the disparity in their presences and the haste he made in his escape, he might have stepped over her. —Ghood heavens . . . eh? he addressed Crémer's pinched back. —The damnedest . . . presumption. Mmmph . . . going upstairs are we, eh? Ummp. There's a pretty thing. German, I should think. Eh? Polychrome wood, fifteenth century or so. Saint John Baptist, eh? Ummp. Shame he's lost an arm here. Damn shame. He paused for a moment there on the landing, running a finger over the coarse-grained marrow of the break, and then followed the heels up the stairs before him muttering, —Eh? . . . The armor? good heavens, no one wants to look at armor . . .

Miss Stein returned to her companions to say, —Talk about how polite the English are supposed to be, he wouldn't even answer me. Just the same, I should think a thing like that would scratch. Wouldn't it? Wouldn't it?

There was a clanking sound from above, but no one turned to the balcony to see that the headpiece had been lifted from the suit of armor up there. No one, that is, except the sharply bearded sharp-eyed man at the other end of the room who, despite his attentive conversation, had been watching the activity aloft since it had begun.

The bearded young art critic was speaking in French, managing it with such urbanity, indeed, that his little friend (the one cheered on earlier as resembling an oeuf-dur-mayonnaise) told him later, with demure awe, that he had not been able to understand a word of it; no marvel of ignominy, really, for the harassed Lyonnais who was listening could not understand a word of it either, and attempted, at aspirate intervals, to swing things in his own direction with commentaries in a series of grotesque syllables which might, in Lyons, have passed for English by default.

This impressive bout drew the attention of someone who believed himself to be talking to an Egyptologist named Kuvetli, and (perhaps it was the fluttering of the plump hands over there, and the impassive mien before him) became so familiar as to draw a simile upon mimicry among the butterflies, citing, for his thesis, —The female of *Papilio cynorta*, in the Uganda . . . while over his shoulder the Egyptologist sought a face he could not locate. Basil Valentine had, all this time, been holding a cloth-covered ice cube against his upper lip, raising it now and then to look at the chipped tooth inside, and staring at his image in the mirror of the medicine cabinet.

Someone banged on the door, as someone had been doing at impatient intervals for some time, a guest apparently unable to make the stairs for he had directed them above with some irritation at the second

assault, and now he cried out, —All right, damn you. He dropped the cold pack into the sink, saw the swelling gone down somewhat, peeled up the lip for another look at the tooth and then drew it down firmly, catching his own eyes in the glass. And since the intimacies of catoptric communion were by now as strange to him as any others (he was always prepared for, and satisfied with what he saw in the glass, in those numerous but brief encounters when he hunched toward it, washing his hands, his face an established proposition, his mind busied elsewhere with still mutable concerns), he stood now reflecting his face more absorbed than that most dubious mirror-gazer of our acquaintance; and it took another attack on the door to sunder Basil Valentine from this conspiracy of chin and eyes, the straight nose and high bones which were his face. He turned, adjusting himself behind, under the ventless jacket, and before at the weighted waist, and came out, without a look in either direction until he'd arrived among people.

He took some brandy immediately, and managed to avoid a conversation on whether the names of soft drinks spelled across the sky were desecrations of the House of God; a man who said, —In dthis kenntre no ouonne toks ovv dthe ouor becose ovv krissmess? . . . and a young woman who said something about King George III which he hoped, vaguely, he had not understood aright, as he looked anxiously over the room.

—Et ce vieux moricaud . . . où se cache-t-il? . . .

—Because Mister Schmuck wants to have one made just like George the Third . . .

Valentine stopped beside a dark man who barely reached his shoulder, and before he'd noted the peaked sharkskin suit or the glazed eyes asked, —Where's Brown? Have you seen Mister Brown?

—I fear you too are at the wrong party? Perhaps . . .

Basil Valentine moved quickly. He touched another elbow, —Have you seen Brown? Mister Brown? . . .

—Men den himmelske rustning . . . hey?

Then Valentine stopped short, staring more than half the length of the room at a stout fluttering figure, plucking the point of a black beard with one hand, disposing the other in riotous gestures on the air, and for all his apparent weight, moving with admirable agility upon his toes. —Good God! Good God no!

—Say, old man, where you been hiding, eh? . . . Missing all the fun, what?

—What?

—Jolly old rascal, isn't he! sweating up there like a . . . mmp. Just came down for a bit more of this cognac, eh? Good heavens yes, have to keep up, don't you know.

—Brown's . . . up there?

Some of the guests were leaving, with over-shoulder looks of last-minute anticipation, —We'd hate to *miss* anything . . . Some had left. Some appeared rooted; and even those that continued to move did so with a buoyant vagueness, sustained on the flood of heat filling that vast room like a natural element. Thus Basil Valentine's eyes, like those in the tapestry vacant, remained attached to the capering figure with the black beard beyond simply because it moved with such mimetic extravagance: a spell which he might break in an instant, as he well knew, by summoning his gaze to the right, near the Christmas tree, where a conversation on Cheops' prophecies, or the improbability of a Fourth Dynasty mummy (—There were none, properly speaking, until the Eighteenth . . .) was most certainly taking place. So much for his unbroken gaze; for now, in like manner, he was aware of sounds from the balcony above, scraping sounds, and the slight shocks of metal against metal, an affliction momentarily worse to whose relief the habit of intervention threatened to betray him, but he stood firm, giving the R.A.'s voice the same glazed attention his eyes gave the cavorting beard beyond, waiting, glamorized, for the shock which would break the spell. Even then, lapsing voices allowed the radio to penetrate with what sounded like dissonant caterwauling. (The music was Ravel, *L'Enfant et les Sortilèges*.)

—Is he up there, you say. Good heavens yes, with all his . . . mmmp. You'd think he wanted to climb into the thing, like that Don mmpht the Spanish fellow don't you know. Nice enough thing of its kind, I spose, but I mmp . . . never been very partial to armor meself. And good heavens, eh? Hardly the sort of thing to be seen running about in these days, eh? atom bombs and all that sort of thing popping off everywhere, eh? Not much protection, I shouldn't wonder, mmpht . . . like being roasted alive in a . . . I don't know what, eh? I say, hev you gut any more of thet Virginia about you? Smoking my brand, don't you know.

Basil Valentine's hand alerted, and he took out the packet of cigarettes as he continued to stare down the room.

—Lot of odd ducks kicking about this evening, eh? Oh yes, yes, thnks vry much.

—The armor? Basil Valentine said in a low tone, listening.

—Eh? Oh yes, rather a nice suit of its kind, I daresay, Italian, round about the fifteenth century looked like to me. Odd little fellows, the Italians, eh? I mean to say, small stature, don't you know, nothing Saxon about them at all, small-boned little fellows, fine Italian hand and all that sort of thing. Some of the more . . . mmmp less decorous guests up there egging him on. A regular carnival, don't you know. Good heavens, I daresay they'd hev a devil of a time getting him into it, eh? He's hardly a mmpt Renaissance figger, eh?

The R.A. paused to light his cigarette, and then as though bound from having accepted it to the donor, who showed no inclination to move, he continued. —Not quite the . . . son métier, as that obnoxious little Frenchman says, eh? But then the French, eh? Good heavens. The French, don't you know. Can't do a thing with them. I mean to say, there's nothing I'd want to do with them, except mmmp . . . never mind, eh? Hardly go about doing that sort of thing. Good heavens, no. Not these days. He paused again, and made a clucking sound with his lips before he raised his glass there. From above came a dull thumping sound, the heels of hands on metal, forcing it down, pounding among strictures of laughter, and Basil Valentine raised his fingertips to the vein in his temple.

—Why good heavens, you'd hardly get the mmph what-do-you-call-ems down over his shoulders, the pauldrons I mean to say, eh? Made for some skinny little Italian . . . mmpht horse-soldier, don't you know. All bones, those little fellows, bones and sinews, you might say, eh? I daresay that's why it's such a delicate piece of craftsmanship, don't you know . . . all of a piece, as Dryden puts it somewhere. Good heavens yes . . . but not this suit, not this suit. A shame, too, lovely thing like that, to be mmmh . . . it's not my field, of course, so I've no right to interfere with my comments, eh? But good heavens, the feet, don't you know, a bit incongruous, having German feet wouldn't you say? I mean to say, that rather sort of delicate Italian line all the way down, and it ends up in a pair of German feet. Bear-paw type, don't you know, great wide clumsy German sort of things. Not that I'm carrying any ax to grind with the Germans, good heavens no. Much healthier heving a neighbor you can break out and hev a bit of a war with now and then, eh? Settle your differences right out in the open, eh? Instead of putting up with the mmpht absurd posturing of the French year after year, eh? What's the matter? . . .

Basil Valentine had startled suddenly, as the cigarette between his fingers burned down to meet the skin. He looked round at his interlocutor, as though fully aware of him there for the first time.

—Eh? You all right? I was just about to say . . . what the devil do you spose they're doing up there? . . . The sounds of metal on metal had become more noticeable, an irregular and subdued clatter; still Basil Valentine did not move to go. —Eh? You don't think that . . . good heavens no, why they couldn't even get the mmph what-do-you-call-ems over his calves, over his ankles, don't you know . . . the greaves I mean to say. Not my field, not my field at all. Though I did write a paper once, some occasion, what the devil was it . . . when I was studying, I suppose, eh? Some time ago, don't you know, though one doesn't just stop being a scholar, eh? like putting off Eton collars, eh? Good heavens no. Now that paper, what the devil was it . . . mmmpht. Oh yes yes yes . . . I was younger of course, it may sound a bit naive now, don't you know, but it was a rather original bit of thinking, I was told so at the time, at any rate, rather fresh approach, don't you know . . . but damn me if I can remember what it was . . .

And now, though very few faces turned to one side or the other, or up, to show they had noticed it, came the distraction of an even and metallic tread from above, and Basil Valentine turned his head slowly left, though he did not raise his face.

—Pfooo, the R.A. went over his glass, —yes, yes, here it is. The devil, wearing false calves, do you recall? Mephistopheles, don't you know, in mffft that ponderous thing by Goethe. Good heavens yes, wearing false calves, don't you know, to cover his cloven feet and his mphhht calves, yes. Well my thesis, don't you see, was that these things weren't simply a disguise, to fool people and all that sort of thing, but that some sort of mffft . . . aesthetic need you might say, some sort of nostalgia for beauty, don't you see, he being a fallen angel and all that sort of thing, rather . . . unpleasantly different in his mphhht appearance from mphhht . . . The white-haired gentleman stopped, looking at Basil Valentine square for the first time and, apparently for the first time, realizing that Valentine was not listening to a word he said. —Mphhht . . . a long time ago all that, eh? There, that's rather a nasty place you've got on your lip, eh? Going up like a balloon, eh? Good heavens . . .

Then, as Basil Valentine raised his hand to touch the broken swelling, his arm was pulled down.

—Ghood heavens! Ghood heavens! Ghood heavens! . . . D'you see? Here's your lunatic come back again. Eh? Do you see him there by the foot of the stairs? . . . looks like he's ready to . . . good heaven knows what . . . go up in flames, eh? Won't do, won't do at all . . . can't hev this sort of thing, invading a private gathering, eh? A man's home is his mphht what-d'you-call-it, don't you know, eh? Popping in here from nowhere in that sort of a get-up, good heavens no, no reason at all to run around in two suits of clothing, none that I recall at this moment at any rate, don't you mpphhht . . . I say, my dear fellow do be a bit more careful, you're spilling your drink all over me . . .

The member of the Royal Academy stepped back, brushing cognac from his sleeve, and spilling what was in his own glass as he did so; and his immediate vicinity quieted somewhat, there under the balcony and round the foot of the stairs, as he stopped speaking. Then a number of people stopped talking, others to talk more loudly, some to turn their attention, and some their backs, on this diverting visitor who stood looking feverishly round, holding up a handful of charred wood, whispering, —Where is he? . . . where is he? . . .

Basil Valentine had stepped back. His finger remained at his lip, and he pressed it; suddenly aware of acute pain there, he pressed harder, and blood reached his tongue.

—Brown!

That end of the room silenced. Several people stepped away from the foot of the stairs, and the figure standing there, looking among them. Some of them looked up, to the shuffling sound of metal on metal. He saw them looking there, and turned himself; but there was nothing to see but the bend of the stairs, and the polychromed wood figure exposing the coarse-grained scar of the arm amputated in benediction.

Out in the room, voices continued. Flames moved unhurriedly up over a black wild cherry log in the fireplace. Muffled caterwauling came from the radio.

—Brown!

The panoplied figure reached the landing in one fall, taking a long time, so it seemed afterward to those who saw it happen; and making a good deal less of noise than they might have expected, hitting head-on at the turn, attacked by shadows leaping to meet it, withdrawing as it dropped away from the wall and hung, for a moment when the whole room silenced and all the eyes were brought into one equation, the quick eyes stilled, and the still eyes of the wart hog, the face in the youthful portrait, the blind eyes of Valerian stretched on his rack and the all-seeing eyes of the pale underclothed figure in the middle of the low table, those and the eyes in the tapestry, turned in the other direction, alerted.

—There, of course, I disagree with Dante, came on a voice from the far end, restoring the unconscious balance, rescuing what was alive from what was not; and enough voices to deliver one another from the isolation of separate identity took up and spread in a slow wave toward the broken weight poised on the edge of the landing, whose clinging shadows leaped away as it moved, and repeated their concerted attacks as it fell from one step to another, stifling it in their last embrace at the bottom.

—Good heavens! . . . they've knocked the thing down the stairs, d'you see? Heavier than one might have thought, eh? The white-haired gentleman approached. —Good heavens, I . . . daresay . . . there's someone in it.

Behind him, Basil Valentine crossed himself quickly with the third finger of his right hand; then touched the bend of his forefinger to his lips as he approached.

Clattering down the stairs in his grotesque shoes, which looked like they'd been built especially for participation in some sport, possibly one on snow, or in marshland, or some such sodden surface, that grimpen, perhaps, where is no secure foothold, came M. Crémer, to plant those remarkably equipped feet among the Aubusson roses, and hold forth the broad-bowed thick-lensed glasses which his host had left behind. He was talking at a great rate, and in his own tongue, so no one stopped, him, and no one paid him any attention.

Behind him, a tall unexaggerated man stood on the step holding a damp double-breasted suit coat; and there were others, crowding between this one and the polychrome amputee, as wide-open eyed, and as silent, a reticent concord which might have been mistaken for reverence but for the immoderate curiosity which had shone in the eyes of Saint John Baptist ever since he had first been put out in the weather some centuries before.

Then the tall woman reached up to catch a naked earlobe, and cry, —Oh! . . . I've lost my baby's breath . . . a line which did attract some attention.

Resounding in the regions beyond the staircase, the crash had straightened Fuller up on his kitchen stool forthwith. It was a minute before he could get out, for the dog wanted to get out too. It commenced to trot up and down the room, nervously sensing something amiss with that intuition which Fuller knew all too well, and seeing it active now, became the more alarmed. As the dog scratched at the door leading to the hall and the great room, Fuller slipped out another, up the kitchen stairs to the second-floor halls, round to the balcony and out slowly to the front stairs, where he paused at the newel and looked back, abruptly aware of a vacancy. Then his eye caught the cigar, half-smoked and gone out but not before it had burned a long scar on the rosewood chest. He picked it up, licked his thumb and rubbed the burnt place but it did no good: and at that moment, from the corner of his eye he realized what was missing at the end of the balcony, and carrying the half-smoked cigar he got to the stairs and almost fell in his hurry to get down them.

—Les pieds, voyez vous, les pieds de cette armure, il a trébuché vous savez . . . M. Crémer harangued his audience, so effectively that it grew moment by moment, as he waved the broad-bowed glasses in the air, and pointed with his other hand to the footpieces of the armor, —Et sans les lunettes alors . . . Les pieds? les pieds, voyez vous? des Boches, pas vrai? Voyez vous quelle gaucherie allemande . . .

—Good heavens, said the R.A. somewhere in the shadows there under the balcony, —all well and good he tripped over his feet because they were German, don't you know, but how did he get into the damned thing to begin with? eh? eh? he demanded of no one.

Of all the figures gathered there beneath him, Fuller knew only two, meeting now over the headpiece where Basil Valentine knelt on one side to put forth a hand and withdraw it as quick, for the throat was covered with blood running from a corner of the mouth, though that was all of the face that could be seen, the throat, and the heavy chin, and a sagging corner of the small mouth. What had happened was, that in the fall one of the hooks which held the beaver in place had come undone; perhaps it was not fastened properly at the outset, or possibly it had not been fastened at all. And so the beaver of the helmet was knocked askew, and the visor above jammed even more tightly closed, as the figure still kneeling there when Valentine withdrew found out, trying desperately all of a sudden to get the thing open.

Fuller stared at Basil Valentine, down on one knee, the hand he'd pulled back from the unbroken throat resting now on the taces, those plates meant to afford a loose protection round the thighs where they clung now full and rigidly distended. The breastplate and the backplate had not been drawn together, though they were as tight as they could be, their gaps bulging with mounds of white shirting and a split side of the blue vest from which somehow the penknife had escaped, and lay there on the floor at Valentine's foot. And one of the greaves had come half off too, and the broad footpiece with it, exposing a small foot splayed in a silk sock, where the wrinkled white line of the clock on the black silk ridiculed the thickness of the ankle it covered, and it was there that Basil Valentine thrust two fingertips, waited a moment, shifted them and thrust them harder, behind the tendon there, waited again and withdrew them to figure a cross quickly at his chest as he stood away, taking a step back which Fuller repeated on the landing above; though both of them now were watching the figure still kneeling at the head, and both of them were in retreat, Fuller clutching the half-smoked cigar, up the stairs, down the hall, and Valentine stepping backward, slowly at first, when he started to speak. Waving the charred fragments before him, he took a step over the head and stood above it.

—Wait! Wait! he cried. —Wait!

The sound of this voice again, and the sight of him, worked on them immediately. The pool around him emptied, and no sooner did it flood from the rest of the room than it emptied again, the fraud of what had seethed for so long there as undersea discovered as the stopper of the tank was pulled and they poured out in a continuous stream, while he stood over the broken hulk shouting them on, —Wait! Listen! Wait!

Basil Valentine still clung in the shadows, watching him.

—Like me to stick around for a bit, old man? Anything I can mphht do d'you spose, eh? Before the mmmp who-do-you-call-ems come, eh? The R.A. stood at his elbow.

M. Crémer, on the other hand, was suddenly in a great hurry, but found time to say, —Il faut que je parte, je viens de me rappeler d'une . . . heh heh assignation vous savez, mais le Memlinc, voyez vous, le Memlinc, je veux l'acheter vous savez . . .

—Blasted little . . . mphht. Good heavens, eh? Probably willing to go as high as two and six at that . . .

—A n'importe quel prix, vous savez . . . Crémer cast back, being swept away now.

—Good heavens! the R.A. said, still at Valentine's elbow, —begins to sound like he might go to three shillings. I say, if there's nothing more I can do here but confuse things, don't you know, I mphht get on my way I spose . . . You seem to be in pretty close touch with this . . . mphht our host laid out here, eh? Ring me up tomorrow, let me know what hospital they stick him in, eh? There's a good fellow. Like to send along some flowers, don't you know. And that mppht van der Goes canvas in there . . . mphht like to mpht come to some terms, eh? Yes, well ghood night, eh? Ghood night . . . goo night, goo night, goo night . . .

A number of people, in fact, suddenly recalled other engagements and hurried off to fill them. Though the tall woman, as she described it to her husband next morning, simply led him off "as meek as Moses"; the bearded young art reviewer paddled away on a crest of enchantment, already repeating the story to people who had not been here to enjoy it, squeezing the hot little hand folded deep in his own; and the sharkskinned Argentine, his black hair high in a dorsal fin cutting the spray around him, fled murmuring —I was not warned about this sort of thing in New York . . . turning his glassy eyes for a last look at the bold spectacle on the floor, thankful, at least, that he was not, like M. Crémer, being hindered from leaving by the figure looming over it.

—Attention? eh? qu'est-ce que tu veux, alors! va donc . . . laisse moi passer . . .

—Yes, yes, yes . . . Crémer, yes. Yes, damn you. De l'argent, vous savez, damn you, il faut toujours en avoir sur soi . . .

—Eh bien, tu es fou, eh?

—Now listen, listen . . . the tone changed abruptly, —you've got to listen to me . . .

As the grip relaxed, Crémer wrenched away, brushing his neatly creased sleeve as he made for the door. There was some confusion at the large closet there, turned for this evening into a cloakroom; but M. Crémer emerged in short order wearing a voluminous camel's hair coat, enough sizes too big for him so that he considered it a perfect fit, and a Hollywood label inside, as he discovered a block or so away.

While here and there, inside the great room, eyes vaguely approaching the door were still caught by the eyes of the youthful portrait hung there, and turned away with such unconscious abruptness that they usually fled back to the broken thing on the floor for confirmation, and as quick there to avoid the half-face found refuge in the gauntleted hand flung out, its delicate lines palm up and open, and looked back to the portrait for denial.

The squat procession passed by, the third-in-line murmuring with the subdued reverence of a tourist speaking of something quite other than the hideous sarcophagus which he pretends to his guide he's come three thousand miles to see, —Tchikovsky you can almost take straight, but what can you do with Bach? . . . the second-in-line considering lighting, camera-angles, and the over-all general effect of the heavy figure in perfect grace despite its distension hurled down among roses, serving not contradiction but complement for the lighter one mounting over it, grown out of it and rising continuously in the tension of growth . . . distinct close-up possibilities there, the thin empty hand in a shape of its own ascending in wild emergency and the eyes the same . . . while their leader himself confirmed, —We oughda get ouda here . . . bad publicidy . . . And they advanced, suddenly remarkable for the fact that they all appeared a good half-head shorter than everyone else, except for the last of them, who, with a forehead, might have stood a half-head taller. They found the cloakroom and, considering their numbers, came out rather badly.

The R.A., who had resolutely sought the exit down near the Christmas tree for reasons buried near three-quarters of a century in his, or Sir Walter Scott's past (he had trouble distinguishing them), came forth over the empty field.

—Here now, don't you know!

—No listen, listen . . . you've got to listen to me, you've got to . . . to . . . wait . . . wait . . .

—Ghood heavens, my dear boy, I don't hev to wait for ennathing . . . here here now, turn loose, eh? You can't mphhht don't you know, eh? What the devil do you think I am, a mphhht . . . ?

—No wait, if you'll listen, if you'll . . . listen to me.

—Here now, there's a good fellow, turn loose, eh? And mphht stop waving thet dirty hendful of mphhht whatever-it-is in my face, don't you know . . .

—Listen . . . Wait . . .

—Here now, my dear boy . . . The R.A. turned himself loose, but stood there a moment longer, —Nice hot bath, eh? Nice hot bath and a good night's sleep, eh? Thet'll straighten you up, eh? Ghood heavens yes, don't you know . . . And he got off quite nimbly, and spent hardly a moment in the cloakroom, for his threadbare tweed coat was one of the few garments left, and he would never have considered making off with the trenchcoat which hung beside it. So he was quite quickly out on the street, in a swank neighborhood, he noticed, for there was nothing in the refuse bins but empty bottles, and the elegantly long white boxes of florists.

The last stare Basil Valentine had matched, as he stepped back, one step, and another, startled him only because he had for so long been staring down the room at its counterpart the yellowed mimosa, and here his arm was taken in a tight hold, and —Come away, this is not a good place to stay now.

Valentine pulled away. —You . . . go on, eh? Go on. I'll be in touch with you tomorrow.

—But you . . . are too nervous now, you are not well, this is not a good time to leave you . . . alone?

—Alone? Go on. You go on, will you? . . . After a pause, in which Basil Valentine's face rehearsed every muscle the other restrained, he said, —What do you know about this? What do you know about . . . me? . . .

—Perhaps as much as you know about me. Yes. And the gun, now. You have no reason for it?

—Yes, I . . . leave it with me, I . . . I'll be in touch with you in the morning. Basil Valentine turned away, into the dark hall, and into the bathroom, where he locked the door.

He stood still on the tile floor, and he heard Fuller on the kitchen stairs. Then he went to the mirror, and stared at what he saw there. The swollen lip twitched, and he drew it into a smile. Then he raised a finger and pressed it, and looked into the eyes for as long as he could, and then to the soft shine of the gold signet ring. The weight at his waist was heavy as he thought what it was, and took the gun out and laid it on a hamper. Then he took off his jacket, and with a good deal of unfastening of buttons and buckles, and stretching of elastic, undid himself, and sat to a weak hypospadial stream. He stood, and saw bubbles on the surface he'd discolored, bubbles drawing into the features of a face. He flushed it, and swung on the mirror again, doing himself up (and that was the detail, the totally irrelevant detail, the floating face, which he remembered long afterward).

From the closed kitchen came the whine of the dog as Valentine emerged; and from the great living room, broken strains of music, as he approached, and stopped in shadow, watching, and licking his lip, and, as the voice came, listening.

—Yes, your daughters all were fair, and . . . your daughters all were fair, but the youngest . . . here, I

didn't know you had a radio here? music here?

Basil Valentine first looked to the foot of the stairs, there saw nothing but the still caparisoned bulk. Then he saw the figure at the far wall, as still as everything else in the room, and his back turned on it, tuning the radio, stopping methodically along the stream that poured from it, bursts of brackish laughter, shreds of music, the human voice in aggressive counterfeit, lowered in counsel, raised in song, sincere in extolling absurdities, absurd parading devotion up and down the scale: a vapid tenor, widely known and loved, wound *Silent Night* round his throat, and strangled on it, into the brackish laughter again, and then from the north Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis* emerged, commenced to fill the place, and was gone into jazz, *When the Saints Go Marching In*. He left it at that, turned his back on it and walked vaguely across the room, empty-handed now. —You and I . . . he said approaching the foot of the stairs, —You and I . . . you were so damned familiar . . .

There, he went down on one knee, and tried to open the visor again but gave that up after a moment, and raised his hand to look at the blood he'd got on it. Then he looked back at the figure before him, and said quietly, breathing sharp in what sounded like a laugh, —Il sangue? ti soffoca il sangue? O yes, ecco un artista . . . Good God . . . Then he looked the figure up and down, and went off balance toward the feet, where he seized the exposed ankle and worked his fingers there seeking a pulse. —Yes, there's where they nailed the wren, there's where they nailed up . . . He pulled himself back to his knees again, staring suddenly feverishly at the chin and throat, his weight resting in a hand on the breastplate, where he turned his eyes and pushed it with the heel of his hand and all the weight he could give it. It sank a little, and came up again, and he rested there until his eyes caught the penknife on the rug across, and he reached over to pick that up and open it as he stood. —Yes . . . what chance had you, when hierophants conspired? . . . Then he walked away. —Good God, he said, wandering off toward the pulpit bar opening and closing the penknife blade in his hands, and the music continued, —I willingly fastened a tail to my back, and drank what you gave me, but damn it, there . . . He stopped and poured brandy into a glass, and with it turned and looked around the room. Then he put the glass down again without raising it to his mouth and took three steps, gone for a minute beyond the pulpit bar and out of sight for Basil Valentine who stood where he had stopped, tingling the tip of his tongue on the broken tooth and aware of a warm dampness filling the crotch of his trousers. A full minute of this, and Valentine prepared to step out, but put a foot back instead of forward as the figure emerged again, tucking something in an inside pocket, and, it sounded like whistling a broken delayed alto to the music, which he broke off with, —Oh yes, "I'll scratch you a bit till you see awry . . . But all that you see will seem fine and brave . . ."

Then he came rushing across the carpet toward the thing on the floor there crying, —Get up! Get up! When he reached it he stood over it, the penknife closed and gone inside one hand with the other closed round it, quivering, like his voice now, —Good God, you've . . . left me in midair, it's as though the . . . bottom has dropped out of time itself. Then he went to his knees and tore frantically at the visor trying to raise it. Finally he stopped, looking exhausted, staring down, and his hand still on the projecting chin. —What now? . . . good God, what now? You and I . . . you and I, you . . . were so damned familiar. He stared a moment longer, and then as he whispered —What a luxury you were! . . . and flung his face down bringing both hands in round the headpiece, Basil Valentine stepped forth and reached him very quickly. He lay there shaking.

—Here now . . . you know, Valentine said standing over him, surprised at the tremor in his own voice, and even more at the calm expression of the face raised to him. So they were silent, until Basil Valentine shifted half a step back and said, —You might . . . go in and wash, you know. You got . . . blood all over one side of your face just then . . . you know. At that Valentine stopped, unable to keep the tip of his tongue from the broken tooth, and more aware than he was of this face before him of the face he had left in the mirror minutes before as that image's smile returned, and he felt it distorting the lips in betrayal of the emotion he did not feel, as he summoned his voice and said, —My dear fellow . . . you're weeping, aren't you.

Still nothing moved.

—Come along now, my dear fellow, straighten up. It's a shock, but . . .

—Who are you? . . .

Basil Valentine stepped forward again, almost kicked the headpiece. —Now listen to me, he said firm for the first time, —there's been enough of all this . . . business. He sounded impatient. —Don't you think it's time to . . . wash up, and get into some fresh clothes, get a fresh start? Because all this . . . all this . . . Valentine raised his foot, and jarred the headpiece with his toe, at which the other stood up quickly and turned away, leaving the penknife dropped on the carpet where he'd knelt.

—After all, now, Valentine said to his back, —there will be some changes, won't there, without . . . now that there are just the two of us.

—I've got a headache, a . . . I've got a rotten headache. He stopped in the middle of the room, and Valentine came up on him where he stood pressing his forehead in his hands.

—I should think you might, you know. Basil Valentine put a hand gently on his shoulder, but he drew away quickly. Valentine stepped back. —And I suppose we should . . . call the police, you know, he said, licking his lip.

—They'll probably be here any minute.

—How do you mean?

—Where do you think I've been all this time? Good God, what do you think kept me from getting right back here before this . . . this . . . He shook a hand out at the scene behind them. —After I'd broken your door down, and was coming out . . .

—You broke my door down?

—Where the . . . what do you think those . . . pieces of . . . dirty . . . burnt wood, that . . . what do you think that is? I knew what it was, when I got in and saw the . . . saw something smoking in your grate, I knew what it was, I knew what you'd done, damn you . . . I knew what you'd done.

—Now listen to me, what is all this? The police are in my flat?

—I don't know, I don't know, I don't know where the police are. I know that two of them were taking me somewhere afterwards and I got away from them . . . and came here. How should I know where the police are? Why should I . . . care where the police are.

Basil Valentine had gone pale in the face; and now he touched his lower lip, tapped it with a fingertip. Then he looked up and said calmly, —There was really no reason for you to do a thing like that, you know. I . . . I've been trying to get hold of you since . . . yesterday morning, when you left me in the park there so . . . precipitously.

—You have! Then who did you think it was ringing your bell an hour or two ago?

—I've been out . . . for some time, Basil Valentine answered. —I've even been down to Horatio Street, you know, looking for you.

—You have! And what did you find there?

—No one at home, my dear fellow, obviously.

—No one at home! Yes, that's good . . . No one at home! Do you know what happened down there? Do you know what had happened when I went back down yesterday? It had burned. The whole place had burned, the whole building. It must have been that . . . I left some things burning there, in that fireplace, and there was oil and everything spilled everywhere, and something must have . . . the oil must have . . . Good God I don't know, but it's gone.

Basil Valentine had backed to the pulpit bar, where he leaned watching. —That painting you were working on too, eh? he said after a moment. —The last one, the one I liked as it was, eh?

—What? The face turned to him in confusion from the abstract emptiness it had fallen into, staring down at the carpet.

—That *Stabat Mater?*

—What, she?

—Burned too?

—Good God! Good God! She wasn't . . . she . . .

—Here, my dear fellow, Basil Valentine said coming at him again. —Get hold of yourself, get hold of yourself. This time he did take both shoulders in his hands, to say, —We're both upset, there's no sense in all this now, and it's no time to try to talk rationally about it. If the place is burned, it's burned, and anything in it . . .

—Oh yes, and the griffin's egg, that was there! Oh, that griffin's egg, damn it. That's why I went down there, to get it so I could . . . Then he stopped and pulled from Valentine's hands again. —This last picture, he said, —the van der Goes, where is it?

—My dear fellow . . .

—Where is it?

—Come back here . . . listen . . .

—Oh yes, it's in his privy chamber, isn't it. That's where he kept things like that, isn't it? Yes, in the genizah?

—Come here, listen . . . And at that moment Basil Valentine's eye caught the painting behind him, just beyond the pulpit bar. —What's this! What's happened here?

—That . . .

—Here, stop that laughter . . . this, did you do this? Valentine stood running a finger over the hole, where the figure of the Emperor Valerian stretched on his rack had been cut neatly out.

—I? Good God no. Crémer, Monsieur Crémer, vous savez . . .

—Stop that damned laughter . . .

—Ah oui, qu'il voulait un souvenir, vous savez, un tout petit souvenir de sa vieille connaissance du monde des truqueurs . . .

Valentine didn't answer, staring at the damage under his hand. He ran his finger along the edge where it was cut, as his tongue ran over his broken tooth, though he stopped that as he turned, to catch his lower lip under the broken place.

—Bleu de Prusse, alors, ça ne fait rien vous savez, le ciel en bleu de Prusse, retouché simplement vous savez . . . the work of some incompetent restorer, un restaurateur vous savez . . .

—Come here! Yes, and now you want to damage that . . . van der Goes the same way . . . come here!

—For the same reason, vous savez . . .

—Come here! But Basil Valentine followed him to the panel door; and stood behind him as he stared at the painting hung inside.

—That face, that . . . Good God, that face, where did it come from?

—The face? Valentine watched him, with hardly a look at the painting, —and . . . what do you think of it? . . .

—Think of it! Think of it? Good God, I . . . I can't think of it, look at it, it's . . .

—You don't care for it, eh? Valentine withdrew a step, and back outside the door. —You think it's bad, eh?

—Bad? No. No, it's not bad, it's funny. It's funny, do you know what I mean? he demanded turning on Basil Valentine. —It's funny, it's . . . vulgar, he said holding a hand up between them.

—But you . . . stop, my dear fellow, stop that laughing and come out.

—That's why it's funny, because it's vulgar, do you see?

—Damn it, come out of there.

He came out, and followed Basil Valentine across the room laughing. —Oh, and they . . . said I dishonored death! Did you see that face? Then he stopped. —Where did it come from?

—My dear fellow . . .

—No, tell me, who painted that face, tell me.

Basil Valentine stood taking a cigarette out, which he hung under the swollen lip. —Your benefactor there did it, he said, and motioned away.

—*He* did it? *He?*

—What do you think all this . . . foolishness about climbing into a suit of armor was, this . . .

—Oh no! No! No! The same thing, yes, oh yes, the same thing he wanted, but the only way he knew, but *you . . . you . . .*

Basil Valentine tasted blood. The cigarette paper had torn his lip again. He stood backed against the pulpit. But he could not turn away as he had in the lion house: for these were the same eyes on him, the same movements the lioness made, approaching, the head hung, one foot crossed over the other in a bound, and the eyes again on him in another approach, and no bars between them. The broken smile on Valentine's face yielded its weak incipience as he tried to draw his lips tight against a feeble sound that escaped them, initiating defense, or some proposal. Then he straightened up, a step from the pulpit. The threatening shadows had stilled, the figure retreated across the room to stand over the low table in the dull glow of the fireplace. —And you were the boy! Valentine said in a tone gone almost childish with recrimination. —The boy in your story? whose father owned the original? The boy who copied it, and stole the original, and sold it, for "almost nothing" to . . . him.

—To him! How did I know, I didn't know who bought it, I just sold it. The original! I thought . . . do you know what it was like, coming in here years later with him, and seeing it here? Waiting, seeing it here waiting for me? waiting to burn this brand of final commitment, as though, all those years, as though it was what I thought, instead of . . . a child could tell, even in this light . . .

—Perhaps you were right all the time, Valentine said quietly, coming closer.

—But this is a copy!

—Of course it is. When the old count sold his collection in secret, this was one of the copies he had made.

—And, the original? all this time . . . ?

—All this time, the original has been right where this one is now. Basil Valentine stood very near him by the table. —Of course it was the original here for so long, the one you sold him. And this, I picked this one up in Rome myself scarcely a year ago. Do you recall when we first met? right here, across the table? Of course that was the original. I said it was a copy simply to hear you defend it. I knew Brown would trust your judgment. And I knew Brown would be troubled enough to have it gone over again, by "experts." I brought the idea into his mind simply to let him kill it himself, so that once I'd exchanged the two, no matter who called this a copy, he'd simply laugh at them. He'd just made absolutely certain, hadn't he? And

the original? It's on its way back to Europe where it belongs. I exchanged them quite recently. Do you think he knew the difference? And Valentine laughed, a sound of disdain severed by a gasp of pain at the shock in his lip.

—Yes, thank God! The figure across the table stood illumined at its edges with the steady glow of the fire. —Thank God there was the gold to forge!

Valentine smiled his broken smile, coming closer, as the other retreated a step up the room.

—And you wanted me to copy the Patinir, so you could steal it, so you could steal it from him too.

—Steal! Look at him, look at him over there. Steal from him? Look at . . . his hand on the carpet, Valentine shuddered. —Like a fat soft toad on the carpet, the ugly venomous toad with the precious jewel in its head, look at it. Hands like that, on these beautiful things? Then drawing his hands together before him as though in protection, Valentine's wrist pressed the weight at his waist. He stepped forward suddenly, keeping his arm there, and said, —Listen . . .

—Good God!

—It's all different, Valentine said, —it's different now, now that you and I are . . . alone.

—You . . . what do you want of me?

—And you! what do you want? Basil Valentine burst out, advancing again as this figure before him moved backwards up the room, not unsteady, but from side to side, back toward the staircase and the hulk flung at its foot. —Yes, your by all that's ugly! And you, handling you like a jewel, he went on, his voice rising. —You and your work, your precious work, your precious van der Goes, your precious van Eyck, your precious not van Eyck but what I want! And your precious Chancellor Rolin, look at him there, look at him. Yes, why didn't you paint him into a Virgin and Child and Donor? Do you think it's any different now? That that fat-faced Chancellor Rolin wasn't just like him? Yes, swear to me by all that's ugly! Valentine hissed, and got breath. —Vulgarity, cupidity, and power. Is that what frightens you? Is that all you see around you, and you think it was different then? Flanders in the fifteenth century, do you think it was all like the Adoration of the Mystic Lamb? What about the paintings we've never seen? the trash that's disappeared? Just because we have a few masterpieces left, do you think they were all masterpieces? What about the pictures we've never seen, and never will see? that were as bad as anything that's ever been done. And your precious van Eyck, do you think he didn't live up to his neck in a loud vulgar court? In a world where everything was done for the same reasons everything's done now? for vanity and avarice and lust? and the boundless egoism of these Chancellor Rolins? Do you think they knew the difference between what was bizarre and what was beautiful? that their vulgar ostentation didn't stifle beauty everywhere, everywhere? the way it's doing today? Yes, damn it, listen to me now, and swear by all that's ugly! Do you think any painter did anything but hire himself out? These fine altarpieces, do you think they glorified anyone but the vulgar men who commissioned them? Do you think a van Eyck didn't curse having to whore away his genius, to waste his talents on all sorts of vulgar celebrations, at the mercy of people he hated?

Blood flowed over his broken tooth. He'd turned away, but swung about again unable to stop. —Yes, I remember your little talk, your insane upside-down apology for these pictures, every figure and every object with its own presence, its own consciousness because it was being looked at by God! Do you know what it was? What it really was? that everything was so afraid, so uncertain God saw it, that it insisted its vanity on His eyes? Fear, fear, pessimism and fear and depression everywhere, the way it is today, that's why your pictures are so cluttered with detail, this terror of emptiness, this absolute terror of space. Because maybe God isn't watching. Maybe he doesn't see. Oh, this pious cult of the Middle Ages! Being looked at by God! Is there a moment of faith in any of their work, in one centimeter of canvas? or is it vanity and fear, the same decadence that surrounds us now. A profound mistrust in God, and they need every idea out where they can see it, where they can get their hands on it. Your . . . detail, he commenced to falter a little, —your Bouts, was there ever a worse bourgeois than your Dierick Bouts? and his damned details? Talk to me of separate consciousness, being looked at by God, and then swear by all that's ugly! Talk to me about your precious van Eycks, and be proud to be as wrong as they were, as wrong as everyone around them was, as wrong as he was. And Basil Valentine flung out a hand to the broken hulk on the floor, toward which he backed the retreating figure before him. —Separation, he said in a voice near a whisper, —all of it cluttered with separation, everything in its own vain shell, everything separate, withdrawn from everything else. Being looked at by God! Is there separation in God? Valentine finished, and held out his hand again, but more slowly, less steady, to withdraw it immediately the two retreating before him came up, breaking the surface as the voice broke the silence he left.

—And that van der Goes? Who put the face on it? Who couldn't stand that emptiness? Who had to see it with his hands, then! Yes, what are you telling me all this for . . . you . . .

—Look out! Valentine spoke too late, and stopped still as the figure before him tripped over a gauntlet and was down to his knees again beside the shape on the carpet between them. Standing over it, Valentine

said quietly, —Because, my dear fellow, you and I . . .

—You and I what! You and I what!

—Because finally, you and I are together. And now . . . here! what are you doing? What are you trying to do? He got no answer but what he saw, the hands straining again at the visor, blood spilled out on the rose beneath that gross chin and the back of a hand against the bloodied uneven teeth, and the hoarse whispered, —Damn it . . . damn it . . .

—Here now, leave . . . leave all that alone.

—His eyes, I see his eyes shining through this . . . thing. Do you see them? Do you see them?

—Stop it now, stop it . . .

The visor came open. And they both drew breath suddenly, as though they had even now expected to see the youthful face of a Mantuan noble, and had been tricked, and were mocked, by this heavy forehead still wet, and the sharp protruding eyes in a stare unbroken by the quick interruptions of life.

Basil Valentine again made a cross on his chest, caught, now, his upper lip under whole teeth until it bled again, stepped back with a wave of the damp heat from his crotch rising, saw his own hand glittering with a shock of gold out before him, and below there a hand on the lower jaw, a thumb lapped over the bloody uneven teeth, and the other hand wiping the sweat away from the forehead.

—And now . . . Valentine said.

The moving hand stopped, and the eyes turned up to him.

—This man . . .

Valentine hung there over him, —What? . . .

—This man is your father.

Basil Valentine stepped back, his weight on one foot; and the other foot he put out, slowly, until it reached the headpiece. —You are mad, aren't you . . . and with his toe he kicked the visor shut, and held his foot there.

The visor was jammed closed on the thumb which had opened it, jammed tight, as Valentine saw, crushing the white length between the joints, and Valentine moved nothing but his eyes, up, to the living eyes which burned green upon him. —But you and I, now, you and I . . .

The green eyes did not move, and Valentine withdrew slowly, withdrew his foot from the visor whose edge moved no more than the still thumb recovering its shape forced, for the thumb itself stayed.

—You know . . . Valentine said, getting his weight on both feet now, —all of this . . . He made a faint gesture over the room. —You and I . . . Then he watched the thumb withdrawn from the broken mouth, and that hand trailing a streak of watered blood down the breastplate. —You and I . . . listen. Listen . . . Valentine tried to smile; and was as instantly aware of the image he had left in the mirror returned to mock the cold lines of this face which he had learned so well to use and trust. —Listen . . . he said, watching the hand search between roses, and stop fingertips on the penknife, —Listen to me. You and I now, it won't be . . . the kind of thing that . . . it won't be vulgar . . . it won't be vulgar, he repeated with half a step back, watching the other hand come away from the half-opened visor, and as he saw the hands join on the penknife his own reached toward his waist but it hung at the weight there, —Because you're . . . part of me . . . damn you, damn you, damn you, he cried throwing both hands up before his face as the short blade stabbed him once, and again, and again, driven each time at the top of his chest, and he lost his balance and hit his head against the newel and went down.

A cry, or a yelp was it? came from the kitchen. And there Fuller walked over to the sink, none too steady, and washed his hands. Then he washed the butcher knife and dried it on a hand towel, dropped the towel in a hamper and put the butcher knife in the rack where it belonged, and then picked up the two cardboard suitcases which he'd been all this time tying closed. He turned off the kitchen light by stooping and catching the switch with his shoulder, and emerged into the great room with a bag in each hand.

—You, sar!

—Fuller! . . . I . . .

—But what occur sar? The bags in Fuller's hands sank to the floor. —And Mister Valentine, sar?

—Yes, yes I . . . I've just taught him the lesson . . . the only lesson the gods can teach, yes . . .

—But you, sar, you unharmed?

—I? Good God yes, I . . . I'm as free as the day I was born. Here! Here! . . . don't go near there, don't touch him.

—But maybe Mister Valentine in danger of recoverin, sar.

—But . . . no, don't touch him. You never know what they may . . . have in their hair. Then he laughed. —And you, Fuller? taking a vacation, Fuller?

—Yes sar. Where I belong to be, sar, after all the years of bondage. Then Fuller straightened up from the bags he'd returned to, saying, —Something enter my mind. He went over to a cabinet and took out a large

flat cedar box. He opened it, passed a hand in, held it up and smelled its contents, and closed it again. When Fuller came back across that carpet, avoiding stepping on the roses, it was with an expression of guilty satisfaction. But he stopped to look up and say —What is it, sar? Fuller got no immediate answer, and stood watching him force the taces aside over the heavy buttocks, to get a hand into a trouser pocket and come out with some bills in a wet wad. Then he bent over the hand flung out there at his feet. Fuller by now was beside him, and they both stared at the diamonds embedded in the flesh of the finger.

—Sar . . . Fuller hesitated, —I believe by now the diamonds grow there, and to my eyes have lost their luster. Then he turned his face against his will to that staring up at him from the carpet.

—So the eyes, he said, and broke this hold for the last time, —the eyes look like that black dog one day havin the temperature taken.

—Good God!

—Sar? Fuller looked up, to see him pull open the dinner jacket and tug at the waist. The pistol fell out on the carpet, and he stood there wiping a hand across his forehead before he reached in and got the wallet, picked up the pistol, and put both into his pockets.

Fuller went back to his suitcases. —Seem I goin to enjoy the legacy of some excellent cigars, he said picking up the flat cedar case, unable to resist opening it wide enough to peep in, and sniff the contents. Then the dull jangle of the radio ceased, and Fuller watched him cross the carpet slowly, finishing the brandy he'd poured earlier. In the silence he stood looking down at the expanse of the table painting, the contour of his figure still before the fire until the movement of an arm broke it, and the empty glass shattered over the burning logs. Then the figure was all movement, sliding the glass top off of the table, smashing a foot down into the table's surface, hands rending the painted panel into one piece after another small enough to throw into the fire, while he whispered, —Cave, caveat emptor, Dominus videt, Christ! the original! . . . a whisper broken by laughter, —yes, thank God there was the gold to forge!

It was all the work of a few moments, and he was still again standing before the fire. The flames rose and moved quietly beyond his profile throwing a radiant edge to it and leaving the features in shadow and the streaks of blood indiscernible.

Fuller watched, cleared his throat, but did not interrupt. The fire rose with sharper cracks of insistence and sudden shocks of flame throwing longer shadows and Fuller moved like one of them toward his luggage, speaking softly. —So long ago, wen he tell me he goin to make me from a black man to a wite. He picked up his bags and got the cedar case of cigars under one arm. —Evidence of the great power watchin over me, that he did not succeed in his design. And after a moment's waiting, standing straight, Fuller started to the door without another look on that great room, startled, to be sure, passing the youthful portrait, as he went out to the hall and unloaded briefly to reach his hat down from the very small panel closet. Hat in hand he paused, readying to break the silence pouring out to him with his own voice in farewell perhaps, when the silence was broken, by a rattling of metal; and Fuller quickly busied himself with picking up his bags, embarrassed at eavesdropping on an intimacy which for the first time he understood, hearing now,

—Good God! what a luxury you were!

Out in the street Fuller waited. He stood and breathed deeply. Then when the door behind him opened again and closed he spoke without turning, looking toward the sky, —Seem we have the moon waitin to light us upon the way . . .

—The moon? the moon? where . . . They both sought the sky for it.

—A moment ago . . . Fuller commenced.

—Ah but it's all right, when we need it why, charms, yes charms can bring it down . . . Fuller, here, listen, this money. Will you take some of it? I don't know how much there is, but, where are you going now?

—First I must seek a telephone, inform a friend of the condition of these we leave behind, requirin his professional services. Then I believe escape from this vicinity to be desirable for many reasons. And you sar?

—Yes, to go. To go, but first, even if . . . it didn't turn out like I thought it would but, it turned out, it had its own design. Yes to go. where. But I have to get her first, you understand, you would understand, where I've been all this time. Fuller? the money . . . ?

—Oh no sar, Fuller started to retreat, a pale shaft of light yellowing the life of the streetlights full upon him. —I quite sufficiently provided for as it is: in a smile his pink tongue fled delicate and in danger, into the darkness of that donjon keep as he closed the gold portcullis of his teeth.

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The moon, and other lustrous blisters of heaven, were gone. It had commenced to snow again when the cab

drew into Central Park, and the driver looked up into his mirror to see the figure slumped in back suddenly pull himself up at the apparition of trees and stare out, as though alarmed and uncertain where he was in the dark wood, until they came out of it.

The cab slurred up in the slush and stopped, and the driver twisted round in his seat. —Now look, Jack, we been riding around an hour now, I already told you an hour ago you can't just go into Bellevue this time of the night without something like you got your throat cut. Haven't you got a home somewheres you want to go? Haven't you got some dame you could go visit? Me, I got to get all the ways out to Astoria yet . . . what? Now you want to go back downtown? Horatio Street, that's down on the West Side? O.K., this is the last time, we'll go down, but this is the last time.

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Above, windows were lighted, occasionally blocked by the shadows of incurious faces looking forth only in order not to look back, and her own back turned on this room of faded Edwardian elegance, motionless, heedless of the paper littering the carpet about her feet. The letter under her left foot opened, "I have written you a number of times now, and you have not answered me . . ." and its lines were streaked and awash, where a drink had spilled. She stared out into the dark chasm beneath her high window, unable to make out its depths from the laceration framing her figure in light, and turning away, the breath drawn so slowly was expelled in resolution as she crossed the strewn carpet. A moment later, the pen moved in upright strokes of vicious indignation: "Dear Doctor Weisgall. It may interest you to know that my mother and the Pope . . ."

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Further down, in this concentric ice-ridden chaos, heavy wet snow was falling. The wind bellowed down fighting against itself in the dark gaping ruin where the building had been, and he turned slipping again in the slush, to see red lights streaming across the street further down, near the corner. He had to stumble round the dark edge of a pool to reach the bar, and even at that was forced to wait in the door, his entrance blocked by two beer barrels being rolled in opposite directions, meeting here head-on while the owner and the bartender swore at each other and rolled them back again. He came in muttering, felt for the sharp packet inside his coat, and ordered a drink. Someone ordered drinks all round. The place was foul-smelling, the floor awash and streaked with things spilled, and a clogged drain behind the door to the men's room. A small figure clutching a filthy dollar bill fixed him with a strabismic stare. He drank, breathing through his mouth to avoid the smell, and was trying to count the edges of the bills protruding from his inside pocket when a fight started and he withdrew, slowly for fear of being drawn in on their mud-spattered anger where they came on wildly at one another, hand and foot and a butting head which almost upset him before he recovered the darkness and the streets streaming red as though consumed with wet flame. The argument emerged behind him, as he set out to cross the dark lake.

—Look, Leroy . . .

—Dis city . . .

—Leroy . . .

—Dis

•

Across the chasm, the mirror reflected a brightly lighted and harsh reality, which included, immediately, two drunks busy in conversation. One of them, speaking from a twisted face, trod backwards upon Mr. Pivner's foot, forcing him to move slightly closer to his own companion, at whom, every few moments, he stole glances in the glass behind the bar.

—You know what I am? demanded the drunk on the far side. They were enjoying their discussion very much, each finding the other intelligent, witty, in all, a good companion, for neither was listening to what the other was saying. —I'm a male nurse.

—Well I say anybody can make a million dollars. You just have to start out thinking that way, and if you keep on, if you keep right on, you get into the habit and you can't help it.

—Well let me tell you what we had today. We had a c.a., do you know what that is?

—After awhile, you can't help it, you can't help making a million dollars. You know what I am? I'm a fortune teller. Hands, cards, I can read anything.

Mr. Pivner had taken off his wet hat when they came in, looked round, and put it on again. He felt well, but a little giddy. Their conversation was not hurried, he responded alertly enough, but found himself far

behind: while listening, even while speaking, he was still examining the words of three or four sentences before. Speaking, —Well, what are you studying now? . . . he was still weighing his own embarrassed greeting when they'd met in the street, —I was going home, but, why no, no I'm not really in a hurry. Hearing, —I'm not studying anything special yet. It's pretty expensive going to night school, it's just the books that run into money, you'd be surprised how much they can cost. These are mostly books on science, that's mostly what I'm interested in . . . he was still savoring, —Merry Christmas, gee, I'm glad to see you sir. I was just going to midnight Mass . . . Savoring, again, —I'm glad to see you sir . . . he licked his lips, and looked to the mirror.

—This c.a., up in the hospital, you haven't never seen anything like it.

—Like a friend of mine, he's getting married, like I even foretold him he was going to. Tomorrow, Christmas, he's getting married. He was screwing this little Bronx girl regular, I foretold him he'd have to marry her.

—Now let me describe to you what a c.a. is.

—In a way you might say that this guy's lucky, in a way you might say maybe it's a good thing. A thing like that, when you put it off, after a wile you begin to get scared, but if it happens early like with this guy then there you are and you don't know no different, you get in the habit and you can't help it. Like I foretold him, I foretold him, you get in the habit and you can't help it. And with a step back, the fortune teller jostled the ribs behind him with an elbow.

There was already a similarity between their noses, so was the revelation in the glass; and if it were a negative one, that is, if neither his own, nor that which signaled the skinny face so close to his, was in any way exceptional, there was no time for such apprehension: it still seemed to be happening too fast. He heard himself speaking with the cordial restraint he had envisionedly prepared for his first conversations with his son; but it was a conversation which he had anticipated in such detail, in so many rehearsals, that now each channel and bend was cherished, not to be lost in the mutability of chance exchange, but clenched: yes, for in this instant the truth of it was, that doubt abided in the actuality: that this actuality urged the doubt, a featureless transient until now so abruptly given quiddity and a carnal selfishness of its own. Speaking, —But what I mean is, if you'd like . . . I mean I'd like to get these books for you, because if I can . . . if you and I . . . His lip twitched, but instead of looking away as he would usually have done, Mr. Pivner looked straight at Eddie Zefnic's face. —I think we can manage, he said. He smiled, and his lip stopped twitching.

—But gee Mister Pivner . . .

—And listen, Eddie. Here, Eddie, here there's something I want to give you. It may not seem . . . but it's Christmas Eve and, here, please I, think you should have it.

—You can't imagine what a mess it was, but you got to expect that with a c.a.

—So you see it come out just like I foretold him, there's certain things which you can't escape them.

—But gee! . . . a watch? and it's, gold? A gold watch?

—I think you should have it, because . . .

—But gee! sir. And gee, look it's almost twelve. You wouldn't want to come to Mass with me?

—But I don't think I'd know what to do.

—But if you're with me . . .

—It's that or religion.

—Or helping out to preform a c.a.

—Yes, if I'm with you . . . And Mr. Pivner blew his nose. He had almost thanked Eddie Zefnic for the robe.

•

Otto rounded a corner, walking the curb as though himself on the edge of a chasm, his back turned to the river whose wind followed him, momentarily dazzled by fire and pitch where a tub of asphalt stood in the street sentineled by kerosene flares. The snow had changed to sleet, to rain, and stopped; but his coat was wet, and hung heavy as lead from his shoulders.

—Otto! . . . Stanley appeared as though risen from an exposure of pavement. He shivered, his eyes were red, his mustache looked lopsided.

—Stanley, where are you going? . . .

—Otto why did you do that? Did you know? did you know?

—What, what, did I know what?

—I've been arrested, all this time, I've been in the police station since the last time I saw you.

—But what? what for? what happened?

—And the police, do you know what they're like, the police? like machines, they're so bored, they don't

listen, they don't know who you are, but you can't do anything, you can't do anything . . .

—But what is this? what happened?

—You didn't know? That money you gave me, you didn't know? The money you lent me, that twenty-dollar bill, you didn't know it was no good?

—No good . . . ?

—That it was counterfeit?

—Counterfeit?

—If you didn't know, thank God if you didn't know. I shouldn't have thought what I did, I shouldn't have thought you'd do that to me, I'm sorry, forgive me, forgive me for thinking that about you.

—But no . . . Otto whispered: —No. No, not all that . . .

—I'm sorry, forgive me, I'll pay it back to you. Forgive me, Otto. I have to go now.

—But wait, wait wait wait . . .

—I can't stay, I have a toothache, I've had it all day, I have to go, I have to go to midnight Mass now, and then I have to go see my mother, they moved my mother to a new hospital today and she'll wonder where I've been, and then I think the police might . . .

—The police, what did you tell them?

—About the money? I said I didn't know, I told them I didn't know where I got it, I don't know whether they believed me, they just look at you, maybe they're following me, I don't know, but it doesn't matter now, and forgive me, I'll pay you back . . .

—But no, Otto whispered.

—What is it? I have to go, will you come with me now? Do you want to come to Mass with me?

—No. No. Otto rubbed his forehead, then dropped his hand to the sharp weight in his jacket. —He couldn't have done that . . .

—Good night, good night . . . and I'll pay you back . . .

The wind from behind stood Otto's hair on end, and blew along before him an empty tin can, throwing it bounding over spots of snow, jingling it over bare stretches of pavement, to hurl it lost among the mutilated shadows as he turned the corner into her street and saw that he was not alone. He cried out loudly though the other figure was close upon him: they both halted before the encounter, but Otto came on instantly. —Thank God you're here, after all the . . . all that's happened, and now . . . Yes everything will be all right now. I've been looking for you, I've been looking everywhere, I just went over to Horatio Street looking for you but there was nothing there, the whole place is burned down, and I should have come here, I should have come here first anyhow shouldn't I, because you knew her, and she . . . you . . .

—Where is she?

—Where is she? why, she . . . she . . . why? Look, why are you looking at me that way? And what's happened to you? your face, what is it? is it blood on your face?

—Where is she?

—You're just looking for her? It's . . . her you came for, then? His arms were moving in the dark as though he could scarcely keep himself upright in the thick gloom which seemed to have risen about them. —But I've been looking for you! he burst out. And then he did go off balance on the ice, taking a step back from the eyes which had penetrated him and emptied his face. —And she . . . he got out, recovering his balance with another step back, —I don't know. I don't know where she is, he said, and repeated it slowly, but as clear, —I don't know where she is . . . hesitated, and stood still. And when he raised his eyes, looking east toward the hospital, he was alone in the street. The wind had gone down, and the still cold was unbearable. He stood numb, surrounded by ice, among the frozen giants of buildings, as though to dare a step would send him head over heels in a night with neither hope of morning to come nor heaven's betrayal of its triumphal presence, in the stars.

IX

> Vicisti, Galilæe.
> —Julian, dying words

The sun rose at seven, and its light caught the weathercock atop the church steeple, epiphanized it there above the town like a cock of fire risen from its own ashes. In the false dawn, the sun had prepared the sky for its appearance: but even now the horned moon hung unsuspecting at the earth's rim, before the blaze which rose behind it to extinguish the cold quiet of its reign.

In the daylight's embrace, objects reared to assert their separate identities, as the rising sun rescued villagers from the throbbing harmony of night, and laid the world out where they could get their hands on it to assail it once more on reasonable terms. Shapes recovered proper distance from one another, becoming distinct in color and extension, withdrawn and self-sufficient, each an entity because it was not, and with daylight could not be confused with, or be a part of, anything else. Eyes were opened, things looked at, and, in short, propriety was restored.

Nonetheless, for here and there one drawing breath, with a conscious taste now letting it run to every sensible part, even as the daylight reinvested the furniture of out-of-doors with meaning, the rankling assurance, that is, that if it did not belong to one's self it did at least belong to someone else, here and there breath stopped abruptly as the ear took up the hour, attention pinioned upon sounds, and left so, more distraught at each repetition as the church bell rang in sevenths, an unresolved tone which set the listening nerves alert, a-jangle, a lamed tone leaving lips open at *ahh*-, repeating *ahh*-, confirming desperately irresolute *ahh*- seven times and forsaken there, incomplete at the last, still waiting hymnal resolution in ahh-*men*.

At that, several townsfolk summoned to mind their sexton, considered what he might know about bells in general, and how contrive toward setting this particular one to rights again; then, on second consideration, that he'd likely had something ingenious to do with its getting into this state in the first place, they pursed their lips and tried, with admirable Puritan fortitude, to put him out of mind until that time when he should be delivered from the extravagant snarl of his mortal coils, reckoning it, in all logic, a time not too far off, hoping it, in all charity, a race which he should win (for arrival at that glorious goal before him meant interment at his hands), and even now, in all good faith, quite unaware that that rescue had already been accomplished with all the intrepid serenity implicit in the Rescuer's reputation for order, quietly and in darkness: never in fact suspecting such a thing, what with the industrious hammering and clatter from inside the church since dawn of the day before, as they stood now, listening, drawn-lipped at the windows, and here and there leveled their eyes upon the still unilluminated bulk of Mount Lamentation, and the still-to-be-fulfilled landscape of Christmas.

Here and there they turned, to quietly ascertain that celebrated rubric on the calendar.

It is true, when that red-letter day was done, and its wealth of bits and pieces pruned and grafted, embellished, and laid gilded and gelded to rest in those private rotting-rooms called memories where, after rearranging things and tidying up a bit, the townsfolk sat down again among the corpses of the past, inhaling, and waiting; true that, when peace was restored that evening, and no more opportunities likely for the vigorous intervention of what was, with consentaneous relief, referred to as the hand of God; true, that is, that by about eight that evening, when even the hand of God inclined to decorous retirement, a number of the more exotic accounts of the day's main event, harried reports on the various epiphenomena, and exhibitions from among the souvenirs of the more dilapidated rotting-rooms, had shed their sources, and in currency gained credence.

Concerning the Reverend himself, for instance, by noon it was rumored that he had once traveled in Italy, and by one accepted that he had stopped in Rome; by two, rumored that he had in Spain entered a Carthusian monastery as a novice, and by three confirmed; by four, that he had once dressed himself in rags, rented three pitiful children, and attended in a state of mendicant collapse before the steps of the Ritz hotel in Madrid; by five, that he had stood the entire town of Málaga to drinks, conducted the male population on an experimental hike out on the sea toward Africa, seeking One who should manage it dry-shod; by six, that he had indeed married himself to a hoary crone with bangles in her ears, proclaimed himself heir to the throne of Abd-er-Rahman, and led an insurrection of the Moors on Córdoba; by seven, a score of people were to be found who had seen him on the roof of the church mid-morning of the day before; and by eight, even the tale told by an unpalatable fellow (whose general attitude toward life was sketched in a tattoo on his right forearm, and who had never been seen at any community-supported center but the police station, much less the church), a tale in which that very morning the Reverend had been seen abroad without a stitch on, albeit within the confines of his own lawns and pasture, a tale which might have ended that night under the twelve-point antlers of the buck in the Depot Tavern but for the main event of the day, or, again, if the buck had survived, or, indeed, even the Depot Tavern been left standing, by eight even this tale had made its way into a number of respectable parlors, a rococo affair, adorned, by this time, with elements which many now suspected might be the truth.

This fellow said that he was returning home (and a few suspected it right here at the outset, since he was known from the police blotter to reside at "no fixed address") from work, as he referred to the nightly periods he spent in the abandoned bridge works sleeping off drink, when, as he did every morning, he passed the parsonage, where he had become used to the reassuring spectacle of the Reverend greeting the dawn from the front porch, with increasing vehemence, it seemed, as recent dawns coincided with the end

of the working day. This morning, however, and in spite of the fine sunrise, the Reverend was not to be seen at his station. The night watchman went on to relate how, glancing back over his shoulder as he descended the hill, he discerned what appeared to be an impressively large and white figure in the branches of a tree, down near the barn, the carriage barn at the foot of the back lawn. He paused, understandably, to await the next development, as the figure in the tree appeared to be doing also; and within a minute's time, the black bull appeared in the field below. The bull was readily enough identified; but it was here that the fellow's story assumed such proportions that credulity was strained, even among those enough offended by subsequent events, or injured in the trial of strength which ensued before the morning was out, to cherish every word, for he detailed a chase, and a capture, of such heroic dimensions, that only a few here and there, whom the pagan curiosity of youth had led into traffic with myths, could summon images to approximate his description, and none could match it. For once caught round the neck, at which point the captor's feet did, he admitted, leave the ground, he said that the bull was downed; and the more the time of the day passed, and the more he was given to drink, the more vociferously this fellow swore that he had seen the bull carried shoulder-high, and then dragged, by its hind legs, out of his sight, up the lawn toward the parsonage.

With contumely masked as charity on the one hand, and charity proffered as indifference by the other, the church-going and the Depot Tavern's public suffered one another at a distance, mutually exclusive, not, until that day, to say aloof (for by noon a few had crossed the line in both directions). And so, though a few gathered before the church that morning wore expressions of anxiety, on edge because of the bell which had been ringing the hour in irresolute sevenths since dawn, and even now called them to worship in the same breathless fashion, none was prepared for anything out of what, in extraordinary times, is called the ordinary. Of all the knot of soberly dressed children and somberly dressed adults, with here and there in the bright sunshine a voice like a tinkling cymbal, and another sounding brass, none even noticed from outside that the lozenge-shaped panes were boarded up from within; and none was prepared, upon entering, for the appearance of the interior of the church, though within a few minutes it was difficult to tell who was going in and who was coming out as they blocked the doorway describing the darkened place, the arrangement of the benches (for it proved later that a number of the pews had been hewn down to these modest proportions), the altar brought closer down with a gold bull figure mounted just out of a shaft of sunlight which struck from above. Still outside, a pale woman who never used scent, and so was highly responsive to such things, believed she smelled incense. And someone even noted the disappearance of the bronze tablet put up in loving memory of *John H.* —— (an item never recovered, and, as far as that goes, never replaced).

—Natalis Invicti Solis . . .

A burly man (he proved later, in daylight, to be commander of the local American Legion post) had climbed up and commenced to tear a board from a window, but he lost balance at the sound of this stern and still gentle voice.

—The birth of the Unconquered Sun . . . We are gathered here in the world cave before him born of the Rock, the one Rock hewn without human hands, in the sight of the shepherds who witnessed his birth, whose name signifies friend, and mediator, who comes with rest from sin, and hope beyond the grave . . . and offers the revival of the Sun in promise and pledge of his own . . .

A number of people were trying to get out, and others to get in; but, whatever the rearrangement of the obscure interior, it became increasingly evident that at best it would accommodate only fifty or sixty, and even that number only if they were familiar with the three-sided disposal of the benches.

—Transitus dei . . . the bull lies slain . . . and from the dying bull issues the seed of the world . . .

Possibly the familiar authority of the voice held them silent at first, standing in contorted positions and here and there sinking down on the benches.

—Cultores Solis Invicti Mithrae . . . gathered here wearied of the religions of the cities, the religions spoken of in the cities and practiced nowhere, the exhausted and pale, the frighted and forgotten, come before him who rewards for acts of piety more than he does for valor, the Lord of Hosts, the God of Truth . . .

Someone said later that the voice broke and took up with the gentle rush of smoke from a boat gone under a river bridge.

—We sacrifice unto Mithra, the lord of wide pastures, who has a thousand ears and ten thousand eyes, a God invoked by his own name.

—We sacrifice unto Mithra, the lord of wide pastures, who is truth-speaking, a chief in assemblies, with a thousand ears, well-shapen, with ten thousand eyes, high, with full knowledge, strong, sleepless, ever awake.

—We sacrifice unto Mithra, the lord of all countries . . . we sacrifice unto the undying, shining, swift-

horsed sun.

—For his brightness and glory I have offered unto him a sacrifice worth being heard, unto Mithra the lord of wide pastures.

Later someone else said that here the voice quit and rose like the smoke of a train in and out of a tunnel,

—May he come to us for help. May he come to us for ease. May he come to us for joy. May he come to us for mercy. May he come to us for health. May he come to us for victory. May he come to us for good conscience. May he come to us for bliss. He, the awful and overpowering, worthy of sacrifice and prayer, not to be deceived anywhere in the whole of the material world, Mithra, the lord of wide pastures.

But by now, the sound which lay among them like a sound among stones, filling the cavern behind them, commenced to return in a murmur.

—On whichever side he has been worshiped first in the fullness of faith of a devoted heart, to that side turns Mithra, the lord of wide pastures, with the fiend-smiting wind, with the cursing thought of the wise.

The murmur rose, with the sound of an echo from a chasm, and started to disintegrate into separate voices. Someone said, —Just get hold of him . . .

—With a sacrifice in which thou art invoked by thine own name, with the proper words do I offer thee libations, O most beneficent Mithra. Should the evil thoughts of the earthly man be a hundred times worse, they would not rise so high as the good thoughts of the heavenly Mithra.

—Look out, be quiet . . . come on now, Reverend . . .

—Should the evil words of the earthly man be a hundred times worse, they would not rise so high as the good words of the heavenly Mithra.

—That's enough of this . . . get hold of him, shut him up . . .

—Should the evil deeds of the earthly man be a hundred times worse, they would not rise so high as the good deeds of the heavenly Mithra.

The shaft of sunlight struck the gold bull figure showing a hand grasping the horns, again and again, to be interrupted above by a visage which broke it and eyes blazing with the suddenness of lightning, as the voice at each flash became thunderous, and they struck at the same moment,

—To Mithra of the wide pastures, of the thousand ears, of the myriad eyes . . .

—Look out! Get his arms . . .

—the Yazad of the spoken name . . .

There was a crash, and a howl of pain.

—be sacrifice, homage, propitiation, and praise . . .

Someone finally managed to wrench a board from one of the windows. With the light, everyone looked in different directions. The howl of pain had come from a man now on the floor, and pinned there under the weight of the holy water stoup, drenched, having knocked it over in assailing the altar where it stood. The bell started again, and someone managed to turn off the mechanism. Someone else reached a telephone, and called a minister in a nearby town, inviting, and then entreating, him to come and restore the occasion they had gathered to observe.

Everyone looked in different directions; and afterward, outside, none of them could say for certain how the figure exhorting them had appeared, though two starry-eyed children turned nasty with one another over it, one describing Persian dress, and a turban, the other Assyrian, with a crown, becoming so vivid, indeed, that their schoolteacher, who was quivering nearby, confirmed that they had seen such pictures in a history primer the week before, though this did not deter their zeal for a moment.

One person said he'd been taken to hospital; another, back to the parsonage.

The brisk air was turning cold; and in the shelter of a clapboard buttress, where they'd already retired from the sun before the sky itself commenced to darken overhead, this rising chill embraced a small knot of ladies, uniting them so familiarly that they might have been the immediate source of it, and their voices the shocks of its emanation.

—At our supper last night we never suspected . . .

—Never imagined such desecration was taking place right over our heads . . .

—I heard hammering . . .

—Well *I* heard *ham*mering.

—I heard it too, but I never dreamt that something like this . . .

—Something like *this*! . . .

—I've had the feeling something like this was going to happen for quite a time now.

—Since the last time he went away for a rest. When we all agreed that a rest would be best.

—Ever since May . . .

—Since May?

—I've thought . . .

—Oh *May*.
—That was his last really Christian service. May's funeral service.
—How we have missed her.
—How we have needed her.
—How he has needed her guiding hand.
—May would be eighty-three this month.
—Someone ought to be notified. Someone ought to come immediately. Someone ought . . .
—The son . . .
—The son?
—The son has been gone for such a long time. A prodigal son.
—But he had no brothers. Poor Camilla . . .
—Poor Camilla never was strong. Taken and left in foreign lands.
—He wasn't a strong boy. When he took sick . . .
—The Lord did spare him.
—The Lord did spare him to do His work. To follow right in his father's footsteps. That is, of course . . .
—His fathers six generations back.
—To serve right here in his own community. The people he needs, who need him now.
—Now I shouldn't repeat this, but I heard . . .
—Do you know . . .
—I heard . . .
—Do you know what I thought, as I remembered, after that illness that lasted so long, the Lord didn't spare him. As I remembered . . .
—But I was certain . . .
—Well it's true, the past plays tricks when all we have to depend upon is mortal memory.
—Wait! Don't you smell something?
—I did in there, I smelled something burning.
—The terrible sweet smell of something burning.

Their words rose on bursts of wind, were fouled in the buttressed eddies, and sunk by metallic cries of nails being wrenched from wood inside, where they went themselves a moment later, for it had suddenly begun to snow.

The wind was still gentle enough, and the snow fell lightly; but through it, on the highway, gripping the steering wheel over which he could just see, a young man whose expression did something to redeem the otherwise vapid character of his face peered ahead between knuckles gone white with purpose, as he sped to answer the summons. His only sounds were bleating attempts to control his cold, now in its second, and most watery, day. The storm, as he would call it later, and as, later, it did indeed become, had blown up just as he left the town some ten miles off; and as though it had arisen as a challenge and a dare to his duty, he sped into the white flakes, making of their mild falling a threat worthy of his goal.

He did in fact almost come to grief as he entered the town, where the arrow pointing to left warned of the imminent curve to the right. From time to time he had taken one hand from the wheel, to draw across his nose, which is just what he was doing at that moment, and for uncountable terrifying instants he wove between the Civil War monument and the Depot Tavern, as though choosing which to demolish, an experience which the most worthy of goals could scarcely redeem, and explains why he had to be helped from his car upon arrival at the church.

Things had been set to rights as far as was possible, the pulpit replaced, the damaged pews straightened out, and the windows unboarded, largely through the efforts of the burly man and his buddies. He stood now to the back of the unsteady gasping congregation, looking quite indignantly about him, and above, from an eye already greatly swollen and discolored. There were others as severely marked, better than a half-dozen of them, and he turned to one now, whose shirt hung in tatters under his torn jacket, to mutter, —We got him there all right, the doc gave him a sedative, put him right out like a light. Then he turned respectfully to the fore, waiting for the conscript in the pulpit to begin.

The young minister started twice, but the sounds he made could barely be heard above, or distinguished from, the gasps and chirps in the congregation. And the reason for this ferment was that they were, one by one, turning their eyes above them. Although little light came in through the lozenge-shaped panes even now, uncovered, because of the sudden change in the weather, and the electric lights were, like the organ, found to have been put out of order, it was still quite easy to see the figures of stars, planets, the moon in various phases, and a resplendent sun, among other lavish celestial bodies, painted broadcast over the inside of the roof.

Gradually the sound from the pulpit disentangled itself from those rising before it, climbing earnestly

from one line to the next of what turned out to be part of the second chapter of the Gospel according to Saint Luke. After that reassuring narrative, the place was quiet but for the sounds of his own sincere pleading, as he went on to Saint John, and that vernal episode involving Lazarus, which he seemed to think might not come amiss. Apparently he was right. They seemed more grateful for resurrection than they had needful of the stable birth; and as his own voice broke and mounted between gasps, and his eyes watered in what, from almost anywhere in that light, appeared an overpowering emotion of belief, many lips on the upturned faces joined his importunate plea, —I *am* the Resurrection, and the Life . . .

It was a simple service. He hoped by now to do little more than read a psalm, solicit a hymn, a cappella, and during that exercise recover enough voice himself to get through benediction; but he had hardly launched Psalm Number 89, —Till I thy foes thy footstool make . . . when there was a resounding crash which, though apparently some distance off, in the direction of the railway station, lost none of its impact on this convalescent throng. With great presence of mind, he called for *Rock of Ages*, and with equal fortitude led two stanzas of it himself, so that the benediction, when it came, was accepted as a minute of silent prayer by all but a few who could see his lips, and every bit of his face, straining over it, until, with the lowering of his unsteady hand, it was all over, and no one there ever saw him again.

He left that town the way he had come, though more slowly, and more slowly still as he approached the built-up end of the curve which had almost saved him from the experience he had just been through, in the same manner that someone else, a complete stranger as the barbarian license tag showed, had just been delivered from the cares of this world to the chimera of the next. The Depot Tavern was ablaze; and the car radio, which was well inside with the whole front end of it, was playing the rondo from Mozart's *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*, to the silent passenger, and the twelve-point buck, knocked slightly askew up there as though he had cocked his head, listening, and in spite of the red Christmas tree light dangling at the end of his nose, watching with a dusty eyeball and an air of imperturbable serenity.

The real storm came, shrouding Mount Lamentation and then obliterating it altogether. The wind blew with a peculiarly terrible quality, broke here and there in the town a few windows, vindictive, viciously fingered where there was anything to destroy. It swept over the empty carriage barn, and cracked a blotched pane of that window tucked high on the house where Janet had been found, blue and rough-faced, weeping, and slavering —never never never never never . . . see him . . . more . . . , which some coarse unimaginative mind later publicly interpreted as a reference to a figure he'd known only as the sexton, found then in answer to the whine of a dog from behind a locked door, in bed, clutching a piece of paper, as the coroner, displacing the top button of the underwear for a token touch of his stethoscope against that empty chest, said he had probably lain for a day or two.

(Downstairs, in the defaced study, the coroner even got to his knees on the floor beside the carcass flung there at full length, to note and comment on the single fatal wound in the bull's neck, inflicted while it lived, as one could see from the round and gaping nature instead of its being drawn in a slit, as such a wound would have been otherwise.)

And the darkness came in like a substance driven on the wind which filled every crevice with it, and still did not relent where it failed in destruction, wailing round corners and shrill in the timbers erected awry but steady there at the foot of the hill. As for that platform, it would take three men as many days to dismantle it; but, although a number of curious things were to turn up around the place within the next few months, no one ever came upon anything that might have been a balloon.

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A number of curious things turned up during the first few months of the new minister's tenancy, though that barely lasted the spring. He did "dig right in" (that was one of his expressions) to try to make the place "cheery" (another) and even "cozy" (. . .), choosing, first off, a bright upstairs room for his study, where it was not until one day when he lay on his back on the floor exercising with dumbbells (that was one of the things he did) that he discovered the wall to be papered with roses, and all of them upside down. Heretofore the pattern had not disturbed him, for he'd never tried to make anything of it; but now! . . . He was on his feet immediately, and had that taken care of, repapered, that is, with something (as he said) of a more masculine character, a repetitious series of what for him represented fox hunting, not unlike the paper he had used in a darker downstairs room, after its floor had been sanded to remove the stains, and its walls and ceiling scraped of the brilliant colors with which they had been heavily painted, that and a half-dozen repairs to the walls where they looked to have been kicked in.

From a small room at the end of the upstairs hall, he'd had removed a printing press, its jumble of type, and a bundle of printed matter of which he could not make head or tail; not that he needed the room for anything, but he saw no *reason* to have a printing press in it at the foot of the narrow bed. From a chest of drawers in another room, he had a quantity of empty bottles removed. Not that he needed the drawers. He

took down some paintings, whose subject matter was neither cheery nor cozy, and stored them along with a damaged statue, whose presence was certainly neither of those things, in a closet where he had come upon a jumble of books and some pieces of dark wood each mounting a small broken mirror in the end, which he took to be the remains of a curious picture frame, though he did not consider trying to have it restored.

At one point he opened a small closet and found in it oatmeal tins, nothing but empty square oatmeal tins stacked from floor to ceiling.

Then there were the books. Dumped in another closet he found such titles as *Malay Magic* and *Libellus de Terrificationibus Nocturnisque Tumultibus* in a cascading disarray, and forced the door closed on them again immediately. From a dim room presided over by a needlepoint NO CROSS NO CROWN (which he gave to the Use-Me Ladies) he rescued a few sober titles for his own shelves, where Baxter's *Everlasting Rest* and Fisher's *Catechism* lent an air of permanence, stacked against Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. Andrew Jackson Davis's *Penetralia* was of course relegated as a curio, for "Dick" (as this young man encouraged people to call him, since his Christian name was Richard), had no interest in seeing the interior of objects. That, along with Buffon's *Natural History*, which actually sprang open in his hand when he took it down, and he found himself staring at a hand-tinted picture of an ape.

There were even books in the room where he'd found the drawers full of bottles. He kept two volumes, Tissandier's *Histoire des ballons*, not that he was interested in balloons, or could have read them if he were, but they were bound in green, and matched the motif of the new wallpaper. As for the others, two volumes of Lew Wallace, and Jules Verne's *Tour of the Moon*, *Round the World in Eighty Days*, and *Five Weeks in a Balloon*, those he gave to the American Legion, with whom he was co-operating in the great nation-wide Spiritual Crusade which they were sponsoring.

In the community, "Dick" also sang (he had a very agreeable "white tenor"), and conducted the Boy Scout troop.

There were, among the local mothers of fourteen-year-old boys, a few who felt they understood "Dick" very well, and cherished him accordingly; there were on the other hand a few elders who did not understand him at all, even to one sturdy old man who complained at the new minister's pronunciation. —Don't like the way he says *Gawd* . . . said that gray eminence, with the petulance of a man defending someone in his immediate family, and he never entered the church on his own feet again.

The ladies of the Use-Me Society found "Dick" a very agreeable listener; and he soon had some idea of how matters had gone before him, how the church (where he took one look and said, —Gee, we'd better dig right in . . .) came to demand such extensive refurbishing, and so forth. —And don't you know . . . said one of the ladies (who already referred to him as "Our 'Dick'"), speaking of the late sexton, —I once heard him say, It's only we that have no care for dying who never manage it . . . And from other things she, and her companions, said from time to time, their relief at having been delivered from the prospect of burial by those hands was evident, as though he might have laid them in askew, to hamper that mighty leap when the Trumpet sounded. "Dick" heard of the demented girl who had lived up there, since taken to a state institution where she should have gone in the first place (for her own good) but for the Reverend's charity (which often extended too far), that she had rewritten the Bible and was in the act of printing it herself when "everything came to a head." Even the reliable details of her rumored cure of the sexton's paralysis were brought from these rotting-rooms and aired quite solemnly: the old man had got both legs into one leg of his pajamas one night on going to bed, cried out, —A stroke! . . . or —Paraplegia! . . . or some such, and she had come down the hall to the rescue. Though where they had gained this intelligence, or that she never left the house because she feared falling through the cracks in the sidewalk, they did not disclose.

As for the Reverend himself, it was generally admitted that his efforts and accomplishment, especially in those two final days of his dominion, had been prodigious, and, for one man, incredible; as it was generally agreed that he had, in his lifetime, suffered severe trials, and in sharing the magnanimous aggregate of their own troubled pasts, they were able to concur in granting him the right to a prolonged, confined, rest, in a private institution, where what remained of his own funds after the cost of repairs to certain community property, and his neighbor's bull, had been deducted, would suffice to maintain him until he was delivered (or summoned: there were two distinct opinions on this) by the Lord; and where "Dick," being of an earnest, responsible nature, decided to visit him.

And he did manage to emerge with the consolation that the familiar figure whom their community of kindness had enthralled showed no signs of breaking out to return and violate them with signs of appreciation, and appeared, if not grateful, distantly resigned to what, in the compound agreement of their own, they were pleased to call the Lord's will.

Happymount had been built originally as a natural history museum, by a philanthropist who felt that such things should be located in the country. When, eventually, it became evident that people were unwilling to make this excursion simply to see stuffed animals and stuffed Indians, it was suggested that

they might come out to see human specimens, especially if they were relatives. The lighting inside was very bad. Beyond an iron palisade which separated it from the cares of the world, Happymount rose on a sea of green lawns tended by lonely lunatics: what could be more restful and rewarding than following the lawnmower up and down the green swathes day after day, and by the time one reached the laundry it was time to start at the front gate again.

The grassless winter proved a problem.

—Then you are the son? The doctor stared brightly through gold-rimmed glasses. He had proved, when he stood behind his desk a moment before, to be a good head shorter than "Dick," who was himself barely average height.

—The what? I? . . .

—Miss Inch, the doctor called, and a nurse appeared in the door. —The son . . . the son . . .

—It's a beautiful day, doctor.

—Ward G . . .

—Wait a minute . . . wait a minute . . .

It is true, the grassless winter proved a problem for everyone. Once outside in the sunshine, the nurse said, —You must not mind Mister Farisy. We have put him to sharing quarters with Mister Farisy.

Mr. Farisy's dossier at Happymount was a slim one: it detailed little of his successful years as an eminent anatomist, did not, in fact, even mention the process he said he had perfected for curing hams while still on the pig. It commenced in volume only at the point where (according to his own testimony) he had been appointed by the Congregation of the Sacred Rites, at the Vatican, to investigate early methods of crucifixion: were nails driven through the hands? or the wrists? As a scientist, Mr. Farisy had always relied on empirical methods, and found no reason to abandon them now: twenty arms were delivered to his laboratory. He nailed each right hand, and each left wrist, to the wall, and attached mobile weights driven by a system of bellows which he'd removed from a player piano, to simulate the rising and falling motions of the breathing human being. Then he set the thing in motion: weights rose and fell; wood creaked; flesh tore; bones split; and something snapped in Mr. Farisy's head. Next day he called for two dozen arms, then a gross, and silence followed: he said he had been brought to Happymount soon after he'd been discovered swinging hand-over-hand in the trapeze of intricate and grand proportions he'd fashioned in his laboratory. (But then, he also said he was descended from Attila the Hun.)

—Humm . . . ho . . . did Barabbas go free? Listen, I had a dream last night, a most ghastly nightmare. Do you want to hear it?

—No.

—I was on a mountaintop beside a little shed. I don't know how I could tell I was on a mountaintop, because I couldn't see the mountain. I couldn't even see other mountains. It was just because I knew I was on a mountaintop, so there! Ahhp . . . don't interrupt or I won't tell you any more. Maybe it was the light. The quality of light is different on a mountaintop, you'll see, thin, rarefied, the quintessence of purification.

—Be quiet. Go to sleep.

—The shed was an old board building. Weatherbeaten. Well, why shouldn't it be weatherbeaten, on a mountaintop like that, so there. The sun . . .

—Hmmnph . . .

—Yes the sun was behind me, covering me with its quintessential light, so there. I had him under the arms, with his back up against the shed but he was much bigger than I was, so much bigger I could hardly lift him. I decided the only way to do it was to nail one hand to one board and the other to a board higher up, then take the first nail out and put it in two boards higher, and then the same with the other hand, left hand, right hand, left hand right hand left hand . . .

—Stop it. Stop it. Stop it.

—Right up the wall. And why that's exactly what I was doing when I saw the hands were tearing to pieces. He was too big. I couldn't keep it up or the hands would be all torn to pieces by the time I got him up there. Oh, oh, oh, oh, it was terrible, and terrible, and discouraging from a scientific point of view, the way the nail just tore it apart, left hand, right hand . . . maybe I should have used smaller nails? That's the way I left him, with his trouser-cuffs dragging in the dirt.

—Stop it.

—There we were, in the pure quintessential light of the sun.

—Hmmmnph . . .

—On the mountaintop.

— . . .

—Transmogrification.

Then, —Look! came in Mr. Farisy's hoarse whisper of confidence. —See? the hammer? I keep it all under

my mattress. See the nails? Nails! one by one. I've taken them from the shop, one by one by one, ten-penty, twenty-penty one by one. We'll do it on the door frame, I measured it. I know how much you weigh. I looked at your chart. We'll do it scientifically. If they burn you afterward, one by one, ashes don't show scars, left hand, right hand, twenty-penty, thirty-penty, clink, clink, . . . listen!

—Mabutone, said Miss Inch the nurse, —or Methyltestosterone Mucorettes, between the upper lip and gum above incisors.

—Oops! . . .

—Take his arm.

—Luminal?

—Sedamyl.

—You have a guest. Your son . . .

—He's not big enough.

—Not you, not you. Doctor? . . .

—Try Palagren or Passiphen, or Pento-Del or Phanodorn . . .

—Reverend, your son? . . .

—Ooops! . . .

—The sun?

—Seconal or Sedamyl, Tolyphy or Tolyspaz . . .

—Wait a minute . . . wait a minute . . .

•

The refurbishing job which "Dick" had brought about in the church had been an extensive one. To begin with, the bell had been replaced with an electrically driven sound system which not only rang out the hour in more dulcet tones, but summoned the congregation on Sunday mornings by playing familiar hymns especially recorded for the purpose, and broadcast from the church spire in lively resonant notes originally drawn from a novochord, or something similarly up-to-date (it is true, there were days when the wind behaved badly that it sounded like a Hawaiian guitar).

The hole in the roof had, of course, been repaired; and the interior done over in taupe and white. The gilded organ pipes had disappeared; and so had all of the harsh angles of woodwork; instead, eyes and voices were lifted to smooth turns and flexures in taupe, and two bullet-shaped chromium lights trained on the pulpit, whence the President of the United States was exhorted with benedictions for the first time since the assassination of James A. Garfield. The oaken boards, where hymn and verse had been posted during services, were no longer necessary, for programs were now printed up every Sunday, detailing not only the service but other church activities. The programs sometimes ran to three or four pages, not counting the front which bore a "nice" (slightly Gothicized) likeness of the church itself.

Sturdy brass basins had taken the place of the wicker baskets for the offertory (not, in this illuminated Protestant world, of course, the tendering of bread and wine for Divine approval before their consecration; but here, according to custom, that equally exquisite and perhaps more realistically inspired moment of communion, when "Dick" received the brimming basins from the ushers, and solemnly held them up somewhere over his head in a gesture of intercourse of the most intimate dimensions imaginable to those who had contributed).

On the whole, the congregation looked rather younger; and it is just possible that "Dick's" "bad habit" might have had something to do with this. It seemed he had, at the outset, perceived that an entirely virtuous man, even one of the cloth, occupies an untenable position in society; and sensed the wisdom in giving one's neighbors some small vice upon which to latch their rancor at the absence of larger ones. Had his wisdom grown of years as well as wit, he might have gone a step further with his logic and had the good sense to conduct this vice in private, thus giving it the aura of secrecy, and so something to be spoken of in whispers among the townsfolk: but no. He did not give them that satisfaction. He let himself be seen in public, smoking his small cigars. Now for one thing, there were certainly members of this community who did believe an entirely virtuous man possible, men who themselves had shrunk to those proportions; and then among the ladies, there were some who had no intention of considering this a minor vice, but felt every bit as strongly about tobacco as did England's first, and Scotland's sixth, King James, whose Bible they retired to read in the clear dry air of their fathers, and the fathers before them, piqued in their solitude, it is true, on occasional Sunday mornings when the wind was wrong, and that air shimmered painfully with crystal tones and clear glissandos from the chaste spire turned campanile, where the new minister, whose forebears, it was generally known, sprang from somewhere in New Jersey, prepared to lead off with Hymn Number 347 in the *Pilgrim Hymnal*, —O God be-neath thy guid-ing hand . . . Our ex-iled fa-thers crossed the sea . . .

Still, a number of gray petrous visages continued to appear, drawn on by a habit which they called duty, and perhaps, though none would have admitted it, a sort of perilous curiosity roused by this young man who invoked flesh and deity alike in whistling tones which bounced off their northern souls like shiny stones scaled over still water. As for those whistling punctuations, they were first credited to some electrical distemper in the public address system, for there was now a microphone mounted on the pulpit through which "Dick" managed to convey, if not severe awe, moments of anxiety, and if not wonder, moments of acute embarrassment; if he could not tender mystery, he could arouse curiosity, rewarded with ceremony if not ritual, inspiring, if not hope, then sincere desire, if not faith, allegiance, if not charity, tolerance.

In keeping with the general spirit of refurbishing (for even the arrow at the entrance to town had been changed to point the real direction of the imminent curve, a kindness to strangers though it caused some confusion at first for the natives), the weathercock atop the spire had been exchanged for a cross, and "Dick" ministered wearing a pallium (he called it a "surplice"). All this, what elders were left him bore very well; and he was quite popular among the young people. They asked him weighty questions: one young lady, whether he would approve her reading a current novel, entitled *SENSATION* (it was one of those books called "bitter satire" by those who think life better than they find it, and "inadequate" by those who find it a good deal worse than they had thought); and he did not say no. (He was waiting, and would in vain, for it to appear condensed in the *Reader's Digest*.) It was the same girl who had asked him earlier if a passage she showed him from Katherine Mansfield were sacrilegious: something which mentioned the soul being "set before its Maker, hatless, disheveled and gay, with its spirit unbroken . . ." And though this was a sensation which had certainly never occurred to him, "Dick" indulged it in what he, with Saint Peter, regarded as the "weaker vessel."

In spite of all "Dick" had done to brighten things up, the parsonage held a sense of bereavement about it. His heels clicking on the floors (for he wore metal taps, to save leather so he said) echoed sharply and came back to him in creaks in the woodwork. And he found himself, when he should have been busy culling a sermon, standing instead at the window of the dark downstairs room which he never used, staring through evergreen branches at a distant shrouded hill; or, as he sat quietly going through letters, or the church's business, bent forth from his chair, listening, staring at nothing, listening to and then for, creaking sounds from other parts of the house. And one afternoon in the bright upstairs room he had chosen for his study, he dozed off, in the midst of considering plans to co-operate in a large (interdenominational) campaign to dispatch airborne Bibles, via hundreds of free-floating balloons, to a part of the world where they were, presumably, desired. He awoke at dusk sitting bolt upright, startled by silence, looked around where nothing moved, unable even hours later to shake from his head (which he literally tried to do) the sound of a child crying, which he thought he had heard.

He had already considered removing, to a neat white house only two doors from the church itself, nearer "the center of things."

That happened before the winter was fairly out, soon after the death of his predecessor, whom "Dick," being of a responsible nature, followed to the crematorium with that somberly vacant mien composed for such occasions with as much care, and similar in result, to the face the lid is closed upon once it has been drained of any suggestion of death, life, or familiarity. For the ashes, however, he had no idea what to do with them but leave them behind, until a fortunate incident occurred when he went to the cascaded books in the closet, seeking material for a memorial sermon. He settled down to what he would refer to as "these quaint and curious volumes of forgotten lore"; and though startled at the outset to discover the cavity cut in *The Dark Night of the Soul*, and about to lay that pleasantly scented curio aside, a paper fell from it which proved to be his predecessor's last will and testament. In that, he found the request that "the remains be laid to rest" (that phrase was "Dick's") with those of "the wife of the deceased" (so was that). It was fortunate in more than one way, for it gave "Dick" occasion to congratulate himself on his procrastination in another matter, which he could now call "foresight." In a kitchen closet he had come upon a large package of food staples, loosely tied in already-addressed wrapping paper, which he'd meant to send off and generously pay the postage himself. The operation which followed was a rather hurried one, for this red-blooded young man had an instinctively healthy distaste for death. Remembering the sturdy oatmeal boxes in the upstairs closet, he got one, transferred the ashes from the delicate urn in which they'd been delivered, and clamped the round top in tight, noting as he did so that it carried the family name stamped in the tin. This he put into the parcel already bound for Spain, sent it off (by ordinary ship post, since he was paying the charges himself), and only when he sat down to write the covering letter did he realize that he'd forgot to take the name of the monastery where it was bound. In an almanac, he found a prominent monastery located at Montserrat, and so he addressed his letter, in cordial English (on a church letterhead) there, considering that if it were not quite the right one, things would be straightened up at that end, where they were, after all, all Spanish, and after all, all Catholic.

Before Sunday came by, he'd spent time thumbing through Tertullian and Origen, Sozomen and Zosimus, and the evidence in the *Avesta*, noting down marked passages, all of which would serve as batteries for exposition, but the text itself of course, must come from the Bible. He sat back in a deep chair and smoked his way through a small cigar.

It was in this inert position, and with no change in his expression at all (as a matter of fact he had finished the cigar and was picking his nose), that "Dick" was inspired to take his text from I Corinthians, "the foolishness of God . . ." what was it? "Hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?" He got up mumbling —"Unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness . . ." looking for the familiar gold-lettered black spine, —"But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise . . ." His blank look gradually focused as his lips, pursuing "Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men . . ." slowed and went dead. There, on the maple table, lay one of seventeen and a half million copies of the latest issue of the *Reader's Digest*, in which he became so engrossed, that he took it to bed with him.

•

—And don't you know, said one of the Ladies, going on from shaking "Dick's" hand out into the sunshine of the newly graveled drive before the church, —I even felt that it was a little impertinent . . .

For the sermon was not a great success. In spite of "Dick's" earnest and refreshing manner, and the trouble he had gone to, combing through the marked passages in the books jumbled in the closet, to make Mithraism sound unattractive, several people felt as that Lady did.

Nevertheless, on this particularly fine morning it would have been difficult to harbor any sense but one of well-being. "Dick" was, this morning, behaving with even more than his usual bonhomie, even showing some cordiality to the sexton of whom he did not wholly approve, for it was known that the small modest man, formerly the station master, liked his daily glass of beer, could, in fact, sit over it an entire afternoon below-stairs: a comforting figure to many in the community for all his small beer, not likely, on his small stipend, to be found rolling lopsided down Summer Street at odd hours of the night, singing unchristian songs.

If "Dick's" bonhomie was, as it appeared to be, exaggerated after service, it was because with his penetrating insight he had sensed something wrong, about halfway through his sermon, a restlessness which commenced with his passage from I Corinthians, and seemed to rise especially among the older faces, as he went on into the contents of the "quaint and curious volumes of forgotten lore," doing his best to show Mithraism in its "true" light, and its most recent propagator, if not demented, certainly misled. Supported by the battery of purloined mercenaries, Justin Martyr and Tertullian, Origen, Arnobius, Firmicus Maternus, Augustine Bishop of Hippo, Paul of Nola . . . "Dick" could hardly fail in his unnecessary cause. Reading from the ex-Manichee Hippian bishop, he had reached this point when he noticed lips moving here and there, as though minds were already wandering: —"For evil spirits invent for themselves certain counterfeit representations of high degree, that by this means they may deceive the followers of Christ . . ."

—But don't you know . . . as one of the Use-Me Ladies said later, —there was something . . . She sniffed. —Something . . .

For "Dick" had brought to the pulpit all of the notes he had made; and this panegyric upon Julian written by Himerius, was among them. Antagonistic as it might be to the original Corinthian epigraph, he found it in time to change his course and, that abruptly, come in on still water with the wind at his back, for he did read it very well:

"He by his virtue dispelled the darkness which forbade the uplifting of the hands to the Sun, and as though from the cheerless life of an underworld he gained a vision of the heavens, when he raised shrines to the gods and established divine rites that were strange to the city, and consecrated therein the mysteries of the heavenly deities. And far and wide he bestowed no trifling grants of healing, as the sick in body are revived by human skill, but unlimited gifts of health. For with a human nature akin to the Sun he could not fail to shine and illuminate the way to a better life."

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Soon after that day, the new minister moved down to the neat white house "nearer the center of things."

From his back yard, partly tilled as a garden, Mount Lamentation still reared in the distance, and more distant when it withdrew, shrouding itself in time of storm. He seldom looked toward the old parsonage, unless at evening watching birds gather and compose their course toward that eminence already dark, where a tree had fallen through into an upstairs window and leaned there so, where so many curious things had turned up, and would turn up, even, in some digging after the carriage barn was leveled when it

threatened to collapse, to a small skeleton, and don't you know the story gained ground, that this was the son? though some thought they remembered him grown older, bigger than this evidence, as time passed and no one ever saw him again, the story remained, with the parsonage to witness, a place with a sense of bereavement about it, though no one has come or gone in a long time.

PART III

I

"There are many Manii at Aricia."

IN PATIENTLY prolonged collision with the sea (to such an untropical degree of frankness that a concrete length of seawall is necessary to separate them), and then retreating up the hills, lies the Central American port of Tibieza de Dios. Shiploads of iron beds, houses of broken bannisters whose paint is unable to tell to the querulous eye of the foreigner (for no native would question) what was its original color, indeed has forgotten itself, the streetlights bare electric bulbs strung on wires, it has the transient air of a ragged carnival never dismantled. The population is largely black. It is governed by descendants of Spain who live on the central plateau, given work by an American fruit company whose white employees live between ten strands of barbed wire and the sea, and its modesty and sophistication are at once satisfied in acres of brilliant calico provided by the Tibieza Trading Company, a family of seventeen Chinese, all male, and all different shapes, whose veranda card game never ends.

Traffic often consists only in the gay orange garbage carts, passengered by black vultures who ride rocking in mistrust on top, or follow running, half in flight, behind. In the postprandial heat of midday no human inhabitants may be seen at all (except for the card players) and passers-by in the streets hardly nod acquaintance, for they are dogs, vultures, and occasional horses moving with easy poise, looking neither right nor left, as though on their way to appointments as casually futile as the tides. When the afternoon rain is over, black stirrings begin again, and the natives appear in such states of disintegration that a bit of string knotted round the wrist or neck seems to indicate that even these parts would be lost unless tied on.

Drift in suspension, the only sounds were the dry bird-calls of old men selling peanuts, —*Mani . . . mani* . . . that and the sea. Now, after three days of rain, it was brown, green further out, and the horizon a hard line of blue against the gray sky. The steel braces of the pier were rusted to ankle thinness at the water line, and the sea crashed in around it against the seawall with merciless finality, piling its fullness into reckless weights of water and hurling that in, tirelessly. At first sight, that seawall looked ridiculous, a pitiful barrier which the sea could easily swarm over to obliterate this frail town. But again the water was abruptly smashed into whiteness and hurled back upon itself.

Otto, though as yet he did not know it, was on his way to Tibieza.

At that moment his airplane sat like a great sow on the field at New Orleans, bulging from end to end and barely containing the weight of its long belly from the ground. Otto was an even color of yellow. This was interrupted in his clean-shaven face by the two ghastly pits of his eyes, staring out in exhausted possession. His hands, both free and one noticeably whiter, both shook. He had imagined, at other times, himself outwitting scores of the finest minds of international detective forces, casually committing deeds of stupefying audacity, of inhuman daring . . . (just then, as a uniformed porter passed, his hand shook so raising a cigarette to his lips that he rested it on his knee, and turned again to stare at the book he held propped against the chair arm).

He pressed his wrist against the bulge of his wallet, to assure himself that the crammed wallet, and his ticket for Balboa airport, in Panama, were still there. His flight was announced. He went out to the field. Mail was loaded. Luggage was loaded. A white-crated dog, spurting with excitement, was loaded. Startled by the immensity of the airplane as he stood beside it, the air and his whole inner body were suddenly shaken by another airplane taking off before him. Abruptly, then, the fury of the other rising airplane was gone; and a frail bird flew by, in silent dignity, and in the opposite direction.

Otto noticed that one wing of his airplane looked curiously bent. A man in uniform passed. Otto almost spoke to him about it, then caught himself. Or perhaps the man in uniform knew the thing was bent suicidally? did not intend to do anything about it? It would be quite a job, straightening it. Otto looked at his watch. Obviously there wasn't time. It looked tremendous.

The great body throbbed on the ground. He sat in the womb of this furious animal. Then worse, it moved

across that ground with desperate purpose, angry to leave it. Something lifted it, and it roared away from the sane hardness of earth into nothing. Smoke swirled past the windows: not smoke, but a cloud. There were the clouds below, moving restlessly over one another while the absurd silver animal hung above them motionless. From it, Otto looked out on the white fields below in a nervous exhaustion at being so enclosed, as though, could he get out there and sit down for awhile, everything would be solved. But it went on, hanging without self-consciousness as though it had forgot this preposterous thing it was doing. Heavier than air, it tore into a cloud, angrily shook itself through, conscious again. Frail, wings quivering with effort as unnatural as the bird's glide is harmony, it shifted, dropped, scaled over shallow green water and came down on Mexico for a rest, recollected its fury, gathered it, and tore away from the ground again with the frantic speed of one possessed, afraid to look back, as though to hesitate, to doubt for an instant, would lose all that illusion was making possible.

Below the sea lay still and hard as a field of lead.

Otto looked behind. Reassuringly, the tail assembly was following, though he could not see its full profile broken by the figure clinging to it, throwing the plane off balance. Beyond lay that giant curve, two colors, nothing more, separated by the surface luster of their meeting: the quiet limit of the world? It went on suspended up there, finally over Guatemala, whose twisting highways looked to him like the course of his own life. Then on the right, alarmingly close, stood a volcano, losing its quiet smoke against the green sky. It stood out of space, in time like a thing seen in memory. Not to be touched or known in any way, it ignored him, beauty which would admit no tampering, to be lost in the horror of intimacy. With every effort of his eyes it grew less real, more distant, as the airplane flew on, like a fragment of time itself scrambling through eternity.

•

Several thousand sensible feet below, on what had appeared a surface of lead, the *Island Trader* trundled south-by-west on the surface of the Caribbean sea. This vessel was a bare two hundred feet long, and its dirty hull, which kept it to a speed of seven knots, drew thirteen feet of water. Twin screws labored it forward. It had been built in Copenhagen in 1924 as a private yacht. Some time since it had seen the Atlantic, or even the North Sea: sheltered by the chain of the Antilles, it fared nobly upon a sea whose surface was like glass, as the Caribbean was now. The *Island Trader* was returning from Florida, where it had carried seven thousand stems of green bananas. The Honduran mess boy stood on deck watching the sun set. Jutting from the porthole beside his head, long toes of one black foot engaged those of another in contest, tugging at one corned toe whose compatriots were busy protecting it. The boy seemed tempted to leave the sunset and attend this contest for the winner. From inside, a voice sang, —*Littel girl, please leave my bachelor room . . .*

The sun had melted into the shape of a keyhole on the horizon, and the *Island Trader* moved as though enclosed by the sea and the dull beauty of the sky, with only a glimpse, through that open door, of the outside, real world of fire.

A shout of the mate's voice and the contest ended, abruptly the feet were withdrawn, to reappear a moment later in the door frame where Fuller paused to press them into shoes. —He callin me, Fuller said. —Mahn, I hope he not goin to be vexed again. This was because Fuller sat next to the mate, at the end of the table, at meals. Though immense bowls of mashed potatoes, platters of meat and fish, chops, croquettes, and many vegetables were served, the mate's diet never varied from pigs' feet, cooked roots, and banana chips. This choice was all that reached Fuller, unless he interrupted the silent prandial industry beside him to ask for something else. When the mate was vexed, Fuller dared not hazard this interruption. He did his best with what was left in the three serving bowls, when the plate beside him had been loaded with pigs' feet, cooked roots, and banana chips. Such fare was difficult, for Fuller had no teeth. He had sold them in Tampa, Florida, to a rising young buck with social aspirations, left behind, like Crassus below, admonished, —Say, did the taste of gold make thy mouth good?

In response to the darkening sky, the sea changed its surface from glass to marble, the Breche rose marble of Italy reflecting the broken color of the sun, and losing that, to the gray-white Piastraccia, reflecting light from nowhere, veined with shadows.

The sun sank over the sharp edge of the marble sea. The shout sounded again from above. Nevertheless, Fuller paused there at the rail for a moment, that momentary sense of something lost, that sudden moment of emptiness which pervades everywhere the instant the sun has disappeared.

•

There was trouble in Tibieza. No one there wanted it. It came from the capital, up on the central plateau,

where brisk weather encouraged that troubled intelligence necessary for revolution. It was all very well for *them* to run about the hills firing old Springfield '06 rifles, ponderous brass French Hotchkiss machine-guns whose clips jammed after the first few explosions, heavy American water-cooled Brownings and delicate Italian Bredas: that stock of arms which has been floating about Hispanic America for decades, whereabouts totally unknown until necessity produces it with revolutionary magic in any one of the sister republics. All very well for the educated people up on the plateau to blow each other to bits, but for Tibieza . . . except that Tibieza de Dios, in fact its only reason for existence, was a port, and one of few. Therefore it must be taken. First, it was necessary to settle who held it. This was arranged one early morning, when three men suspected of belonging to the revolutionary party, and known to have participated in shady deals (an easily made and always justifiable charge) were shot over their morning coffee, in reprisal for removal of the local priest who had been found garishly made up with lipstick, and castrated, sitting on one of the petrified sponge-like rocks at the end of the seawall in an attitude of repose, with a hole in one side of his head where an ear had been, and out the other.

After that, even the veranda card game moved indoors.

The cathedral, in a state of such genial collapse that it looks never to have been built stone by stone, its arches chipped and smooth so that no one stone stands away from another, its saints armless and headless waiting, smoothed and quietened by the rain, in open niches, its towers hanging heavy with the silent bells, stands to one side of the central plaza, behind a pitted concrete wall. These pits, obviously due to poor contracting years ago, were now circled with chalk, and scribbled beside them, "Calibre .45 para los niños," though actually no children were known to have been blown up in some time. Across that plaza stood the Hotel Bella Vista, girt with a rickety balcony, and leaning, as though rickets were familiar throughout its frame, like a hipshot elder, toward the sea. There were a few large trees in the plaza, which was surfaced with concrete. Just around the corner, toward the beach, was the office of Doctor Espinach, whose sign told that he had been educated in the United States of America.

It was upon this strip of beach that Otto's mighty airplane careered to an ungainly stop. The passenger who had caused this aerodynamic embarrassment, by riding outside instead of in, was so cold that he remained fixed to the tail assembly as the others got out to see why their giant had hesitated, what engine of human frailty had interfered with the miracle so preternatural that they took it for granted. The other passengers were a fairly dismal group, except for a handsome lady with an armload of orchids, and a small man whose clothes bulged suspiciously, both of whom seemed delighted to be put down right where they were. The fresh-air passenger had boarded in New Orleans, so he said, in Spanish, for that was all he spoke, with lips which were the only thing about him that he could move. —We would have seen you when we stopped in Mexico, said the co-pilot, who allowed miracles only a reasonable breadth. —Dios . . . dios . . . said the passenger. The plane might have waited until this problem was disposed of, but its arrival had caused some consternation, and delight, in the town. At that moment seven carloads of men were racing toward it, believing it had brought arms from the capital. Two of the cars were loaded with revolutionaries, four with loyalists, the last undecided, but armed. All stopped behind the dunes. Before he knew what was happening, the co-pilot was knocked awry with a bullet in his calf. He and the pilot consulted in decisive profanity, and a minute later the airplane roared down the beach and veered away into the sky, slightly cockeyed, its topside passenger so occupied holding on that he did not raise even a paralyzed arm in farewell.

The proprietor of the Bella Vista was a man with a heavy bunch of keys which rattled against his thick thigh as he strode up and down the first-floor veranda, avoiding the place over the dining-room door where the boards had gone through one night during a visit from United States Marines. He wondered what the airplane's mission had been, what all the shooting was about, and it was oafishness rather than courage that permitted him to expose himself as he was doing. All he saw, however, was a draggled figure in gray flannel crossing the empty plaza toward his door. Everything was silent but for a distant hum of song, punctuated by thuds, from the direction of the Baptist Church where a prayer meeting was in full sway. They were using their new bass drum to rousing effect, its clamor enhanced by the resonance of the roof, which was pleached of flattened oil tins.

Past the sign of Doctor Espinach, a tempting swinging target with three holes in it already, he came on looking slightly dazed, to be given a room with one window facing toward the sea, hung with forlorn curtains in the middle of a sagging string. Two doors led to nowhere, and the louvers in the outside door were broken. The wire to the electric bulb swung free on the wall. The sink gurgled like the plumbing on a ship. There were large pictures of blond girls on the wall, one holding daffodils for Carr's English Biscuits, the other, suffering a running jaundice brought on by a leak in the ceiling, presented a tray of Canada Dry. With a cigarette, he lay back to consider that modest portion of the ceiling which was painted, just over the bed, and his own, a swelling weight on his chest where the wallet lay empty of anything but uncounted

bills. He had escaped twice, this second time from the certain difficulties he would have had upon reaching his destination and being asked to produce identity papers and a visa. He had escaped, where, he did not know, he did not think, he had not thought since Christmas Eve, and when thought or memory intruded he forced it off with calculation drawn to one purpose: to keep moving, with money no object but to spend his way through it, to keep moving and live it through, without looking back. He reached out on the floor and drew the chamber pot nearer, to use as an ashtray.

In the afternoon, it seemed that the loyalists were in full control. Police, at any rate, rode into the plaza, though no one was certain whether they were on the payroll of the loyalists or the revolutionaries. They were armed with pistols and carried sabers. This was because there was to be a demonstration, fomented in the local school and forbidden by the mayor, whose measure for peace and quiet was understood as a challenge to liberty.

The demonstration began on time. Boys marched into the plaza carrying placards which read, “Mothers! Your children have the right to be free!” and “Calibre .45 para los niños.” Someone threw a rock at a mounted policeman. Someone else threw another. The horses were having difficulty keeping their feet on the slippery concrete.

After a ghastly lunch served by a black girl sheathed in one spotted white garment, Otto wanted coffee. He waited. The dining room was festooned with fly-blown streamers of colored crepe paper, each leaf of which had lost most of its own color and borrowed some of its neighbor’s. In the middle of the room, a fruit bowl stood on a table, a luxurious economy, for the bananas were so near rotten that no one ever took one, or at best, never took another. —No coffee. She burned the milk, the girl said. Otto lit a cigarette, and went out. He had got as far as a café across the plaza before the demonstration began. From there, he watched it progress. It made no sense. He started back toward the Bella Vista. The demonstration was noisy, but he looked on it with a tired eye, refusing to be taken in by such foolishness. Until a policeman rode toward him, swinging a saber; and the policeman’s neck was covered with blood.

That suddenly, it was real. And as suddenly terrified, Otto looked frantically for sanctuary. The cathedral, with its protecting wall, stood waiting. He looked wildly round him but saw nothing as he started to run toward it. From behind the bandstand, a policeman rode, he and his mount looking in every direction, the man’s and the horse’s eyes matching in bloodshot apprehension, dodging the rocks that found them from above.

Just then a white bird came down in an arc from a branch, down falling like a stone before it ascended, and the policeman, dodging the threat, threw his weight over, his horse scrambled for a moment on the concrete and went down, and the falling flank caught Otto as he ran without seeing toward the church, spun him round and pinned him on the concrete, unconscious.

•

The vulture on the outside roof fussed for a moment, one wing extended, impatiently like a dignitary fully dressed for an appointment looking at his watch. Then the wing came back somewhat askew, as though he’d buttoned the coat up wrong, and not noticing it in his impatience stood rocking from one foot to the other.

In the street outside a little boy held up a male dog, exposed, for a female to investigate. His mother said to another and larger black woman, —Tomorrow morning, soon soon . . . Other little black boys passed, wearing men’s hats. The card game was back out on the veranda.

Near the only occupied cot, in the schoolroom which had been used as a hospital, was posted a stuffed fox whose snarl exposed a pink fly-blown tongue. The doctor stood beside the cot looking down at the face. Nothing moved there but a fly. It rummaged a cheek for a moment, studied the caves of the nostrils, hurried across the bandage to the cleft of the chin, from that eminence sighted the convoluted marvel across the way, and leaped silently to the ear. The eyes flickered, and closed tightly as though to recall the long night and the wonder of nonentity it had permitted: recreation not for the body, nor the soul, but opportunity for circumstances to refurbish themselves, a hope untempered by ages of experience where morning brings no change, but only renewal of conflict on the terms it left off. The lips moved, drawing up twice on, —I know it . . . I know it . . . and then tightening to know sleep only, and there animate circumstance with the good intentions which had already brought it low in present disaster; and then descending, a little lower, only to belabor those good intentions, vicarious opiates laboring in half-consciousness to fall away before the pursuit of dreams, dreams ravin in tooth and claw, while the beard grows against the pillow in darkness.

The fly returned to course the warm terrain of the eyelid, moving with the careless persistence of diabolical things, and both eyes came open.

—What happened?

—I was going to ask you the same thing. They just brought you in here in pieces, and . . .

—I feel sick.

—Well you are sick, so it's a good thing you know it.

—I can hardly hear you.

—You're lucky you can hear me at all. Ever have ear trouble?

—Yes. No.

—Well, you do now. You might even have a deaf ear before you're through. Just like Julius Caesar, that would be nice, wouldn't it. Who are you? You're very young to show up with something like this. I might even say tragic if I knew who you were.

—Wait, I . . . I can't move my arm.

—That's partly because it's broken. Do you remember trying to walk yesterday? Please excuse my shouting at you.

—But what is it? what is it?

—Like a drunkard. Staggering around like a drunkard. Of course I might not say that if I knew who you were. We didn't find any papers on you at all. Just money. Money. Lots of it.

—Where is it?

—Lie back now, it's safe. All that money! But you can't run around spending it now. Don't be impatient. Why, look at me, I have a right to be impatient. I was sent down here to help these nig . . . natives with their drainage problems, and now look at me. They keep promising to transfer me to Barbados, but they never do. A special health project in Barbados . . . He had walked over near the window, and looked out. —I've sent for some more medicine for you. Of course I know all the time that I'll have to go get it myself eventually, this tattooed idiot who's supposed to work for me . . . Then he shouted out the window, —Jesse . . . ! Jesse! . . . There, you see? He's nowhere to be seen. Worthless, useless, tattooed idiot . . . of course I wouldn't call him that if I thought he could hear me. This is the third time now that I've put in for a transfer to that special health project among underdeveloped . . . oops! Wait, don't throw up on the floor. Here . . . here we are. Ummmp! That's better. Feel better?

—But . . . what . . . what is this? Who are you?

—What are either of us doing here? Who are you? Tsk tsk, excuse my shouting at you.

—But you . . . you must tell me . . .

—I suppose I must. The doctor should not discuss the case with the patient, but who else can I discuss it with? Well, after your little accident, something set in. Something.

—Something what?

—Don't be hasty. Something. Maybe something entirely original. Do you hear noises in your ears?

—I hear you . . .

—I have to shout, or you couldn't hear me. Dizziness, nausea, vomiting, staggering, and down you go unconscious. It doesn't sound very original, does it. How would you like to have a disease named after you?

—But I . . .

—Well, I'll tell you a secret. It may be Ménière's disease. It may be. You'd accept that, would you? Because if it is we couldn't name it after you. We'll see. I've given you a little nicotinic acid. Do you work for the fruit company here?

—No . . . no, I . . .

—It's all right, don't explain. I'm on the outs with them too. If they knew I had you here they'd try to get you for their patient.

—No, I . . . now I . . .

—That's the spirit. Now you just wait here. If anyone comes in, cover up your head and moan. I'm going over to the fruit company dispensary, and try to get some Diasal for you. Diasal or Lesofac, Amchlor or Gustamate. If it is Ménière's syndrome, we'll have you up staggering around in no time. Of course I don't know where you'll stagger to, with no papers. What's your name? We can't name a disease after you if you don't have a name.

—But I . . . I . . .

—My name is Doctor Fell. There. What's yours?

— . . . Gordon. Gordon. My name's Gordon.

—All right Gordon. Don't throw up on the floor while I'm gone, Gordon. Gordonitis? tsk tsk . . . Get some sleep Gordon.

—But you . . .

—Roniacol or Dramamine . . .

The door banged. Outside all was quiet, except for the distant dull crash and recession at the seawall, where the rehearsal continued. The sun shone.

On the ridge of the tin roof across from the window, the vulture strode up and down, wings drawn back

in a black mantle and head darting forward, like an old man thoughtful of money, hands restlessly grasping under the wings of his tailcoat. Then from somewhere an old man in a dry bird voice cried out, —Mani . . . mani . . .

II

> "Miss Potter, where is God?"
>
> "He is everywhere," replied Miss Potter with dignity.
>
> "But, my dear Maiden," exclaimed His Highness, planting himself firmly on one of the chairs, "what good is that to *me*?"
>
> —Ackerley, *Hindoo Holiday*

—A patron saint?

—It's a natural.

—What does she do?

—She intercedes.

—What do you mean, she intercedes.

—I don't know, but that's not the point. Look, they've dug up this Saint Clare. She's going to be patron saint for the whole industry.

—Where'd you hear all this?

—Story conference. Somebody read about it in the paper. They've already run up a rough script on it. She had a vision once, at a basilica, where she saw the whole Christmas thing appear before her eyes. It was sort of the first TV show, you might say.

—What's a basilica? What was she, Eyetalian? They didn't teach Eyetalian at Yale.

—I guess so. It's where Saint Francis of Assisi lived. The poor one. A place called Portiuncula.

—How come they call him Saint Francis of Assisi if he lived in Port . . .

—I don't know, but that's not the point. Look, for the program that inaugurates *The Lives of the Saints* on TV, this is a natural. The story line is terrific. This poor girl, she lives near Saint Francis, and finally she went around to ask him how she could be a saint too, like he was, except to start one for women. So he said . . .

—Start one what?

—Like a nunnery, but that's not the point. So he gave her this hair shirt, and told her to go out and beg for awhile, and then come to his place at Portiuncula dressed like a bride. So she did. It's a natural. This scene where all these monks meet her with lighted candles and walk her up to the altar.

—Then what. They get married?

—I guess so. Why else would she come dressed like a bride?

They walked in thoughtful silence for a moment. The long bare corridor was brightly lighted and empty, until a young man with a thin face, a slightly crooked nose, and a weary expression which embraced his whole appearance, passed them. —There, there's the guy who was working on this, he's one of the writers. Hey, Willie . . . But the weary figure went on. He was carrying two books, one titled, *The Destruction of the Philosophers*, the other, *The Destruction of the Destruction*. He rounded a corner away from them muttering, —Christ. Christ, Christ, Christ, Christ, Christ.

—It would be nice if we could get some kind of testimonial on this.

—She's dead, this saint.

—I know that, for Christ sake. I mean from somebody like the Pope. It would make a nice tie-in.

They walked on in thoughtful silence for a minute.

—Ever since the Vatican pulled that stunt of telling Catholics that seeing Mass on TV wasn't enough, that they still have to get out and go to church, when right in the comfort of their own living rooms they could . . .

—Ellery . . . !

—Morgie!

—You two guys know each other? Ellery, this is Mister Darling, he's the account exec handling Necrostyle . . .

—Know each other! Morgie's an old Skull and Bones man. The whole industry's being taken over by the Ivy League. How the hell are you, Morgie?

—I was saying the same thing at a party last night, Morgie said. —We all used to end up in the old man's

brokerage, and now . . . you can't tell me advertising isn't the new Wall Street. He and Ellery walked down the bright corridor with their hands on one another's shoulders. The third man said, —The highest paid business in the U.S. today . . . and fell in behind them. He was an old Alabama Rammer-Jammer man.

—I just came up for a look at our new morning show, said Morgie. —But why you've got a kids' ballet school on for Necrostyle, now what the hell Ellery, with kids' shows like the *Saints* . . .

—That's how you reach them, Ellery said, —through the kids. There's something about kids. People trust them, you know?

—But a ballet school! We want . . .

—We know what you want, Morgie. Just be patient, we know what you want.

A girl in a wedding dress stood outside a door in the empty corridor. She was very young, and the heavy make-up on her face almost hid her bad case of acne. She smiled uncertainly as they approached. —Lost, baby? Ellery asked her. She nodded and sniffed, up this close she looked about to cry. —You're on the Let's Get Married program? Ellery winked at her. She nodded and sniffed hopefully. —Look, down there, quick, see that guy in the skirt coming out of the men's room? Quick, follow him. It's studio thirty-seven, he called after her as she ran, hampered by her tight wedding skirt, her sharp heels calibrating the silence of the corridor, away from them.

The third man turned and watched the restricted motion of her thighs. At present he had a single modest ambition: he was trying to get a line he had heard somewhere into the script of a highly paid comedian. The line was, It looked so nice out this morning I left it out all day. The censors would not have it: they said it was immoral. Nevertheless, he thought it was one of the funniest things he had ever heard. He also had a salt-shaker which he carried and used in public places. It was a crude plastic reproduction of the Venus de Milo. The sign in the place where he had bought it said, *Because of the amusing way in which these shakers pour, better hide them when Grandma's around*. He was becoming a "character," which was exactly what he wanted. When he went out he wore a cap. The person who had sold it to him had told him that he looked like the Duke of Northumberland in it. Now he said, —What a nice tight little can.

Morgie looked at the girl too, over his shoulder. —You couldn't get into that with a can-opener. It's a crime the way they tie it in.

—No disparaging remarks.

—What d'you mean?

—We got the Kanthold Korsets account.

—What's the tape over your eye, Morgie? Did she bite you?

—This party I was at last night. A bunch of scared intellectuals, you know? A bunch of goddam unamericans.

—But you told them, didn't you Morgie. Ellery turned to the third man. —Morgie's serious as hell. He was always serious, even in college.

—This is serious, goddam serious. Don't kid yourself, Morgie said. —They corrupt, these goddam intellectuals do. They corrupt.

—I told you Morgie was serious, Ellery said, and grinned. —See what he got defending his country?

—Don't kid yourself. Some bastard started in on how New York would change if prostitution was legalized. Clean honest whorehouses, see?

—In that case, you'll have to consider me unamerican too, in Alabama . . .

—No, the point was sublimation, see? This is the whoring of the arts, and we're the pimps, see?

—You should have hit him.

—I did. That's where I got this. Morgie pointed to the tape above his eye. —No matter how much you talk to them, they don't get it. It's too simple. It's too goddam simple for them to understand. They still think their cigarettes would cost them half as much without advertising. The whole goddam high standard of American life depends on the American economy. The whole goddam American economy depends on mass production. To sustain mass production you got to have a mass market. To sustain a goddam mass market you got to have advertising. That's all there is to it. A product would drop out of sight overnight without advertising, I don't care what it is, a book or a brand of soap, it would drop out of sight. We've had the goddam Ages of Faith, we've had the goddam Age of Reason. This is the Age of Publicity.

—O.K. Morgie, you believe in it. Come into the control room and see your dancing girls.

—Goddam right I believe in it. You got to regard advertising as public information, that's what it is.

—O.K. Morgie, relax. Put out your cigarette.

Morgie dropped his cigarette on the floor, and stopped to put it out with his shoe. —I know it, but I get browned off the way some people talk. They talk as if we weren't respectable.

—It's the highest paid business in the U.S., said the old Alabama Rammer-Jammer man.

A man in shirt-sleeves came through the door. —You seen Benny? Ellery asked him.

—Benny who?

A girl going the other way heard this. —I know who you mean, she said to Ellery. —He's in OP, nobody around here knows him. I know who you mean, he was here earlier and he left.

—Thanks, said Ellery; hunching up one shoulder he dropped his cigarette, put it out, and watched the girl go down the hall as he held the door.

—You've only got two cameras up there? Morgie asked. They stood looking at three selective screens. Ellery nodded. —I don't think I'd call this even a B show, even for morning, Morgie said. He was watching the close-up screen where a four-year-old girl, extended at the practice rail, smiled a personality smile into the wrong camera. Ellery looked at his watch.

—And look. What the hell are they doing now, is this part of this show? Ellery was watching that screen, where the façade of an ugly church quivered into focus. The image moved to the squat steeple, and turned up to follow the spire to its top. —There's a guy up there, there's a guy climbing up it . . .

Someone handed Ellery a telephone. —That's right, telephoto on number one as soon as you get number two camera set up down in the street, got me? Cut an announcement in right now, got me? First-hand coverage of a stark human drama, take it from there. Get the church in, nice if you can get a shot of the service going on but don't bust *that* up, got me? That's it, that's it . . . he went on, watching the screen. —Lift it a little, get the bells in . . .

—See if they can get the whole goddam cross in, Morgie whispered.

——Ladies and gentlemen, Necrostyle, the modern scientific aid to civilized living, interrupts its regular program, *Today's Angels*, to bring you on-the-spot coverage of a stark human drama . . .

The close-up screen flashed into life again with the figure of a man mounting the shingled spire toward the cross. Ellery stood silent, gripping the telephone. —But wait a minute, he said. —Wait a minute . . .

—Let it roll, let it roll, Morgie said beside him. —It's terrific.

—Wait a minute . . .

—You can almost see the sweat on his face, Morgie said beside him. —Coming over like a dream.

—It's too bad they didn't get some pancake on him before he went up, said the old Alabama Rammer-Jammer man. —But that light blue necktie . . .

—That light blue necktie . . .

Morgie took a step closer to the screens. He held his breath. When he realized that the man beside him was holding his breath, he commenced to breathe self-consciously. The man beside him realized this, and he commenced to breathe self-consciously.

Then at the same instant they both stopped breathing again.

——Our camera seems to be having some difficulty . . . We're sorry, friends, but because of the crowd which has gathered in the immediate vicinity there on the sidewalk it looks like we are going to be unable to bring our camera in for a close-up . . .

—Like a dream, said Morgie, as they breathed again.

When the scene was obliterated in favor of a sleek-haired oily countenance, they turned to one another. —Where's Ellery?

—— . . . brought to you through the courtesy of Necrostyle Products. And so friends, don't forget, *Necrostyle*, in the vanguard of modern civilized living. Ask your favorite druggist for the *Necrostyle* product that meets your needs. *Necrostyle*, the water-shaped sleeping pill, no chewing, no aftertaste. *Zap*, the wonder-wakener. *Cuff*, it's on the cuff. And *Pubies*, the newest . . .

—Where's Ellery?

In the background, an electric organ played *The End of a Perfect Day*.

—— . . . no harmful after-effects. For men *and* women over forty, start living again, with *Pubies* . . .

—He must have gone out, do you think it got him down?

——And so remember, friends, when *you* come to the end of a perfect day . . .

They went out to the bright corridor where, after a moment, Ellery appeared from an office. He was walking very slowly and staring at the floor. —I just had to see B.F. for a minute, he said when they joined him, and he stood there by the door and lit a cigarette.

—Like a dream, Morgie congratulated him. But Ellery did not raise his eyes. From the office they could hear a voice. It was B.F. on the telephone. —Hello, hello Ben? Listen, there was a jump a few minutes ago, it . . . what? No, this was a man, off a church up in the Bronx, he . . . Yeah, that's the point, it was one of our own men, a guy named Benny . . . what? I don't know, something must have went wrong. I know you can't hush it up, but try to keep us out of it . . . Yeah, they can play up this other one then, the woman . . . Inside the office B.F. hung up the telephone. He stared vacantly for almost a full minute. Then he clicked his lips and took out a cigar.

Ellery blew a heavy ring of smoke toward the floor. It rolled, getting larger, dropping more slowly, and

settled round the toe of his shoe.

All this time Morgie was talking. —You handled it beautifully, it came over like a dream. But look, what's the matter, did it upset you? A thing like that? Look at it this way. Those things happen. This happened. We happened to be there. What the hell, it's all in a goddam day's work. Come on, he said as they started to walk down the corridor. Ellery dropped his cigarette and paused to step on it. —Come on, I'll buy you the best lunch in town. You'll bounce back.

—Twenty-one? said the Alabamarammerjammerman.

—Twenty-one Ellery?

—Twenty-one.

•

One after another the flashbulbs burst and, in the gray light of that day, seemed each time to arrest an instant of riotous motion as lightning freezes motion and then, in the dark again, the persistence of vision retains that image of abandon which could not have sustained itself, as it did here, on the winter pavement, after the newspaper photographer had bundled up his equipment and hurried into the hotel, hoping to make the sporting final.

The morning mail was late, for the falling body had struck the mailman, setting off a pattern of inconvenience which intruded upon many routines. Outside that hotel of faded Edwardian elegance which, having become a landmark, was about to be torn down, the body lay in a pose of reckless flamboyance, a gratuitous gesture annoying such passers-by as the tall woman who was leading a poodle and saying to a friend, —Her name is Huki-lau, that means fish-picnic in Hawaiian, isn't that cute? She used to bite her nails right down to the quick, analysis is doing her a world of good. Oh God! Look! No, don't look.

Discovered breathing, she was taken away on a stretcher instead of the pinewood crate which was already half unloaded.

The hotel room itself proved so rewarding that the newspaper photographer telephoned for more flashbulbs, and asked the city desk to send over somebody with shorthand. He said the reporter with him had just been taken sick by the fumes. Then he hurried back down the hall, took a deep breath, and entered that mélange of smoke, whisky, and roses, where he paused only to sweep some of the letters into a pile with his foot as graphic witness to the story which would say that they were ankle-deep all over the room. The bottles he did not have to rearrange at all, their hollow necks protruded everywhere. As for the roses, he could not have done a better job if he'd taken a month to it. They were festooned dead, dying, and two or three dozens still in bloom, wherever that desperate ingenuity could contrive, and the hand reach. —Roses . . . he would say later (when someone was trying to recall a line of poetry that contained "Roses, roses . . ." to use in the caption), —Roses till hell wouldn't have them. The bathroom, especially, was entirely transformed. There was no place to sit down at all.

But when he returned to his office, the newspaper photographer found an atmosphere of tense gloom which even his prize plum could not dispel. The managing editor, the feature editor, and the foreign editor were all gazing at a story from their own columns. There were two pictures: in one, a little girl in long white stockings; but they were looking at the other, a man with a round face whose limp flabby quality was belied by an exquisite mustache and penetrating eyes beneath a sharply parted widow's peak. —That bastard, one of them muttered, and which one was not clear, for all of their expressions reflected the same feeling. —That dago bastard.

—All right, how much is four million lires? What are lires, Spanish or Italian?

—Eyetalian.

—What do these spies want with Eyetalian money? for Christ sake.

—That's their business.

—Six thousand six hundred sixty-six dollars and two-thirds of a cent, a junior reporter reported, after careful miscalculation.

—Lemme see that God damn letter again. "A respectable business man and professor," for Christ sake. "A mere child in arms when this unhappy incident occurred," for Christ sake. "Reparations . . . my unblemished character . . . four million (4,000,000) lire . . ." for Christ sweet sake.

—You're a Catholic yourself, aren't you?

—Christ yes, but not one of these ignorant spic Catholics.

—So?

—So we're screwed. We'll settle for three million. How much is that? . . . And what the hell is all this?

—These are some of the letters from that hotel room where that dame jumped out the window, the photographer said, and continued pulling them out of a bulging pocket. —You didn't send me a speedwriter down so I just brought some along before the cops moved in.

—Any good reporter would have done that in the first place. Why didn't you bring them all?

—I would have needed a truck . . .

—So you just left the rest of them there, for every other paper in town to sift through . . .

—I mailed one of them.

—You *what?*

—There was a thick one all sealed, with the name of this Doctor somebody on it, so I just looked his name up in the phone book and wrote an address on it . . .

—You stupid bastard. You stupid stupid bastard. What address?

—I don't remember, the first one I saw under his name, I think it was somewhere on Fourteenth Street . . .

—Oh you stupid bastard.

—I just thought I'd do her a favor, I . . .

—You just thought . . . Christ! How did you get onto this paper? How did any of you get onto this newspaper? And how much is three million lire, didn't you figure it out yet?

—All I get is sixes, six six six . . .

—All right, shut up. And now what's this?

—A watch. I found it on the pavement beside her.

—Jesus Christ. The battered thing dangled between his fingers. —Even Minnie wouldn't know him.

•

It was roses, roses, all the way

And like an avenue of flags unfurled, the newspapers quivered in the hands of passengers whose faces reflected costive content and requited destitution, prodigies of unawareness, done with plotting against life, secure in disenchantment, recovered from the times when Cleopatra's gnathic index, or Nefertiti's cephalic index, might have made a difference, while the train shook only negligent response from attitudes which flouted the aesthetician who devised the divine proportion of seven to one from the dimensions of the human being.

All save one: for there was an alertness about Mr. Pivner's attitude, as there was an eagerness in his face, which distinguished him, hurrying home now under the ground. Eddie Zefnic was coming over again this evening, and they were going to listen to something on the radio which Eddie said was very worth listening to.

Above ground, he hurried, scarcely pausing at curbs, scarcely pausing to greet Jerry when he got his paper, almost run down at his own corner where a truck swerved past bearing before his eyes a primitive family pictogram and the legend, "None of us grew but the business." Even near his own door he scarcely paused when he dropped a coin into the tin cup of the blind accordion player who had been stationed there the last few evenings.

Once inside he did not waste a moment, did not even pause to lock the door behind him, entered in darkness straight across the room to the floorlamp, which he turned to its highest brilliance. He ate with no sensation but of what was too hot, what too cold; looked three times to make sure of two quart bottles of beer in the icebox; took his injection with professional dispatch; and then, his shoulders drooping in weariness, squaring again with pride, he drew on his dressing gown, pulling its generous folds tight: for he still had the sense that it had been a gift from the guest he expected. He turned on the radio and it responded with *The Bells of Saint Mary's*, played by the Department of Sanitation Band. Uncertain just what it was that Eddie had said would be very much worth listening to, he left it at that and sat down with his newspaper.

THE GHOST ARTISTS He read the advertisement automatically.

We Paint It You Sign It Why Not Give an Exhibition?

He gazed at it a minute longer without understanding, and then went on to an article which said that Swedish scientists hoped soon to be able to breed men ten feet tall.

He could not concentrate. It was not that he was without his glasses, which he had hardly worn since Christmas: he could read clearly enough. It was not that the newspaper was less provoking than usual: quite the other way, in fact. In addition to the front-page story, where he read fragments from the letters found in "ankle-deep" dispersal in the hotel room (including a proposal of marriage addressed to a man executed for murder some time since, a discrepancy accounted for with evidence of a crumpled news item torn from an old paper used to wrap the roses), there were other diverting tribulations: the bones of Sitting Bull, buried in North Dakota, had been dug up by unauthorized persons and buried in South Dakota; a man

apprehended on a charge of engraving ten-dollar bills said that it had grown out of etching nature studies, he had "just drifted into counterfeiting from a hobby of fooling around with engraving copper plates"; a Reverend Gilbert Sullivan had been arrested for practicing phrenology without a license and, on the side, distributing literature which described his South African kingdom, holy water from the spring of Nebo, Uncle Ned's Black Cat bone dust, Eagle-Eye Joe's controlling powder, Aunt Sally's Black Cat pussy-foot oil, and Mother Duck's holy No. 8 oil . . . then the doorbell rang.

—It's *The Messiah* by Handel, Eddie said after they had exchanged slightly embarrassed greetings, and he put down his armload of new books. —It's on this real little station, he went on, approaching the radio with a businesslike air, the slight apology in his tone articulating the expression on the face of the owner of this modest plastic affair who stood behind him, one hand clasping the other anxiously.

——What have I *du-un* . . . and so friends to get your free . . . managed to hold onto the ball . . . en este momento . . . and now in a brand new . . .

—Is it . . . time for it yet? Mr. Pivner asked hesitantly, prompting, self-conscious, a shyness reflected in the face of his skinny earnest guest as a hand dug into a pocket and the gold watch snapped open, and Mr. Pivner looked at him, and into his future with the thrill he had once known contemplating his own.

—I don't get much chance to listen to music any more since I'm studying so much, Eddie said, standing over the radio with an uncompromising look on his face, and like Pandora's box, the stream of things shut up in that marvelous creation poured out as he turned the dial. —It ought to be right here, he murmured, as though indeed seeking the one beneficence which remained behind when the lid was lifted and all of the torments and absurdities lying there in wait rushed forth, to inflict themselves with such thoroughness in man's life that he came to take them for granted as a part of it. —There's no . . . hope, Eddie muttered, as brackish laughter, turned on like a tap, burst in his face.

—Eddie . . .

——Owners of television sets in the metropolitan area witnessed a stark human tragedy in their own living rooms, when . . .

—Listen . . . !

The Messiah was trying to squeeze through an infinitesimal aperture, where it was being jostled, shouldered, pushed aside and out of shape by an acrobatic contest among violins performing Paganini's *Perpetual Motion*, on one side, and a cordially inane voice addressing friends, finally a quiz program where a house was being given away among much disciplined merriment.

Mr. Pivner listened with all his attention, faintly able to follow

——He was despiséd . . . rejected . . . a man of sorrows . . .

But he found himself following the quiz program, where a Mr. Crotcher had just answered a question concerning a fable with an ant for its hero, and won a completely furnished house in a popular suburban community called Arsole Acres.

——A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief . . . while the voice described the joys of the suburban community (its singular name derived, it appeared, from the Latin *ars* meaning art), and the doorbell rang.

There was something familiar about the man standing behind the one who flicked open a hip-pocket wallet with one thumb, to flash the star of the Secret Service as they entered.

—And who's this?

Eddie Zefnic was standing, as wide-eyed as his host.

—This? a . . . young friend of mine, he . . . what is this, officer?

—You better come along too.

—But what's this about?

—You can tell us what it's about, when we get downtown.

—But . . . where are we going?

—The corner of West and Eleventh Streets, the Treasury man said patiently. Then, —Wait a minute, let's have a look at this bathrobe.

—But this, I . . . Mr. Pivner commenced, getting out of it.

They looked at the label. —This is the one, all right . . . and rolled it up. —You're going to tell us you didn't know it was paid for with queer money?

—But . . . Mr. Pivner was getting into his jacket, his coat, his green muffler. Eddie Zefnic was picking up his new science textbooks.

—Wait a minute, where you going?

—Just to . . . to get my glasses, Mr. Pivner said, and the man who had been silent accompanied him into the bedroom. Only as they were about to leave he spoke,

—You might as well turn off your radio, you won't be back here tonight . . . and Mr. Pivner recognized him, as he hurried back across the dark room while they waited in the door. It was the blind accordion

player.

—O.K., let's go . . . But even now, habit did not desert Mr. Pivner. He waited until the radio announcer had finished his sentence,

——And now friends, stay tuned for drama with the impact of reality.

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The program was introduced by *Beautiful Dreamer*, played on the studio organ. Somewhere, distant, spectral, came the tender alleluias of a sixteenth-century processional, written by Gabrieli, to be led across the plaza of Saint Mark's, where he was organist.

——I came here from another state thinking I would be more happier with my father and . . . an insistent quailing voice commenced; and the apparitions on the plaza of Saint Mark's retired. ——Now just a minute, dear, how old are you? . . . With preternatural and delicate strength, the specters reappeared, for an instant directly the viscous voice left off, and then, ——Twelve years old and I came here from another state thinking I would be more happier with my father and my father start drinkin again and beatin up on my step-mother . . .

There was a crash. Stanley stood, and withdrew his foot from the front of the plastic radio, which was on the floor. He stood, staring at it, unable to believe that he had done such a thing: but there it lay in a mute tangle at his feet. Then he looked over his shoulder, alarmed as though he might have been seen by someone (the owner of the borrowed radio, for instance). Round him, everything in the room was packed in readiness, everything but the crucifix over his bed. Stanley's eyes reached that, and rested on it. His tooth began to ache again, the same one that had been aching the hour his mother died; and with that dull throbbing pain that memory returned, throbbing as vividly. Then Stanley squared his shoulders. He stood up straight, a movement which drew breath into his chest. He closed his teeth together hard, and then turned off the light without a glance at the bundle which held his almost completed work, palimpsests bound together with clean scores which he hoped to alter and copy on the boat; and he went out the door without stopping at the communal hall bathroom, as he'd meant to, pause there and correct that multiplication problem for the thousandth time, out on the street with no idea where he was going. He soon arrived at that place where everyone else who had started out as aimlessly decided was the place they'd started out for.

The juke-box was playing *Return to Sorrento*, and Ed Feasley, whom he did not think he had ever met, greeted him with, —Hello . . . Chr-ahst, and handed him a glass of beer.

A weary atmosphere hung over the place. People stood about at odd angles, like clocks which must be stood at odd angles to keep running, finally all that is expected of them, for they seldom tell the right time, cracked faces kept around for familiarity as long as they keep some track of day and night.

—And so then she broke right out in Braille . . . someone said.

And Hannah asked Ed Feasley to buy her a glass of beer. While he was getting it she turned to Stanley and said, —I hear you're going to Rome and be a Pilgrim. Where you getting the money?

—My mother . . . left it.

—Insurance? you can't get insurance if you . . .

—No, it was . . . she had it pinned in her clothing, in her underclothing.

—I hear your lady friend with the white fingernails went out a window too.

—What? Stanley looked at her aghast.

—Didn't you hear? Max was in here, he had a newspaper. It's all over the front page. She jumped out a hotel window.

—No but, she wouldn't have jumped, she might have . . . fallen, he faltered. —She wouldn't just . . . to kill herself . . .

—She jumped, don't be . . . that way about it, she jumped. And she didn't kill herself, she just smashed herself up. She's in Bellevue the paper says. Hannah accepted her beer, sipped it without a word, and turned, —Hey where you going?

—Well I thought I might go over there, over to Bellevue . . .

—Come on, for Christ sake, you can't go in there this late. You probably can't visit her anyhow. She's probably all strung up there . . .

—Please . . . Stanley said, looking up with sudden appeal at Ed Feasley who stood staring at the floor, silent.

They were all three silent for a moment, looking down, and Don Bildow's plaintive voice reached them. —She's all swollen up, and just before I sail. I don't know if I should go with her like this.

—Dropsy?

—How could a six-year-old girl have dropsy? Bildow moaned, fingering the yellow and brown necktie

which seemed to support him.

—I mean Chrahst, what happens to people? Ed Feasley asked finally. Stanley stood looking numb. —And I mean Chrahst, everybody's leaving, everybody's going abroad. I haven't been in Paris since I was seven years old, Chrahst to go there now! I mean to Saint Germain des Prés where they're imitating Greenwich Village and here we are in Greenwich Village still imitating Montmartre . . . I mean Chrahst. Hannah had been watching him narrowly, noting the strain in his voice, the forced way he spoke and looked away. When he looked up and saw her he started to speak again, sounding more forced and talking about Max in order to avoid talking about something else. —And I mean did you see that fistful of Confederate money Max had? All these old ten and twenty-dollar Confederate bills, he said he picked them up for almost nothing, I mean what does he want with that if he's going to Paris? I mean, you know? Chrahst. And I saw him talking to Bildow, I mean how come he gets along so well with Bildow after that poem thing, that poem Bildow published . . .

—He explained that, Hannah said. —He didn't steal it, he said that skinny girl, you remember the one, she used to write poetry, or she told everybody she did. Max said she gave it to him and asked him to have it published under his name. I guess she pretended she didn't want to use her own name in case people didn't like it. That was a lousy trick, getting Max in trouble like that. She was probably high. They picked up that junkie she had hanging around.

—What happened to her?

—I don't know.

—I mean Chrahst what happens to people. You know? I mean, like Anselm, did you hear about him? He joined a monastery Max told me. I mean Chrahst I'd just as soon be dead. Look out, you're spilling your beer.

—Did he . . . is that true? Stanley asked.

—I mean Chrahst how do I know? Ed Feasley said impatiently. —It's what Max told me. Some silent order out west.

—I always thought he was queer, said Hannah.

—But . . . is that true? Stanley repeated, staring at Ed Feasley.

—How do I know! Ed Feasley burst out at him. —I mean, I told you . . . I'm sorry but, Chrahst, I mean haven't we all had enough of all this? They looked at him with surprise, because his voice was that different, it almost broke; and then he recovered without looking up at them mumbling, —Because Chrahst I mean you can't just you know I mean Chrahst . . .

—I heard you bought an airplane, Stanley said after a moment. Ed Feasley nodded but did not look up. And then Hannah asked him,

—Was that true? what we saw in the paper? Was that your father in the *Times* this morning?

—How do I know, I don't read the *Times*. Chrahst. I suppose it was. Then he looked up. —Have you got a cigarette? They both looked blank. —What do you mean? he broke out again. —About all this . . . these charges of collusion with a foreign government, and the whole works going to hell, and then my old man has a stroke on top of that? Is that what you mean? I mean Christ say what you mean.

—She . . . she didn't mean anything, Stanley said putting a hand out.

—Well Chrahst nobody means anything, Feasley drew away muttering, and stood rubbing the floor with his shoe.

—But you . . . you're all right, about money? you did have plenty of money, if you could buy an airplane . . . ?

—That thing, it crashed in Florida. Were you ever in Tampa? I mean to Chrahst what a lousy town that is, Tampa. They were nasty as hell about it.

—You crashed? in a plane crash?

—I was taking off, I hit this flock of lousy birds.

—But you got out all right? you weren't hurt?

—Chrahst no, I never knew what happened after I saw those white birds right in front of me. I was drunk. I mean Chrahst, what a Chrahst-awful mess everything is, everything at once.

Ed Feasley stood watching his toe rub the floor board, grinding a cigarette stub there into the wood, and would not look up until their continued silence provoked him. He looked up, and they looked down.

—I mean, my old man, Chrahst I never liked the old bastard, but I . . . I hate like hell to see him like this, just . . . just sitting there and he can't move a thing, he just sits there.

When Hannah started to speak, Stanley looked at her apprehensively as though he expected some note of acid triumph (and she had, at that, been referred to in a news item on her arrest the night she was doing her laundry in the subway washroom, as a Stalinist, or Trotskyite, or the parent that combined them both, some such); for each of these two seemed to feel that they had suddenly lost a friend, or at the least an

affluent acquaintance upon whom they could call in some moment of extremity, as indeed they had: or say that someone of those dimensions had simply gone out of their lives, and someone else, bearing superficial resemblances, come in. So Stanley was surprised to see the same expression on Hannah's face that he felt on his own; and her tone, which could not help but be bitter, perhaps the more so for all this, was a relief for she changed the subject abruptly with, —Do you remember that fucking faggot that knocked me down at Max's party that night? Have you heard about him?

—Herschel . . . what?

—He's a movie star.

—Him?

—He's a movie star. He's the new most eligible bachelor in Hollywood.

—Good Chrahst.

—He's going to be Saint Sebastian in a movie about the Virgin Mary.

—But he was . . . Saint Sebastian was third century . . . Stanley complained feebly.

—Good Chrahst. I mean, this is like a post mortem, like the night that Otto and I . . . Chrahst. I don't know. Ed Feasley looked round him. —I mean when I come down here all these people remind me of parts of me that never grew up.

—We live in a country that never grew up.

—We live in a whole God damn world that never grew up, said Ed Feasley. —And everybody's leaving. I mean, he looked round again, —everybody's gone. Where are they going? What are they going to do when they get over there?

—Bildow's going over to get laid, said Hannah.

—I mean Chrahst, I almost don't blame him. You know? The only use I ever found for a condom was to fill it up with water and roll it around on the floor. We used to do that in college. I mean you'd be surprised how tremendous they get. It's like a big piece of water with nothing around it rolling around.

—Do you think there would be so many queers around if there were a few good whorehouses in town? Hannah demanded sharply. —No, here they'd rather see their boys go to bed with a picture of some movie star with big boobs, and go on a five-fingered honeymoon like Anselm used to say, with a movie star.

—I know. I mean Chrahst, every time I've gone out to bars looking for a girl I end up drunk talking to some old man.

All three of them stood staring at the floor.

Don Bildow left, looking as vengeful as plastic rims would allow. He had just learned that someone he knew had been arrested trying to charge a three-hundred-dollar suit to the account of someone neither of them knew. Someone else discovered that the old man in black coat, black hat, black rubbers, and black umbrella, was not the art critic for *Old Masses* at all, but had been hired to go round to galleries because he looked the part (and could keep warm this way); the columns were written by someone in Jersey City, who mailed them in because she never came to New York. The old man left, carrying a glass of beer with him. And down the bar, the Big Unshaven Man was offered a job writing the lonely-hearts column for a newspaper in Buffalo.

—What I get a kick out of is these serious writers who write a book where they say money gives a false significance to art, and then they raise hell when their book doesn't make any money.

—Here, put this in the juke-box. Play *Return to Sorrento*.

—That's what's playing.

—Play it again.

—Chrahst I wish they'd stop playing that and play *On the Sunny Side of the Street*.

Stanley had been simply standing there dumbly, staring at the dirty floor, until Hannah asked him what he was going to do next day.

—Well first I, I guess I'll go over to Bellevue, he said. —Why?

—I thought maybe you'd go with me to get a passport.

—But you, you're going too? To Rome?

—Rome, for Christ sake? I'm going to Paris. All he could say was, —But . . . looking at her. Hannah looked straight up into his face; and then as suddenly as he had turned, she stood on her toes and kissed him. —Because I may not see you again, she said, and was gone. He stood there, his mustache trembled, and he pressed a finger against it where she had kissed him.

—You know? said Ed Feasley beside him, —I mean I feel like I've left little parts of me all over the place. Like I could spend the rest of my life trying to collect them and I never could. These pieces of me and pieces of other people all screwed up and spread all over the place. I mean there are people you . . . do something with and then you never see them again. Like Otto, you know? Where the hell is he?

—I don't know, Stanley said clearly, but he continued to stare at the floor.

—I mean he's probably raising hell and having a good time somewhere, you know? But Chrahst, a good time! I mean like the night we went to that party up in Harlem with all the queers, that seems like ten years ago, that little nigger in the lavender dress standing at the next urinal. And then there was this blonde, a woman, I mean I can still hear her singing, If you can't get Maxwell House coffee by the can get Lipton's tea by the balls, I mean Chrahst I can hear it now. I never got over that night somehow, it got me somehow, I even remember what the soap smelled like, this kind of medical smell, I mean why does the soap always have a medical smell in a place like that? You'd think it would be scented. Where you going, you leaving already?

—It's late, Stanley said. —I'm going home.

—Yes but home, I mean late, and then there was this marathon walker, but I mean Chrahst I mean, how long?

•

—Half an hour, Ellery said thickly. —I'll meet you there.

—One of us better go with you, Morgie said. —You can hardly walk.

—I told you, like I told you, I told you I'm just going to drop up there alone for a minute, I'll meet you at the whatever the nightclub I'll meet you.

They helped him into a cab, which got him to Esther's address before he went to sleep in the back seat. He had difficulty getting out, but he managed, staggering into the doorway, and pushed the first button his thumb found. Then he climbed, stopping every now and then to try to count the number of flights he'd come up, and finally knocked at the door halfway down the hall. There was no answer. He put his hand on the knob, it turned, and there stood a little girl with a fly swatter.

—Rose? She stared up at him. —What's the matter, is she asleep?

—Yes, the little girl said. —She's still asleep.

He followed her in mumbling, —Rose, Rose, you're like a kid, Rose. There was a strange smell in the place. It became stronger as he approached the bedroom.

—See? She's still asleep. The little girl pointed with the fly swatter at the figure in the bed, and repeated, —She's still asleep.

The smell was overpowering. Ellery almost fell on the bed; but he steadied himself and stared. He got out a cigarette, but dropped it.

—She's still asleep, and I'm keeping the flies off her.

—Rose. Christ. Jesus . . . He turned away heaving.

—They say at school there aren't flies in winter, the little girl went on, while he was sick over the back of a chair, —but there are, and I'm keeping them off her.

He hung there for a minute, and then pulled a dresser scarf close enough to wipe his mouth on it.

—Because there are flies in winter, here there are . . .

He turned slowly holding his head in his hand, staring at her, and then pulled himself up and started for the door, where he fell against the door frame turning to look at her again. —Rose, listen, Rose . . . Breath was pouring into him and out of him. Then in one motion he turned himself out the door and reached the stairs. He stopped three or four times on the way down, to prevent himself from falling headlong, and finally did fall about three steps at the bottom. It was enough noise to bring out the janitor, who helped him up and demanded, —Do you know anything about fifty tons of sugar?

Ellery just stared at him. Then he raised a hand and pointed up the stairs.

—Somebody's been trying to deliver fifty tons of sugar here all day.

Ellery let his weight go back against the wall, still pointing up the stairs. Then his hand dropped as though too heavy a weight to hold suspended so, and he got out the door, found a cab, and finally got to the nightclub, where some of the movie people had also come, for it was still comparatively early.

—My, that really was a verklärte Nacht, said Mr. Schmuck's musical director. —It was bad publicity.

Mr. Schmuck was tapping his fingers impatiently on the table, waiting for his order while beside him Mr. Sonnenschein engaged a Baked Alaska. Mr. Schmuck had simply ordered filet de mignon.

—I told you we'd ought to have just bought our pictures and gotten out of there, said Mr. Sonnenschein, blowing a delicate meringue filigrane across the table through the word pictures.

—A real Walpurgis . . . Mr. Schmuck's assistant commenced.

—Shut up, said Mr. Schmuck, —so I could see the lady singing.

—Si-hilnt nite. Holy-y nite. Alll is calm . . . she sang, in a blue gown with sequin-studded bolero jacket to match, filling a selective circle of blue spotlights with a song which had proved such a favorite Christmas Eve that she was singing it again.

In the reverent shadows, the Alabama Rammer-Jammer man salted a steak with Venus de Milo. Morgie

pushed a glass over to Ellery. —Drink that and you'll bounce back.

Ellery mumbled, staring blearily into nothing. From a mouthful of steak across the table came, —Come on, if you can't eat you got to . . .

From a nearby table came, —We were here Christmas Eve too. We tried to get into Saint Pat's for the High Mass but you should have seen the mob.

And from the floor,

hea

—Slee pin vun peece . . .

lee

—What happened this morning? It's like it was a thousand years ago, Morgie said, and added to Ellery, —It's the first time I ever knew you were so goddam sensitive.

—And that, Ellery mumbled, going on despite the floodlit applause. —His face, I just keep seeing those beads of sweat on his face, understand? like a God-damned wreath of . . . beads of sweat around his forehead, do you get me?

—Tonight we have with us that famous star of stage and screen . . . Spotlights fought each other over the surface of blank faces. —It's a little late, but I know everybody still has some of the Xmas spirit . . . how about a word of Xmas cheer for everybody . . . ?

Hanging onto the microphone, the star entertained: —Merry Xmas everybody. Glad to see everybody making merry. Just watch out Mary don't go home with somebody else. He paused for laughter, and breath, swaying. —It was the most beautiful Xmas I ever saw . . . when I got up Xmas morning . . . it looked so nice out I left it out all day . . .

—That bastard!

—I've got a broad waiting for me down at the Fritz-Carlton . . . the star babbled on.

—That bastard! He killed it! said the Alabama Rammer-Jammer man, but neither of his companions appeared to notice. Ellery was trying to sit up straight and drink. Morgie stared dully into his glass.

—Look, what did Schmuck's number-one boy want over there, when you stopped and talked to them.

—They made me an offer. Ellery's shoulders sagged again. —The life of the Virgin Mary. They're shooting it in Italy. They want me on publicity.

—Look Ellery, for Christ sake, you're a swell guy. I'd hate like hell to see you get mixed up with the movies.

—What the hell, Ellery said. —You have to make a change once in a while.

—A change? You think it's going to be any different out there? It's the same goddam thing only it's worse. Here at least you know the people you work with, they know who you are, you got friends. Out there nobody knows you. Morgie was staring at the same blank place on the tablecloth where Ellery was staring. —You got to stop trading in some time. You trade in your goddam car, you trade in your goddam wife, and the minute you get used to the goddam thing some bastard puts out a new model. Just go to the goddam bank. Eye-bank. Blood-bank. Bone-bank.

—That's a nice idea for a show, the old Alabama Rammer-Jammer man interrupted. —Banks as a symbol of progress. Money-banks. Bone-banks. Eye-banks. Blood-banks.

—We just bought a canned show on the march of science, Morgie said, speaking slowly. Neither of them had raised his eyes. The plaintive quality in Morgie's voice was that defiant disappointment in the radio voice which has predicted *clear* only hours before, and returns to admit the possibility of scattered showers unhumbled by the fact that his listeners are staring through closed windows at driving rain. —Did you know that a handkerchief and a cannonball fall at the same goddam speed in a vacuum? Well that's where we are, in this great big goddam vacuum where a handkerchief and a cannonball fall at the same goddam speed, you know what I mean?

Their companion was watching the floor, the hollow plastic figurine clutched in his hand. His thumb moved from one salt vent to the other and the lights dimmed again and went out. A ghostly emanation took their place, withholding reality, as an undelineated naked woman came forth, a pair of pink hands described in phosphorescence cupping her buttocks, which she ground at her audience as though the heavy hands of love (fleeting, groping, failing under other tables in the darkness) were kneading them in orgiastic violence.

—He's on, said Mr. Schmuck's assistant to Mr. Schmuck. Then he turned to Mr. Schmuck's musical director. —You're right. Verklärte . . .

—*You're* right. Walpurgis . . . Mr. Schmuck's musical director commenced.

—Shut up, said Mr. Schmuck, —so I could see the lady dancing.

Out there, she turned and bobbed an undulant front, blossoming at its tips in phosphorescent roses.

—What do you want to get mixed up in that for? It's the same goddam handkerchief and the same

goddam cannonball in the same goddam vacuum.

—Travel, Ellery muttered. —See why the other half lives.

•

Six months: *Elmira* was one postmark, and her lips formed the words silently. The marking on the other letter was indecipherable, though the stamps were Spanish, and she held it up to the light, lips tightening as nothing interrupted the translucency but the jumble of a florid hand. There was no return on it. She put it aside, and took the first letter with her on her trip across the room, there to press it up under her armpit as she adjusted the radio with one hand, and tuned in her new hearing aid with the other. Then she sat down, resting her head back, lips twitching again on "six months," the letter gripped still unopened in her hand as the radio warmed up to *Sweet Betsy from Pike* sung in Yiddish, and she stared at a crack in the ceiling.

•

By daylight, the crack appeared to have just lengthened another whole inch or even more, and Stanley almost bounded out of bed for his string measure. Then he sank back under the blanket (his sheet was packed), closed his jaws tight on the throbbing tooth to hold off the image it conjured as well as the pain, and then lay waiting, as though for instructions from above on something near at hand which he could not quite grasp, and with little time remaining him to do so. His forehead creased with the effort of trying to think clearly what it might be, and as the effort rose to that part of his face his jaws relaxed and immediately the pain in the tooth penetrated him sharply, and the image, close upon it, intruded.

Within the half hour, he was wandering among hospital corridors.

—But baby, taking *that* one to *Is*chia would be like taking an ow-wel to A-thens, he heard, approaching her door, and he stopped. —And don't permit me to leave without the key to my *box*, all those brrrr-beautiful things, I just couldn't show up over there na-ked.

He heard someone say, —Agnes, I'm glad you're all right . . . and then,

—Baby do you call that all rwight? all strung up like an exhibibition in a shop window! Cru-wel boy!

Stanley stood there, after a glimpse at the group round her bed, pressing the deep pain in his jaw, listening.

—Arny baby you must try to stand up, or they'll put you in a little box here and you'll never never never see the normal outside world again. Arny-marney-tiddley-parney, what *have* you got in your pocket?

Then he heard her voice, giving someone an address, her mother's address, on the Via Flaminia in Rome.

—Rubbing alcohol! You should be spanked!

Stanley turned away with sudden resolution: he had heard of there being a chapel in Bellevue, and set off to look for it, rescued from the prospect of actually seeing her, by the more abiding, and surely more prudent reflection, that he might burn a candle for her recovery. And he was well on the way to doing so, moving through the corridors with apprehension, as though afraid of being hustled into a ward, or a straitjacket, himself. But as he came down that hall, where the three western faiths have their depots, he was stopped dead by an apparition in a red and white candy-stripe bathrobe emerging from the synagogue, her face so abruptly familiar, delicately intimate in the sharp-boned hollow-eyed virginity of unnatural shadows, like those priestesses of Delphos in subterranean silence transfixing what might have been fear on a face in the light but there paralyzed in prophecy (until one of them was raped: then they were replaced by women over fifty). —Hello, Stan-ley, she greeted him as she had always, as a stranger whom she knew.

—But . . . I didn't know you were . . . Jewish? he said, and looked even more surprised, having meant to say, —I didn't know you were here . . .

—It is so beautiful in there, she said, and smiled, as one foretelling death by falling pillars, death at sea.

Zealous, importunate, he pressed her. —But here? he recovered.

—She has always been just here, but just here, Stan-ley, she said to him; and then lowered her eyes and turned her face away. —But now they are going to send her away.

—When? he asked quickly.

—Yesterday, or today, so soon. She looked at him, in an instant looked about to cry.

—Where? Stanley asked her; but she looked at him. —Wait, he said, and started to speak rapidly. —You, you see you can come with me, yes, can't you, you can come with me. He took her wrist, and she looked at him. —You see because . . . yes and then everything, then you'll be save . . . safe I mean, you'll be safe . . . Now . . . wait, first . . . He pressed the pain in his jaw, as though to communicate its urgency. —This, I have to take care of this first, I have to go to a dentist but then I'll come back and we, and you'll be . . . all right. You see I . . . we're going away . . . The question lay only in his eyes, searching the large still pupils of hers.

After that he moved with compulsive certainty. And only on going through the pales outside, pressing his

jaw but carrying his head up, and passing the delegation which had forestalled his intended visit, he remembered that he had not asked for his glasses and then, that he had not lit a candle.

—Arny-parney-tiddly-marney, he passed quickly, —stand up! What ever made you try and telephone your *wife*, even if the line *was* busy?

•

The telephone was still ringing when Maude got in. She'd heard it from the hall, and almost broke her key trying to fit it in upside-down.

—Yes, what? she said breathlessly into it, —I? Me? . . . As she spoke her eyes rose slowly to meet those of the figure gently swinging in the bedroom door. —But you . . . why did you choose me? she brought out finally. —But no, no . . . no, she cried, and even with the last word the telephone was back silent where she'd got it, and she stood with her weight on it staring and still, as though supported by those eyes which held her across the room. It was only in wilting, as the energy which the telephone, so long silent, had flooded her with, ebbed away, and she came to rest in her spinal support with a twinge, that the bond of their eyes broke, and she ducked round the suspended figure, into the bedroom to take off her coat. And the baby hung there, sitting silent in a sort of breeches buoy which she had made from a pair of Arny's shorts and some cord, a breeches buoy pulling neither to ship nor shore, moving gently, never more than enough to intensify the repose of its occupant whose only activity was to fix Maude and hold her with clear blue eyes.

In the bedroom she stood looking vacantly at the thing curled on the dresser top: only that morning, trying to find her bank in the telephone directory, she had come helplessly upon the *Guarantee Truss Company*, thrown the book down, and never called to find what remained of her tiny bank balance. And here the thing lay, a circle of swathed steel tapered, to broaden an end in a cushion which rose just enough from the top of the chest to liken it to an open hood, and the whole tensely coiled length a cobra in devious wait: and she hurried past it jabbing a hand to the light switch.

The kitchen sink was stacked with dishes. On her way in there with the baby, she tripped over a pair of Arny's shoes which she kept out, empty, in the middle of the floor.

—The most popular hostess of the week . . . ! she said in a faint tone as she washed, first a dish, then a tiny foot, then a cup. —They telephoned me to ask me if I would like to g-give a luncheon for my . . . and they would bring everything and do all the work and afterward s-serve . . . s-sell their lunchware to my . . . my . . . And I asked them how they picked me and she said we blindfolded a girl, and found your name in a telephone book, it's a great . . . a great honor to be . . . to be chosen the most . . .

The eyes did not move from her. The baby's head was not conical nor, looking at it, did one have that impression; but immediately upon looking away such an image formed in the mind, and no amount of looking back, of studying it from strategic angles, served to temper the placid image which remained. When most of the dishes were done she had reached the neck, and suddenly she applied both thumbs at the base of the baby's head. —It should go in more *here*, she whispered, then applied the heel of a hand there, and finally stepped back and turned away from the fixed gaze as though breaking fetters. She left the baby there in the sink with what dishes remained and went into the living room, where she turned the radio on, tripped again over the empty shoes, and stood thoughtfully for a moment before she picked up the telephone and dialed, reading the number of the druggist written on a bottle in her hand.

——Friends, the time to sell your diamonds is now . . .

—Hello? Could I buy some morphine from you? What? No, I mean just some plain morphine . . . ?

•

It was a long struggle, as though the image itself were holding him back in the chair while the dentist worked. And there was time for the agony of remorse, since Stanley had simply got off the crosstown bus and gone to the first dentist whose sign he saw, up a flight, someone he had never heard of and who had, surely, never heard of him. They strained and tugged at one another, Stanley at the chair, Doctor Weisgall at Stanley, and the longer it went on the more alarmed Stanley became, for the dentist seemed in an unsettled state himself. He had heavy arms, was in need of a shave, and perspired freely in his white coat. And then, while Stanley still lay back, gripping the arms of the chair in a rigidity of concentrated terror, he heard a voice and opened his eyes to see the thing held before him in a pair of heavy pincers. —Is it out? he tried to say, —Is that it? But he could not control that side of his mouth. Nonetheless he asked for it when he left, to take with him wrapped in gauze and a piece of newspaper. Out on the street, the dead side of his tongue nudged the numb hollow on his jaw, and he stopped to spit blood in the gutter. Passers-by glanced at him with distaste, the contempt bred of Fourteenth Street's familiarity with such exhibitions, for he made

a bad job of it, a stream blown against his chin, hung dripping from the uncontrollable side of his mouth, for he had no handkerchief.

In the window above, Doctor Weisgall watched him stagger, collide with a trashbin, a child, another staggering figure who tried to embrace him as a companion in arms, and finally disappear from sight. Then he took off his white coat and stood there rubbing his chin for a minute. Then as though he had put off for long enough some alien, fortuitous, but no less constraining duty, he picked up the letter he had received that morning, opened it, and stared at its pages as he called the police to report this anonymous persecution:

Dear Doctor Weisgall.

The I, what does it stand for? your first name, what is it? The book I am going to write will be called Flowers of Friendship, because do you remember Before the flowers of friendship faded friendship faded, well that is what my book will be about.

We are the great refusal, doctor.

Why do they love us and trust us for all the wrong reasons, reasons often we know nothing about and then they are disappointed. They are always disappointed. Sometimes I want to just stop, just stop everything and thank everyone. What they do, they free us when they betray us. Is that too easy, doctor? Is it because we can share a part of Ourself with each one we know, the part he demands for the rest we do not offer because he would not recognize the rest and more important even would not believe it is us, so we think better perhaps to simply put it away and do not bother him with it. Then see him, with all his might and main and all of his necessity he builds a whole Us out of his fragment, an Us we may have trouble to recognize too but respond kindly to it but better fearsomely, better beware and afraid for one day he will face us with it and then who can say, This is not us at all, why he has depended upon that Us he made with such loving care did he not? Oh surprised he is and disappointed! How we failed how we failed! He is angry and deeply hurt, betrayed! Betrayed! Do not trust Us, flowers of friendship. All the while we search beyond him for what he thinks he has offered so honest, so honest is he, so honest. Finding in him and everywhere some where where we may share a part but no more, is there anyone you can share nothing with? Is there then who you can share everything with? No no no no— but they do not understand. There were too many of them, doctor. There, there, you see? Your kindness is hypocrisy. They gave you everything, he shared everything he had with you. Did you ask him? No, he gave it so honest is he and so sincere. And some day he finds, you never did accept from inside do you understand? Only outside like a handshake you accepted. He is angry and reduced, not for you now but of you then who pretended to share, and did not share but gave, and gave in the giving only a fragment in exchange you see. How little of us ever meets how little of another. As one day he recalls his confidence to you as weakness, and to cast it out he will cast you away because you did accept it from him, so you served him well, and he is older now, and better unfriendship and weakness so cauterized than friendship which remembers.

Why after this long time have you not answered me? What do you demand?

Why do you treat me as they do, as though I were exactly what I want to be. Why do we treat people that way? But we do, everyone treats anyone that way, saying I have had these defeats and disappointments, but you whom I encounter you know what you will say, moving, in accord with your nature which is here in bloom, but I do not yet understand, I, for myself, do not yet understand. Since my problems are not yours therefore you must have none, but live alone inside yourself, therefore here are my problems and we shall share them. So honest are they, picking the flowers with such ease and such concern.

If you have walked out in a summer night, you will understand this, walked out with your face bared to the darkness and then, a spider's web hung heavy with moisture between magnolia and the yew claps its sodden delicacy over your face, then you will know what I mean. Here, he makes friendship in spite of things, worming confidences as they say, he does lose no opportunity to find your frailties, where you fail and how weak, nor lose opportunity to make you know he knows these, at last to lose no opportunity to assure you of his friendship in spite of them, and always in spite of them and so how fortunate you are to have him a friend! feebly saying nice things about you behind your back.

Or elsewhere, never live at the end of a straight road lest you be always looking down it. There in the distance two meet and do battle, where are you? They do battle about you, faded, faded, One says, That is my friend, but you and I are so different, that That cannot be your friend too, then each says secretly, if That is his friend That cannot be my friend too, then they look at one another saying this, We are so different (they say because they do not know each other) that That can be friend to neither of us, but shall be our common hypocrite, and nevertheless and recognized now must be thanked nevertheless for bringing us together and we, being different we shall be friends but honest friends, for you see there are things we do not share.

O doctor, how the meek presume.

Then why after so long have you not answered me?

It is forbidden to enter the garden with flowers in the hand. That was a sign in french at the gate of a french garden, you see, and read it well and you will understand. As though to understand were to forgive! We find the ones with whom we can share nothing. Oh, hold them up and cherish them for they will never come saying, I have found you out! Oh. Oh. They will, doctor. Even they, they will come saying, I have found you out! for from the first you knew we had nothing to share, and that is what we shared, not the nothing but the knowing we had nothing, that I shared with you, but you, what did you give me in exchange but the nothing: I have found you out! They will murder you for that they will. So good doctor do a favor to your friends and go away and die and so unite them.

It is all going to get much worse before it begins to get better, doctor. Glowing they gave you things you did not want, their scarcest treasure. We will not tell, we will not tell, until one day they take it all and nail it frabjously upon another, and your betrayal will be another nail in the coffin of love.

The satisfaction of being found out. It is a very relaxing satisfaction. Oh I have read so much, doctor. So many sensitive things, how sensitive they are, the ones who do not suffer. They wish themselves very well, sincere people. Not with trumpets, doctor, but I see the Lord of Hosts putting his enormous head round a promontory on the northeast end of the Island where a point rises from the water, and here all of us are on the beach, somewhat sheltered. They will all know what to do, the others on the beach, for they will recognize Him and follow some satisfactory prescription but doctor you and I, what will we do but look surprised, look up from a paper-backed edition of something that sold well twenty years ago, or the serial story with no beginning and no end in a magazine found on the veranda, the sole of a beach shoe needing mending, that or the cigarette lighter which won't work for

the sand in it or the face of the dollar watch we always take there which tells the time with sand in it, look up and look surprised and mildly so at that. You and I doctor, on the beach.

He speaks of you and wonders where you are. Calls you Indy, in his selfish voice which is mild with disappointment. Why are the meek so selfish?

You would be surprised how important bars are to people who don't read books, doctor. Sometimes I could weep, and other times I do. I remember The Deserter, a drama acted by dogs and a monkey at Sadlers Wells in 1785, and I could weep. I remember Freddies Football Dogs, and I could weep. I remember the round of names, names taken from popular books for naming of children, and taken back from them grown-up for books which no one reads, and I could weep. Somewhere in Africa I believe they made a mermaid from a monkey and a codfish, I have seen its photograph.

I remember the dampness there. I remember cherries in a blue ceramic dish, specked with water and mold, the cigarettes were delicate to smoke, specks of brown appeared on the white paper as it burned, and left a wet line on the stone tray and all the while the green working outside like a blanket, the grass, honeysuckle, clematis, ferns, tall weeds including Queen Anne's laces, the rosebush and the blackberry out of control without flowers or fruit so busy growing, and tomatoes fallen into the high grass, cobwebs formed and hanging heavy with dampness, the clothes clinging with dampness and without stockings the shoes hollow and damp. Every surface needed paint, and the damp wires sent electricity free through the lampstands. Dust worked into pages of the books left open for them. We invited them, they did not come but they remembered the gesture.

Doctor, eventually the importance of breeding.

Do you remember Rue Gît le Coeur?

What did he say? What did she say? Three of them are there, which is intolerable. Witness three must leave the room so that ambiguity may enter, and in such company one talks assuredly to two since they are now safely alone with mistrust.

Names are very important.

How can you deal seriously with a person named ——? they ask me.

If I owed you money, then you would be interested in me, then you would follow my career with interest. I have thought of that, doctor. For upon contraction of debts, you must expect to pay. You will have to, and probably in a way worse in proportion to the ease and faith with which they were contracted. Do you understand her, doctor? Raped across three state lines, in a back seat in her uncle's car for her uncle with whom she lived was dead on the kitchen floor, raped in an empty movie house and in a cornfield where the police finally cornered him and killed him with a hail of bullets and rescued her, she protested, I only wanted Romance, doctor. And even then no matter how you love, you cannot repay the debts contracted in the loved one's past, nor interfere with how the loved one tries to repay them. But you must pay, you do though you cannot.

Doctor, your honesty's showing.

Well then, do you know the worst thing? When he confirms your accusations. You accused him, then how violently he sets upon you to prove otherwise, then you can do no more than stand and watch, in spite of himself watch him work out all of the things of which you accused him and did you, all the while, hope he would prove you wrong? Watch him unable to leave the scene without making it worse, and the more he insists upon his right the more he disintegrates it until it ends in all he feared most, he recreates and proves you right.

How helpless you are when you are right.

For hard times and difficulty do not make a stronger person as they told us children, good fortune makes him stronger but the others make him weaker and more crafty you see, and they make his circumstances which when good fortune comes he will resist by making circumstances which will make him what he is neither good nor strong. That is what happens from hard times and disaster. Those bad circumstances are the only ones where we can recognize ourselves, and when good fortune comes away, away, we cannot face it, to see ourselves abroad in good fortune and there is no alternative, there is none but in the face of good fortune to flee, and in the terrifying comfort of solitude find the devices to construct the familiar landscape of bad fortune where we step forth in certainty, so it mounts, gets worse and in spite of ourselves we see ourselves more fully and there we are precious again.

What would I have done in his place? People say that, and they mean it because they do not understand it. Sometimes I clean my pocketbook, and that is a wonderful feeling though a task. That is why I do not telephone you, telephones are dangerous things, they separate us from one another and is that simply because we put them to the wrong use? Human, we treat them as we treat others, take for granted services to which they did not pretend. But we force telephones to corrupt intimacy while they pretend to preserve it by keeping alive only its dangerous immediate symptoms. Say a word, say a thousand to me on the telephone and I shall choose the wrong one to cling to as though you had said it after long deliberation when only I provoked it from you, I will cling to it from among a thousand, to be provoked and hurl it back with something I mean no more than you meant that, something for you to cling to and retreat clinging to. There, now we are apart! Doctor? That is why I did not telephone you, send only a symptomatic fragment of me to you in my voice where you cannot see my face but instead sit and stare upon matters of your own intimate self arranged like furniture but not my face which I have been so long in forming for just this moment, writing you a letter where you will see my face doctor and all of me laid out, what can I give you more for forgiveness?

That's all right, we serve them better than they know, if only we exist for them to reject, for they do not understand as you and I do, doctor, and to be certain of accepting one thing they must reject another. I remember, we serve them well. Many of them must make you unhappy before you will take them seriously, so honest are they. Do you remember envy when it called itself admiration?

We serve them well, icons of their desperate and idle manufacture, and Oh! when we betray them by being other selves, and the icon is broken, doctor, do they grow? Or fashion it again and elsewhere, so detailedly the same, different only enough to prevent their recognizing it for what betrayed them once. We serve them well, doctor. That is what I did, extended my vanity where I thought it would be held in trust, and found it taken with desperate seriousness in all the confidence that envy engenders. Then you have accepted a confidence, and laid ground for mistrust. Do you read, doctor? Do you read so far? Are you, too, always certain that you have found the answer at hand, demanding it so, articulate and incarnate? and then you are betrayed? and who betrayed you? How many have you around you, who have never feared you? nor mistrusted you for fear of your being more than one? How many who will share what can be shared but do not fear to expose, simply expose without confidence, nor the secret sharer, those other things which must be worked out alone in privacy, knowing they exist but respecting you for respecting that privacy as the matter of fact indeed it is, doctor have I trapped you?

Are you there, an island in their past, afloat, or a rock shoal, and sailing back do they sight you with cries of happiness and

recognition? Indeed, do they cruise back just to reach you, to land and enter the same pleasance with recognition even delight, share it with others who have languored there, or meet those others upon the beach and do battle? Or cruising somewhere else beyond do they sight you casually, remark your presence with a smile, or do they mark you severely upon the chart and sail by far to leeward and out of sight, to meet further on others bound forward and warn them of your dangers where you lie in the past there though it is for these bound forward the future and they will set their course accordingly. Or sailing back do they sail past however near or far offshore with a shrug and a glance of dismissal recalling nothing but an arid coast. Or do you float, as they told us the Sargasso Sea floats partly under the surface and none is certain exactly where, necessitating vigilance and uncertain anxious care.

Have you ever thought about this, that right now this instant every one of them is somewhere being real? The Pope and the President and also certain surviving kings, the people whose secrets we know and the ones of whom we know no more than the newspaper confides, all the people you have met and all the people you will meet, and all you have never met and will never meet, all of them they are somewhere now right this instant being real. Even when you are not talking about them, not thinking about them perhaps not even remembering them in spite of these insults they are somewhere being real. As though they did not care! At the very same instant they are being real right now. It is too much to comprehend that, still they dare it, but it is too much.

From the train window I see places I have never been, a street corner with the streetlamp on one evening in New Britain Connecticut, and I wept. For it is worse being alone without someone than just being alone. Why I remember green, that color, when color was more than itself, green at sundown after a rain when it was blinding with life, doctor should I have been a drunkard or a nun, for they will not love us as we want to be loved, and a nun or a singer, a singer or a child, doctor or only unborn? For when she lay alone making love, do you think as that ring slipped round her finger, and breathing in the feverish dark do you think she fancied his breath upon her? visioned his beauty? or her own, and only the beautiful woman she will be— Now you have tricked me! coming into the garden so, carrying cut flowers in your hand. In spite of the prohibition which even you could not help but see, so you were deliberate? Yes, I understand, why you cannot forgive, love and forgive, if forgiving restores our innocence and being loved confirms the beautiful things we want to be, and loving is always forgiving that we are not. Why love is divine, because only divinity can restore innocence. You knew the secret I had, didn't you, coming in with a nosegay, love-in-a-mist, love-in-idleness, love-lies-bleeding, you knew the worst thing didn't you. But there wasn't time. The honeysuckle grew and covered everything like a blanket and smothered it. The grape arbor collapsed, not with the weight of the fruit for the birds had taken the grapes away, but under the weight of the vines. I remember the holly trees, where the female stood alone out on the front lawn, and the male cringed away upwind, did you know that doctor? Everything grew too fast then, it was no use trying to keep it down. Everything grew too fast.

But in reading it, the hand had defeated its own purpose: for those lines written in frantic haste took time to interpret; while it was quick work to go through those written with careful painful pauses, written slowly, to compel the reader to read slowly and attentively, a habit she might have made in conversation.

•

—Plain morphine, doctor?

—Better give her a half-grain.

—I don't think there's any on this floor. We've been using Pantopon.

—All right. A forty-milligram dose.

—Surgery recommended Trilene, with an inhaler? . . .

—To hell with Surgery.

—Yes doctor. And now . . . the nurse went on, turning, —Miss Deigh, or Mrs. Deigh, Mrs. or Miss? . . . which is it? I'll just bet it's Mrs. she said coyly, seeing a letter there on the night table addressed *Mrs*. The letter was from an insurance company, to inform her that upon receipt of her signature on the enclosed waiver, they would make payable to her the sum of twenty-five thousand dollars ($25,000.00) in life insurance on her husband, who had fallen off a bar stool in Hollywood.

—And wasn't that an interesting young man that came to visit you tonight! Why, I think I could turn into a Buddhist myself with him to talk to me. The Four Noble Truths! and the Eightfold Noble Path! Why, life *is* suffering, isn't it . . . you just try to lie still now. The nurse finished tidying up the bed and went out of this private room, where the patient had just been moved, mumbling, as she passed a ward, —But to say suffering is caused by *desire?* . . . and that story he told about Bishop . . . Whutley? . . . which she repeated to the nurse in the drug room, —And so this Bishop says to the man praying there in front of this little wheel, who are you praying to and what are you praying for my good man? and the man says, I'm not praying to anybody and I'm not praying for nothing . . .

But that nurse shrugged her shoulders too, handed over the prescribed Pantopon, and went back to straightening the gay handkerchief pinned to her blouse, and untangling the plain gold cross whose chain had got caught on a button.

The night nurse paused on her return to reprimand a shapeless figure huddled half out of bed in the dark to receive this confidence from a low-tuned radio, ——Another case of homicide. And so for really top-notch entertainment, listen in . . .

—All right now Mister Jenner, tomorrow's another day. And she carried her cheer, and the drug and a clean glass back to the private room. She turned on a bright light and started to speak, but the whistle of a

boat, very near on the river, startled her, and she waited, pouring water into the clean glass on the night table, beside the flowers.

—Isn't this the nicest plant! she said, and her patient turned: until that moment the anthurium had really looked rather obscene.

•

About the only person whom the blasts of the whistle did not intimidate into silence was Arny: it brought him round just enough to raise his head, and speak for the first time in two hours. He said it was getting late, and he thought he should call his wife. But he did not speak distinctly, and the blasts of departure drowned out every other sound.

He was part of a gay throng on a promenade deck, where someone fluttered up to ask, —Where's Rwudy?

—Baby you'll find *that* one in the bridal suite. *Alone*.

The whistle blasted them into silence again. Arny alerted, and spoke.

Up above, the tall woman said, —My God, what do you suppose we've got next door *this* trip . . . will you listen to that? . . . pouring-on party?

Her husband put down his glass and stared at the passenger list for First Class. —Two United States Senators, he said finally, and got his glass back.

Aft, as near as he, could get to his wife and the two with her who had come down to see him off, Don Bildow waved again and straightened up. His wife cried something out to him. He waved. It was past midnight.

—If you can't be good, be careful, she repeated. He waved. Then, —Oh! Oh! Oh! Look! . . . he forgot and left his Methyltestosterone tablets, he won't be able to do *any*thing without them. Look, he left his Methyltestosterone tablets . . .

He waved. With the other hand he held on his plastic glasses. The wind stirred his brown and yellow necktie. From down below, he looked like he was being abducted.

The whistle blasted again.

—Baby you were sweet to come see us off but you'd better get back on sho-wer . . . we're going to *sail*.

—But I'm coming *twoo*.

Lines were cast off, and the ship, as large as a country town, commenced a grotesque rearward motion, now as though embarrassed at its size, like a football player backing out of a doll house. Finally, faced in the right direction by six tugboats, it recovered its dignity in imperious puffs of smoke and a shrill blast of steam that lowered enough to sound, to penetrate chasms ashore and be rendered back in particles, each one more faint, as though the island were loath to let it go.

Well below the water line, Stanley opened his door and looked into the passage. —It's all right, he said, —come on out.

Other Pilgrims were already apparent, and Stanley had, a few minutes before, met a priest whom he liked immediately, a man with a plump face which carried joviality easily, but could instantly recover a medieval sternness which, one realized, was there all the time. His name was Father Martin, and he accounted for the large number of Pilgrims, some of whom he was shepherding toward the impending Canonization ceremonies in Rome, which Stanley forthwith hoped, somehow, to attend. They had quite a chat in that minute or two.

—Come . . . he said again, and took her arm. —Don't you have any coat? You didn't bring any coat at all?

She looked at him and shook her head, her eyes impossibly large it seemed to him as his own widened. Then as though aware of the warmth of her elbow in his hand, he took her hand which was cold and led her up to an open deck.

She'd brought no luggage, only a sort of bundle, and what was tied up in it he had no idea, except for a paper book tied on the outside. It was labeled *The Story of Barbara Ubryk*. There was a picture on the cover captioned, *Smothering a baby*. And below, *Why nunneries are within high walls, barred windows and bolted doors*.

—But . . . where did you get this?

She had looked at him with these wide eyes, instantly frightened at his wrath but with no challenge, no question but that it must be justified. —An-selm, she answered him; at that he'd looked away quickly, put the thing back, its cover turned down, and stood looking away unable to confront the sad hope that had suffused her empty face for that one moment, and the bright pleasure her eyes had almost dared over this thing they were to share, that he had brought her to.

She hardly spoke, except when he spoke to her and even then, only if he addressed a question, which she would answer very slowly, deliberate and brief. Though once she had burst out with, —Then do Pilgrims

need a pass-port too? Or I shall wear a cockleshell, and he will know me and he will know me well . . . Which disarmed Stanley: what could she know of Santiago de Compostela? or when with the same light about to break in her eyes, waiting only his confirmation, she had asked whether it were true, Did the mice eat Saint Gertrude's heart? —For she is patron saint of them . . .

As now, he took his hand from her and stood, staring at the lights of the Jersey shore, unable to believe that this was New York, and he was leaving it; and as dreadfully convinced that it was.

Even now the name Anselm threw him into a whirl, the more so now if what they had said a few evenings before, what Hannah had said and they had accepted, if it were true: and if it were true then everything else was true.

With one hand in his pocket he clutched the gauze-and-newspaper-wrapped tooth, as Anselm's dream, —I dreamt about you last night . . . I'm sure it was you . . . and the tooth almost came through to bite into his palm. At that the other hand came up in reflex to take her arm, and missed, though her arm did not move at all there on the rail: missed only so that his knuckles rubbed her bare arm and she turned that anticipating vacant beauty upon him, her eyes unblinking though the wind was rising and came round the upper decks full upon them now, as she waited, awaited his temper: and Anselm persisted, the more strongly, on the floor, ritu quadrupedis, —Succubus . . .

The daring instant of a smile on her face provoked him, —Aren't you cold? Until he asked her she might have been anywhere; now with his prompting question the smile and, if it had been warmth, left her. She shook, three times or four, sharply as though to atone for a multitude of slight shivers.

He looked away, not toward the shore, or where the shore might be, but up forward; and saw only a man on the deck above leaning at the rail, a man in a Chesterfield with the collar up, a black Homburg hat and a long face which seemed to empty through the triangular chin, that, and a glint of gold, at the cuff was it? a finger?

—Don't you want to come in?

After a moment he left her there, and with a shudder of cold went below himself. Roll and go, the motion of the ship was becoming familiar and inevitable to hundreds of people, the sole reciprocation that bound them together.

Already through the Narrows and into the Lower Bay, past Sandy Hook, and into ten fathoms of water when Stanley realized that it was some time since he'd left her out on deck, and hurried up stairs and passages again with an anxious look on his face.

She was not where he'd left her. But he was confused enough with the unfamiliarity of it all to be uncertain that this was where he'd left her, where he stood at the rail and started to call out, at the moment a wave hit the side and threw up spray, and knocked his voice right back into him. He swung round and looked at the water, terrified.

He heard her call him; and he looked still more alarmed.

She was up on the deck above, and waved to him. He saw her there with great relief, finally, and saw a shadow that had been standing near her turn and disappear in the dark. When she came down, he could not scold her for the fright she'd given him, and so he reprimanded her, —You shouldn't go up there, that's First Class . . . and he pulled the door open with more effort than he would have thought necessary.

—Was there somebody up there with you? . . . were you talking to somebody?

—Only to the cold man.

—Well you . . . you ought to be more careful, you can't just go talking to people.

—That is what he said, when he heard her singing.

—Who?

—The Cold Man.

At the foot of a staircase leading to First Class, Stanley saw Father Martin descending, and let go her arm. Then as abruptly he took it again, up high where there was some sleeve, and came on resolute, slowing his step and so hers, for the greeting, the introduction, the explanations: but Father Martin passed, looking him straight in the face, without a word, without a shade of recognition, the medieval lines of his face standing out livid as though he had seen a ghost.

Off Ambrose Light, there was some commotion. The ship almost ran down a rowboat in which a Chinaman, equipped with three New Jersey road maps, was setting out confidently for home, and had already got this far from the land into which he had been smuggled so many years before.

But Stanley didn't hear of the incident until a day or so later. Down a passage before him, she commenced singing, her voice very low,

—Blessed Mary went a-walking . . . Over Jordan river . . .

—Where did you learn that? he demanded.

—The song you taught her?

—But I . . . I never taught you that.
—Stephen met her, fell a-talking . . .
—Who is this . . . cold man? he interrupted her again.
—The Cold Man, and he carries his arm like the boy did.
—Like . . . what do you mean, in a sling?
—In a black one.

Inside, Stanley stood looking vacantly at *The Story of Barbara Ubryk*. Then he took her bundle from the chair where he intended to sleep.

—Blessed Mary went a-walking . . .

—Come . . . he said, knelt now beside the bed where the yellowed crucifix was already hung, already muttering the *Pater noster qui es in coelis* he intended to teach her, the metal deck cutting his knees. The engines sounded in a constantly renewed heave forth, as her knee where she stood beside him, brought her weight against his arm, and away, and against him the more heavily as the prow far ahead shuddered into a trough, into twenty fathoms of water, and without a word he drew her down.

III

THE LAST TURN OF THE SCREW

> ¡Así por la calle pasa quien debe amor!
>
> —Lope de Vega, *Amar sin saber a quién*

Spain is a land to flee across. Every town, and every capital, is a destination; and the names which ring with refuge to the fugitive mount with finality to him traveling relentlessly unpursued, setting destinations one after another whose reasons for being so cease upon arrival, and he must move on, to provide that interim of purpose with which each new destination endows the journey however short, and search each pause with reasons anxiously mistaken drawing nearer, with each destination, to the last.

Trains do not depart: they set out, and move at a pace to enhance the landscape, and aggrandize the land they traverse, laboring their courses with the effort of journeys never before made, straining the attention on sufferance of minutes passed separately until concentration is exhausted, and no other pace conceivable. The very distances become greater, through landscape irreplaceable by the exhausted fancy, unaltered by the most resourceful imagination, impossible at last any other land, oppressed by any other sky.

Five miles behind lay Gibraltar, crouching across the bay from Algeciras heavy-buttocked and dumb, the hulk of an animal in immense malformity with lights stacked glittering at its base like suppliant candles round a monstrous idol.

This time of the year, the levanter blew in its chill from the east, shrouding the rock and bringing dampness and an overcast to the sky. Algeciras showed no light but what was left over from day, and when even that was gone dull glows appeared at last in the narrow cobbled streets leading up to the plaza where trees bore oranges among benches tiled orange and white and blue round a dry fountain. There, when the one-arm church sounded the flat planng of its bell, and the dim lights of the plaza, burning an hour or two now in lusterless illumination of the quiet, failed and went out, that quiet proved not what it had seemed, not an immanent thing at all, but imposition: back down those narrow streets the town seethed behind shuttered casements with music and the violence of voices in strained extremes, driven on frenzied patterns of clapped hands, broken by the disciplined clatter of castanets. Café Pinero was betrayed almost two blocks off by the strident crash of the girl's heels on the frail wooden stage. A mute idiot winced in the single door where an unshaven man in a lambskin jacket and dirty white turban pushed him aside to enter, and leave him standing spent in masturbatory gestures for the dancer beyond the round tabletops and coffee cups, turning when she was done, twisted, with a whine, away from the glasses and smoke, frantically hopeless back to the narrow street, drawn by the heels of a passer-by loud on the stones going down the hill unsteadily, with a pause of distress to brush a spot of moonlight off the sleeve, pursued once more by the wail, —sangre negra en mi corazón . . . down, toward the bay again and a hotel whose high-ceilinged rooms drown the transient overnight among sunken ribs of ponderous furniture, to surface him rapidly with dawn among tiles of differing intent, exaggerated on rising, distorted in mismatching deep and then not as reflections underwater, bold below as a public lavatory, consumed on shallowing in Moorish intricacy as light separates the louvers and the train sets out before sunrise for Madrid.

It enters upon the surface of an inland sea, so that land is, as empty and apparently trackless and vast, harboring briefly in indistinguishable ports along a course charted over barren swells, past trees as alien

here as things afloat, and the apparitions of isolated ruins condemned like the specter-ships of the sea to sail forever unable to make port.

It was cold, and one of the soldiers sitting by the broken window in the old second-class coach bundled up a coat and stuffed it into the opening. The seat they had taken was broken too, and every time one of them fixed it, it collapsed again, until they stacked two wooden suitcases under it. Then one of them passed round a leather wine skin, and another brought out a trumpet. He played *Dinah* twice, and each time left out the line, —change her mind about me . . . as the train paused at a village, and went on among stripped cork trees. A vendor came down the aisle with a tray of peanuts and inedible-looking confections. He was stopped by a handsome boy about twelve years old, who paid for three peanuts with a ten-centimo piece delivered with some difficulty from a deep pocket. The boy had a black corner stitched on his lapel. He gave a peanut to each of the younger children, both girls, and offered the third to his mother, who watched him all this time, her own grave eyes excited and shining with a strained surprise which the children reflected, when they looked at her, and all four were caught in the silence of being left alone which none of them tried to dispel with feigned pleasantry or false cheer. But they asked him the time often enough, to provoke the solemn exercise of taking out the watch whose face he studied with such sober attention that years mounted upon his own; and the woman, turning her eyes with something fierce and proud in them from the boy, stared for a rude moment at the man sitting alone across the aisle who was looking at them all with an expression which was not a frown but had happened as an abrupt breaking of his features, until that instant apparently cast for good as they were but even now, in this new constriction, renewing an impression of permanence, as molten metals suddenly spilled harden instantly in unpredictable patterns of breakage. She did stare, with the face of someone looking at a wound, until discountenanced, and when she turned away held a hand to her temples. She was not more than thirty, and in black. Now the train was moving so slowly that every stripped cork tree drawn past stood out in nakedness, writhing the red agony of its flayed trunk toward the waste of heaven.

Between the land and the still brilliant blue and white of the sky moved gray clouds with torn edges.

An old man with a battered guitar entered at the upper end of the coach. He had two tunes, one a vaguely recognizable paso doble, the other a hapless *La Tani*, which could only be heard in his immediate vicinity, with such meticulous care did he work what strings remained. The soldier played *Dinah* in another key, on the trumpet, and the old man tried to accompany with his paso doble. —Aïe . . . they passed him the bota, and he did not spill a drop.

Past noon, the woman asked the time, and they waited with proud patience through the grave ceremony of finding it. Then she stood to their baggage in the rack, all cloth bags and paper packages, baskets and bottles, and a silent bird in a cage. She had already sat down and opened some cheese, while the boy broke open a loaf of bread, when she glanced up to see the man across the aisle staring at all of them feverishly. She was quick to get some bread under the cheese, and with no hesitation offer, —Quiere comer?

He grimaced, and mumbled, appeared to try to smile, shaking his head. He looked eager, but nonetheless surprised, even shocked at her invitation, even her recognition, which she withdrew from him, and returned to the children, the bread, cheese, and fish.

He sat turned away staring for some time through the glass, or possibly no further than the image the dirt on the outside of the glass made fleetingly discernible, and unchanged; until eventually his own meal appeared, part by part, oranges, a banana, bread, a bottle of wine, a cucumber, an onion. Then he smoked, until the cigarette came apart between his fingers.

Toward evening, mountains far ahead posed impassability.

—Una y una dos . . . dos y una tres . . . the soldiers sang up ahead, *La Tani*, though the old man with the battered guitar was gone. —No sale la cuenta . . .

The mountains turned dark, their features flattening and their shapes ahead black and two-dimensional against a sky suffused with faint green: and suddenly the train burst out upon the open blue plateau, into a haze which still held the spent lust of the sun clinging over the barren plain of New Castile, where the train rushed forward into the approaching darkness, toward its destination, Madrid.

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The haze settled on the city in the early morning conveyed that remarkable cold which they say will kill a man and not blow out a candle, motionless cold which seems to come from inside, and be diffused through the body from the very marrow of the bones. That early, the streets were desolate. Here and there old women fanned kindling fires in brazier pans, standing one foot in gutters then being swept clean. Men hosed down the streets, as they did whatever the weather; and those who passed hurried, only the glint of eyes between the drawn beret and muffling throw of a cape. Over all this the Spanish sun hesitated, would not rise until forced by expectant activity, then with a great red flush it appeared from the haze beyond the

Atocha station.

And soon enough, the streets were filled with cries, men selling brooms, or buying bottles, women selling *España*, *Arriba*, *ABC*, tobacco, lottery tickets, —Dos iguales para hoy! . . . Their cries rose like the sounds of people in agony. And soon enough, the blind boy was posted at the corner near the Plaza Santa Ana, with lottery tickets pinned to his coat, to pass the day there, and be taken away at night.

In a nearby alley, identified on a tiled wall as Alphonso del Gato, a spotty unshaven man with cigarette burns in the robe he had wrapped round him, stood on a narrow window balcony looking down at the figures hurrying below in carpet slippers on the cold pavement. Two members of the Guardia Civil appeared, and he retired quickly, closed his windows, and went on with his work at the mirror. On the dresser top before him, a passport was propped open with a bottle of oxalic acid, which he had used to make a few alterations in the lavender stamp-ink, and now he was trimming his tinted mustache in accord with the passport photograph. There were in fact two passports, one Swiss, and this one opened, Rumanian. He had studied the Swiss face and particulars often and regretfully, and finally given it up in favor of the other, though there were, as he knew, certain inconveniences attached to being a Rumanian. One was that he did not understand a word of the language (though somewhere, among the litter of newspapers and bottled chemicals, there was a copy of I. Al. Bratescu-Voinesti's short stories, *In Tuneric si Lumină*, which he carried occasionally and appeared to read in such places as customs sheds and police stations). By adding ten years to the life of Mr. Yák (whose passport, along with the Swiss one, he had been working on in New York before his sudden departure) and, with the tinted mustache and a shock of black hair, subtracting ten years from his own, he quite fit the unknown Rumanian whom he had recently become. He did, in the habit which years of application had instilled, think of himself as Mr. Yák; and any other name, or life he had borne, was almost forgotten: almost, that is, but for the one thing which had driven him to this unobtrusive retirement from his former profession, into the historical asylum of Iberia. Among the scattered periodicals, there was one particularly thumbed, creased, and soiled, a recent copy of *The National Counterfeit Detector Monthly*. Page one, headed *The new counterfeits*, was the most soiled, creased, and thumbed: "Check letter A, face plate No. 95, back plate No. 475, series 1942B . . . The Jackson portrait is exceptionally good . . ." —How? he would murmur whenever he read it over, —How did they catch it? He would go on to read the other current reviews, "The Hamilton portrait is smutty . . . Nose lines broken, right eye too narrow . . . Crude reproduction on poor paper . . . This is a counterfeit of average quality . . . Dark expressionless eyes . . ." but he always came back to the top one, and muttered —*How?*

All this made him quite restless, as the chaos of newspapers showed, *ABC*, *Oggi*, the *Continental Daily Mail*, through whose pages he sought some new challenge to erase the indignity of this recent defeat. This was the first vacation he had ever had in his life, aside from enforced recreation periods prolonged at Attica, Atlanta, and other resorts where he was familiar. He had plenty of money, the local currency that is, having sold the remaining packets of his last work to a Levantine who did business in Tangier. Still he could not relax. He was beginning to look like a remittance man, though, with some success, he tried to melt into the people around him, and look like the other men staying in this pensión, dressed with spruce seediness, as they were, nervously alert, as they were, and even a plexiglas collar, as they wore. Everything was in order. Even his stomach had settled down, after its first horrendous adventures with the fare in the Pensión Las Cenizas.

Still he could not relax. Small things upset him. The mustache, for instance: he was unused to wearing one permanently, and when he came into the room alone and locked the door behind him, reached up to pull it off and toss it into a drawer. And the room was cold. When he complained about it, to the dueño, or the girls in the kitchen where he went to warm his hands, they behaved as though winter had come for the first time to Madrid, and spoke of the cold in terms of a vague wonder which they managed to sustain annually until spring. There was a radiator, a cold, absurd, mocking piece of furniture in one corner, for there was very little coal anywhere in the country; and so he was at last given a brazier whose surface of gray ash remained warm to the touch for some hours. He spent a good deal of time sitting a knee on either side of it, cleaning his nails with the end tooth of a comb. He had tried to read, something more sustained than the papers, but that got nowhere. There was nothing there for him. The same for the paintings of Velasquez and Goya, Dürer, Bosch, Breughel, for he'd even been to the Prado seeking challenge, but there was nothing there for him.

He picked up the *Daily Mail*, and under "Teddington's Good Win," read again of a distant hockey game. He read again of the visit of four rare (Bewick's) swans at Penns Pond, Richmond Park. He read again of betting law reforms; and a seven-year-old girl killed by a shotgun blast. Under "Today's Arrangements" of an organ recital by Mr. W. J. Tubbs at Holy Trinity, Marylebone; a meeting of the Victoria Young Conservatives, the Johnson Society of London, the Friends of Uruguay Society. There was nothing there for him, and he threw the paper down, but with no alternative, than to pick up another.

A minute later, his brows knitted over an open page. He sat forward, and *Digame* quivered in his hands. He looked up from it, and stared abstracted for a full minute at an Andalusian love scene on the wall, then back at the page, his sharp darting eyes glittering with excitement. Pictured in the paper was a face beaming malevolence over a black beard, identified as Señor Kuvetli, a prominent Egyptologist stopping in the capital in the course of his work, which now centered about a search for the lost mummy of a young princess, possibly to be found somewhere in Spain, brought here as a talisman by a retreating band of Gypsies centuries before.

He laid the paper aside and commenced to pace the floor. Then he sat down over the brazier and commenced to clean his nails. The residue from this task dropped on the surface of gray ash, where it sank and burned with a slight puff and a noxious odor which rose to him until suddenly, as though inspired by some divine flatus, he leaped to his feet, and in a matter of minutes was shaved, dressed, and generally caparisoned for the streets.

Before he left his room, however, he took time for a quick look in Baedeker's *Spain and Portugal*, which he had in two volumes, the original having split into two, and then went to seek the dueño in the dim halls of the pensión, after giving the shock of black hair a toss with his broken comb. As he stooped to lock the door, Marga came hurrying down the dark passage, bumped him, and with a flash of her eyes, blond hair, and a blue angora sweater, begged his pardon and was gone inside her own door.

Now there are some women, of retiring nature and modest comportment, who if seen, say, wearing a fur-trimmed cloth coat, are remembered after as having been dressed in the simple cloth coat of whatever color it may have been; and there are others, seen in that same coat, who are recalled sheathed luxuriously and entirely in the fur, and Marga was one of these latter. She was a guest here, and though she had never importuned this exotic neighbor of hers, now adjusting his hair in the dark passage, the mere fact of his avowed origin made him interesting, and she was always exceedingly bright with him, as she was with others there who knew more of her private habits than Mr. Yák might be expected to, keeping to himself as he did quite strictly, but for the dining room, and speaking only when spoken to, in a flow of Spanish which was difficult to follow, was in fact a stiffened Italian from which he pruned the luxurious curls and Neapolitan tendrils as he went along, though as far as that goes neither Marga nor the dueño had ever been to Italy, and neither had ever seen a living Rumanian in their lives.

As for this one she'd just left behind in the chill corridor, he was quite spry this morning, now following a girl laden with two chamber pots toward the kitchen, where two other girls sat picking over a pile of lentils on the metal table top, and the one he had followed went on next door to empty her charges, and rinse them in the bathtub.

He found the dueño there too, in checked carpet slippers, soon had the information he wanted, and left down the linoleum, banging the heavy door so that its bell jangled, moving with a sprightly vigor which might have been surprising even in one of the age he appeared now, the shock of black hair dancing over his forehead as he hastened toward the Estación del Norte, where he was in time to catch the morning express to Segovia, along whose route his destination lay not far distant.

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San Zwingli appeared suddenly, at a curve in the railway, a town built of rocks against rock, streets pouring down between houses like the beds of unused rivers, and the houses littered one against another like boulders along mountain streams. Swallows dove and swept with appalling certainty at the tower of the church, as the morning visitor climbed the hill toward the town, touching now and then at his mustache, as though to make certain it was on straight. He walked with a briskness, and a light in his eye seldom seen today but in asylums and occasional pulpits, the look of a man with a purpose.

With this spring in his step he was soon up behind the town, where the sound of running water nearby, the braying of burros and the desultory tinkling of bells, and the distant voices of people below reached him where he paused to sniff, and then stood still inhaling the pines above him and the delicious freshness of cow manure, like a man rediscovering senses long forgotten under the abuses of cities. Then he was off again, and when he reached the road bounded by cypress trees, he hardly paused to cross himself at the first station he encountered as he hurried up the hill toward the white walls of the cemetery.

The forecourt, as he entered, was flooded with a riot of flamenco music from the radio in the house of the resident watchman, to one side there and almost hidden behind the unfurled hilarity of the week's wash. Nonetheless he could hear voices beyond the next gate, where a small stone crucifixion drew his eye as he approached and went through, with a quick glance up at it and a stab, more a parabola than a cross over his chest, for the figure carved in what appeared at that moment full abandon to a dance which the music accompanied. Within, the bóvedas mounted on both sides, three, four, five vaults high, decorated with bead flowers and metal wreaths, icons and wilted nosegays, broken glass protecting photographs, and all of them

numbered, with names, and ages caught up in infancy and childhood, many between fourteen and twenty, and few to sixty. Straight ahead stood a separate mausoleum, a cross atop it, surrounded by a chain and four corner columns mounting stone faces, the girl, the woman, the hag, and the skull.

—Ausculta . . .

—Mira señor . . . aïee . . .

The argument going on in two languages would hardly have made sense in one, and the newcomer arrived to enter with what sounded like a third, for one of the men was the watchman whom he'd come to see. The other was a feverish-eyed man whom he studied sharply for fear, as he confessed later, that he might be a Rumanian, since the language he spoke sounded as if it might have been anything. (It proved to be Late Latin, being garlanded with whatever tendrils and sprays came to hand.) Both were waving their arms at the bóveda beside them, where an unmarked vault and one containing nothing but the wet end of a broom stood side by side.

—My father doesn't make mistakes! the feverish-eyed man suddenly burst out.

—Ah . . . speaks English?

—Yes, I . . . you, who are you? Listen, do you speak . . . can you talk to him? My mother's in there, and I . . . he tells me . . . Here, you talk to him. Here she is, I've written her name down, here, he went on rapidly, and handed a rumpled card to the shock-haired man, who stared at it. —Yes, yes, there that's her name, she . . . What's the matter, can't you read it?

—This . . . this is your mother's name?

—Yes, can't you see? And she . . .

—But . . . what's she doing here? How'd she get in here? The card quivered, and became damp in his hand. He reached up as though he were going to smooth back the shock of black hair, but his raised hand dropped and he crossed himself as he handed the card back, and crossed himself again.

—Well that's what I want to know. I mean, there's no name on this vault, there's no mark, there's no way to tell . . .

Then the sacristán started, and spoke as though he could not stop: *la guerra* was the word to occur most often; next to that, *los rojos*. All this time Mr. Yák studied the figure beside him closely, as though it might be a ghost, or the leavings of one, the thin lips and nervous blinking eyes, hands at his sides opening and closing on nothing. Mr. Yák was agitated enough himself, tugging at his mustache as he listened to the sacristán, and then pressing it anxiously back in place, searching the face beside him for some resemblance he hoped not to find, while the other simply stood, blinking at the unidentified vault and then up at the brilliant sky where low-flying gray clouds exaggerated the vastness of the sheer blue and white beyond.

—España . . . no hay más que una! burst the music in the court, as the sacristán gasped for breath, and Mr. Yák turned to interpret, —In this war they had, these reds came in and turned everything upside-down, some places they even opened up some coffins and stood the bodies up all over the place . . . even down in the church he says they turned everything upside-down, even the párroco, the town priest here, they turned him upside-down too . . .

—Coño, mira . . . The sacristán recovered his breath, and with it his stream of Andalusian enthusiasm; but he was interrupted by a proposition which left him wide-eyed and open-mouthed: Mr. Yák had, after all, come here on business himself, and now, to show his calm as he spoke of it, he reached to a niche nearby to pluck a boutonnière. He had some difficulty in breaking the wire stem, but by the time he'd done speaking he had the spotted paper rose in his buttonhole, and the sacristán, though he was staring transfixed at this gay embellishment, seemed not to see it for the horror of what he heard. Even the wad of five-peseta notes which reached his hand did not break the sacristán's cataleptic stance, though it loosed his tongue enough for, —Ya no! Ya no! . . . and he commenced to chatter on about the párroco, and a funeral cortège which was imminent, to listen, while he caught his breath, and then bound round the corner of the bóveda, pointing, —Ya viene! Ya viene!

Sure enough, below, and as yet beyond the first station of the cross, the coronation approached. Still Mr. Yák seemed in no hurry. He said a few more words to the sacristán, and then sauntered off among the bóvedas, reading ages and dates on the tiers of vaults like a man on a shopping tour. The paper rose, slightly disintegrated and faded in spots by drops of rain, added a jaunty note to the general trimness of his person, which the plexiglas collar so nicely defined. He might have worn a hat, but for fear his hair come off with it when it was removed, and now, as the sacristán watched them out the first gate, the wind stood his black hair up on end, and he grabbed for it. As for the figure beside him, the sacristán had earlier noted how the man's coat stood out on both sides like a pack-saddle, but said nothing, only stared, as he did now after them: seen from behind, as they passed through the second gate, they looked like two old men.

The funeral pomp was black, led slowly up the rock-studded road by the párroco, an old man with a boy on either side carrying their standards. The horses wore black plumes on their harness and black net

halfway to the ground, and the open carriage they drew mounted to a black cross pinnacle over the exposed casket. The man seated before, driving the horses, and him up behind between the wide rear wheels, both wore black hats square over old unshaven faces, derelict decorations like those awaiting them above. The men who followed carrying their hats, and their heads bowed, stepped round the horses' droppings which were left behind steaming in the sun. Mr. Yák crossed himself, three times, as the procession passed.

Part way up the rough road a little girl in a green dress followed on a cycle, which she turned in uncertain circles before the two figures descending, and looked them over curiously before she went back down slowly before them. —How old do you think she is? Mr. Yák demanded suddenly, studying her with a strange appraising look.

—Ten, maybe.

—Yes. Just about. Just about. His companion shuddered beside him. —What's the matter? . . . it's not your funeral. They passed the sixth station silently. —What's that you've got in your pockets, they stick out like that.

—Oranges.

Mr. Yák nodded, as the oranges bumped against him. At the second station he brought out, —So that's your mother up there, you came all the way to visit her grave?

—There's no mark on the vault. It ought to be but there's no name on the vault.

—It's probably her in there, you wouldn't have any way to know if it wasn't anyway.

—Well I . . . I might . . . I could . . .

—You wouldn't want to go prying around in there.

—What?

—I mean you wouldn't want to go looking inside. She's been in there thirty years, you wouldn't want to . . .

—How do you know she's been in there thirty years? The man stopped beside him, bumping him round with the oranges. —You . . . what do you . . .

—I just said that, Mr. Yák answered with quick constraint, putting a hand on the arm beside him to draw the man on. —You know . . . here, what's the matter?

—I just don't like people's hands on me, that's all.

Mr. Yák drew his hand back quickly, and pressed his mustache with a finger. —That's a nice ring you got there. Diamonds? He had no answer. Then his companion stopped as abruptly as before, but he was looking far beyond, to the east where the snow-capped peaks of the Sierra de Guadarrama emboldened the sky.

—What's the matter?

—Matter? I . . . nothing the matter. Those mountains, I just noticed them.

—Oh them. Mr. Yák sounded relieved. —They been there a long time.

A barrel organ sounded defiant gaiety in a side street as they entered the town and approached the church.

—It's nice you came to see your mother's grave like this. Mr. Yák paused outside the heavy door, its opening covered inside with a hanging which a girl pushed aside, coming out, and took the handkerchief from her head. —You're not coming in?

—In there? The man looked up for the first time since he'd stopped to gaze at the distant mountains, but the same look in his eyes, as though he were looking at something far away.

—To burn a candle. You know. You can have a Mass said for her. If you come all the way here . . .

—But I . . . look, what is all this? Who are you, anyhow? You . . . what does it matter to you if I . . . if I burn a candle or burn the whole church down for her?

—All right! Mr. Yák took a step forward. —Then as far as that goes, how do I know that's your mother? . . . that name on that card you showed me.

—Damn it, now, what . . .

—Look, can't you read that sign? The shock-haired man pointed to a sign beside the door. Further down the wall, near the street corner, was pasted a once-colorful poster for a seven-year-old American movie. —Hace años que los Prelados de la Iglesia vienen repreniendo la bochornosa . . . see? You shouldn't swear . . .

—Damn it . . .

—Que ya no se respetan ni la santidad del templo, ni los misterios más augustos y sagrados en cuya presencia . . .

—Goodbye.

—While you're here you could at least have a Mass . . .

—Good God, I . . . what makes you think she's still in Purgatory? You . . . look this . . . this is idiotic, she wasn't even . . . Wait, I thought you were going in there, in the church.

—I just remembered, the priest, he's up at the cemetery now.

—Yes, I . . . he'll be back. Goodbye.

—Are you going for some coffee? We can have some coffee.

—I'm going for a drink.

—You don't want to drink so early.

—Good . . . God! If I want a drink, damn it . . .

—Look out! . . .

The empty funeral carriage came careening around a corner. Both men aboard it had their hats pushed back, and were smoking.

—That was almost your funeral.

—Yes, well . . . listen, every time a funeral passes, it's your own passing. Now let me go. Thank you. Now let me go, will you?

Mr. Yák took his hand from the man's arm, but hurried along beside him. They followed the barrel organ to a bar called La Ilicitana.

Inside, Mr. Yák ordered two coffees. The man beside him clutched one hand in the other on the bar silently, as the bartender escaped with the order. Then looking straight ahead at the bottles behind the bar, he took out a torn green and black paper packet, and from it a yellow-paper cigarette.

—You don't want to smoke that. The tobacco here's one-third potato peelings. Here . . .

The man's hand trembled slightly as he lit the yellow-paper cigarette, raising his elbow to ward off the cellophane-covered packet being thrust at him.

—You can get real cigarettes here. Rubio, you call them. Tobacco rubio . . . here.

The man exhaled a cloud of acrid smoke, and as the bartender appeared with two cups of coffee he began to gesticulate and mutter, —Vino . . . albus. Bianco . . .

—Here, I already ordered coffee . . .

—Damn it, I don't want coffee, I . . .

—I can't drink two cups of this stuff. One of them will get cold . . .

—Now listen . . .

—All right, what do you want. Wine? White wine? Un blanco, he said to the bartender, watched until a glass was half filled and then interrupted, waving a hand. —Manzanilla. The bartender stopped, and poured back what he'd poured out. —See? Manzanilla, Mr. Yák said to the man beside him. —I'm ordering you the best.

—Yes, I . . . how did I forget that name? he whispered to himself.

The excellent stuff appeared in a stemmed narrow glass, which was quickly emptied and pushed forth again.

—You shouldn't drink it down so fast like that, wine like that you want to sip . . .

The man looked up, as though about to speak, or shout; but his host was sipping his coffee, careful not to dip his mustache. A small dish of fried blood and potatoes appeared, and neither of them touched it. Outside at the door, the barrel organ was straining its way through *La Sebastiana*. The bartender obliged the silent grimace of the man to his left with another glass of Manzanilla; and collected a blue note from the man to his right.

—Now here, don't you pay for this, I . . .

—I invited you for some coffee.

—Well there, I'm not having coffee. You don't owe me anything, you . . .

—How do you know, maybe I do.

—What do you mean?

—Sometimes you just like owe somebody something. Mr. Yák dusted at his boutonnière. One of the spotted petals came off. The bartender returned his change, in coins scarcely more than the weight of paper and bits of paper that looked like a handful of dead leaves. —That's what depresses me about a poor country, he said, trying to fold the brown one-peseta notes together. —All the small denominations, it gets so dirty you can't hardly recognize it. Then he spread one of the notes out on the bar with his thumb, and shook his head with professional disapproval. —Just look at that. Startling him, the hand mounting the diamonds snatched the note from under his fingers. —What's the matter?

—Nothing. This. I just noticed it. He bent close over the note. —This beautiful thing, he whispered.

—What? . . . this thing? Mr. Yák demanded. —Why, I . . . a child could do better than that.

—No, just this. The picture on it, the Dama de Elche. It's a . . . a beautiful thing, that . . . that head, the Dama de Elche. Then the note was pushed back as abruptly as it had been taken, and the man put an elbow on the bar and gripped his face across the eyes, his thumb and a fingernail going white where they pressed his temples.

Mr. Yák picked the note up again and studied it with distasteful curiosity; then he shrugged and folded it, face forward and right side up, with the others. —A cheap engraving job, he muttered, putting the wad into his pocket. Then he craned his head round and said, —That's a nice ring you got there. They're real diamonds. No answer, and the hand did not move away from the eyes. —Why do you wear it on your middle finger for?

The hand came down and almost caught him across the face. —Because it's too damned small to get around my neck. Now will you . . . will you . . . The hand with the ring hung taut and half closed in the air between them, then came back slowly and the man drew it across his feverish eyes, and turned away again, to stare down at a plate of sardines.

Mr. Yák picked up the small fork from the cold fried blood and potatoes, and commenced to clean his nails with a sharp tine. —You don't look very good, he said.

—I . . . I don't dress to please you.

—I don't mean your clothes, you don't look well in your face. You haven't even told me your name, your first name.

—My Christian name.

—Yeah, you haven't even told me that. My name is Yák. My first name . . . He paused to press at his mustache, thoughtfully. —Never mind that, it's not a real Christian name, you might say. Just call me Mr. Yák.

—All right, you . . . Mister Yák, you . . . The face suddenly turned up with a look of terror in the eyes, which spread quickly from the lines around the eyes over the whole drawn face. —What do you . . . what are you so damned interested in me for?

—That's all right now, that's all right, said Mr. Yák, putting a hand out to the arm which was instantly withdrawn. —I can tell you're not a bum.

—What if I am? What does that . . . to you?

—Never mind, you're not a bum. I can tell that. See? Mr. Yák's voice was almost gentle, and this time, when he put his hand on the wrist before him it was not withdrawn, but stayed quivering there. —Maybe there's something I can do for you.

—You . . . you, what do you think you are, my guardian angel? Listen . . . The voice shook, sounded exhausted, though he continued to stare at the plate of sardines. —Listen . . . he repeated hoarsely.

—Are you wanted? Mr. Yák asked him in a low tone.

—Wanted? . . . he repeated dully. —Wanted? Wanted?

—What do they want you for?

—What do they . . . what does who want me for? What do you want me for?

—The police. You got the police after you, haven't you? I know how it is, see? Have you? What do they want you for?

The man stared at the sardines a moment longer, then threw his head up and started to laugh. He jerked his arm away, looking Mr. Yák straight in the eyes for the first time. —Murder. Eh? Damn it. I stabbed a man and left him there for dead. Now, is that what you wanted? The laughter broke off, and he hung there staring at the man before him who said quickly,

—Yeah but don't tell everybody, be quiet. That's not the kind of a thing you broadcast. You can't tell who's watching you, even in a dump like this.

—Yes . . . well they're watching us. They're watching us, the voice took up its dull tone again.

—Who? Where? Who? Mr. Yák grabbed the man's arm again, and it lay there still on the bar.

—Don't you see them? he whispered. —See their eyes, watching us?

—You mean these . . . these fish here? Mr. Yák's grip relaxed, as he looked where the other eyes were fixed.

—Yes, see them watching us?

—Look, Jesus . . . don't give me a scare like that again, will you?

—See them watching us?

—All right now, forget it. Pressing at his mustache, Mr. Yák stepped back and spat on the floor. Then he looked up, studying the profile before him narrowly, as though he were looking over glasses. —You didn't tell me your whole name yet, he said finally.

—Sam Hall. Now . . . leave me. Leave me. He signed for another glass. There was a tapping at his elbow.

—Get out! Vaya! Fuera! Mr. Yák broke out. The man beside him spun around, to see the ragged staring wretch who accompanied the barrel organ, holding out a hat which was the only whole piece of clothing he had.

—Wait . . . wait a minute. Here.

—Wait! Mr. Yák tried to stay his hand. —Five pesetas, you can't give him that much, five pesetas?

The cringing figure took the bill and scuttled away.

—You don't want to give them that much every time they . . .

—I like the music, that's all. Now leave me alone.

—Listen, get hold of yourself now, relax, said Mr. Yák up close to his elbow again. —Maybe I'm your gardeen angel like you say. Maybe I can help you out.

—Out of what.

—You need papers. You need a passport, don't you? Mr. Yák went on in a low tone.

—No.

—Yes you do. You can't move here without them. How would you like to be a Swiss?

—Less than anything I can think of.

—You'd make a good Swiss, I just thought about it.

—A good Swiss? The man snorted behind his hand. He took the Manzanilla as soon as it was put before him, and drank half the glass. —Women cross themselves when they meet me in the street. Dogs in the street bark at me. A good Swiss!

—You wash up and shave and you'll be fine. I just thought about it. I have this passport, see? This Swiss passport, I didn't have time to alter anything on it before I left, I didn't even change the picture on it yet, see? And I just thought about it, that's why I say this, see? This picture looks like you, this Swiss, it's got short hair and a square face like you, all knotted up like around the eyes. See? I'm not kidding you, it's a natural, this Swiss. And you can be him, see? Mr. Yák was talking more rapidly, but in the same low tone of confidence. He had a hand on the man's arm, and followed the half-step the man drew away from him, staring straight ahead. —What do you say? Listen, I know how it is, see? And this way you'll be safe as a nut. Still he had no answer, pressing close so that the man slipped another half-step's space between them, which Mr. Yák filled, speaking in a slightly different tone now, —Maybe I'm like in the same spot you are, see? he said. —Only I'm being a Rumanian. You can make as good a Swiss as I am a Rumanian.

The man took another half-step away to turn and look at him, speaking with something near interest in his voice for the first time. —You've killed someone?

—No, nothing like that. You wouldn't find me doing something that crazy. Mr. Yák filled the space between them, and pulled his throat up from the plexiglas collar. —Anybody can stab somebody. I'm not a bum to do something like that, that crazy. I'm a craftsman, an artist like, see? That's what happened to me, see? he finished, his eyes glittering.

—No.

—No what?

—What happened to you?

—I just told you. There, see? I knew you'd get interested. I'm not a bum either.

—I didn't say you were. What happened?

—I told you. I'm an artist like, a craftsman, see? . . . and they got jealous of my work.

—Who did?

—Well never mind, never mind that right now. And Mr. Yák snorted, and began drumming his fingers on the bar, looking down himself. After a few moments' silence, during which his companion finished his wine, Mr. Yák took a deep breath and spoke again, briskly as though opening a new subject. —Just never mind who right now, he said.

Another half-step, and they'd passed the staring sardines.

—What do you say? Mr. Yák demanded of this companion in whom he'd at last roused interest; but it was gone again, he'd pushed his glass forth and stared vacantly resting an elbow on the bar, and his rough chin in his hand. Mr. Yák looked about to climb up his shoulder. —What do you say, now? This is no joke, I can fix you up with this passport. This is what you want to do, see? Like putting off the old man, you know what I mean, see? . . . like it says in the Bible, that's it, see? . . . that's what you want to do, put on the new man, like it says in the Bible. What do you say? . . . All right, listen. Shall I just leave you here then? . . .

—Yes.

—Listen, I can tell when a man's not a bum, see? Like you, see? Listen, you can have this Swiss passport. You can have it. I'll give it to you, see? Then you're as safe as a nut. This guy's name, this Swiss, I forgot his name. That's all right. It's something Stephan. Stephan something. See? All right, I'll call you Stephan, all right? That will help you get use to it, see? See, Stephan? See? . . . you're getting used to it already, see? See Stephan? Then after a while you think of yourself as Stephan like I think of myself as Yák, as Mr. Yák, see? In case they pull any fast ones on you, see? See Stephan?

They had gone about three full steps, and almost reached the wall by this time.

—See, Stephan?

And Stephan finally turned to him. —Haven't you got anything else to do?

—I'm here on business, Mr. Yák answered immediately, and took quick advantage of what he interpreted as a renewal of his companion's interest. —Listen, do you . . . listen Stephan, I'll call you that so you'll get used to it, just out of curiosity have you ever heard of mummies?

—I feel like one, said Stephan with his back against the wall.

—Good! Listen . . . you know what they are then? You know about them? Listen, how much do you know about them. I knew you weren't a bum. Stephan.

—What do you want to know about them?

—Good! Listen, have another glass of wine. Stephan. Listen, do you . . . Listen . . . Mr. Yák brought his voice down with difficulty. —Suppose, now listen, just suppose somebody wanted to make one, see? A real craftsmanshiplike job, to make one up. Now I know something about it, see, you wouldn't want to use a new . . . you wouldn't use somebody who just died a little while ago . . . Mr. Yák thrust his face into the one before him to confide, —A doctor pulled that one in Vienna and it began to smell, see?

—How old do you want it to be?

—Real old, so it looks real old.

—What Dynasty? Stephan asked grudgingly.

—What what? Oh . . . now wait. Wait a minute, it was, wait . . . Mr. Yák pressed at his mustache with the length of a forefinger, looking down. When he saw his foot on the floor, he started to tap it. —Wait. The Fourth. The Fourth? he repeated, looking up.

—That's quite early.

—Yes, it's real old.

Stephan had lit another harsh yellow cigarette, and the smoke he exhaled separated them a little. He let the smoke settle, and then said, —If I tell you, will you go away?

—Yes, I have to . . . I have some business here I want to take care of pretty soon, Mr. Yák said impatiently. —Go on.

—Well, I should think . . .

—Stephan.

—What?

—No, no. go on. I just called you that so you'll get used to it. Go on, Mr. Yák said bridling both hands before his companion. —Stephan.

—If it's that early . . . you'll go away if I tell you?

—Yes, yes, go on. Go on, Stephan. Mr. Yák stepped back and spat on the floor, then brought his glittering eyes up in enthusiasm, though the voice he heard was level, even forced, the words spoken rapidly, as vacantly strung together as a recitation.

—The body is extended, make an incision in the left flank and take the internal organs out, except the heart. Fill the vacant cavity with linen and resin, saturate the outer wrappings with resin and mold them to the shape of the body, then emphasize the details with paint on the outside.

—That's all?

—That's all.

—But what about wrapping it up, all those linen bandages around it?

—That's quite complicated, the series of bandages. And leave the brain in, they didn't take the brain out until very late. And the heart, don't forget the heart, leave the heart in.

—What about the bandages, do you know them?

Stephan said nothing, but nodded vaguely.

—And the paint, what kind of paint do you paint it up with.

—I don't know. Red ochre I suppose, he answered wearily, as though the recitation had exhausted him. He turned to his empty glass.

—All right, all right for now, Mr. Yák said in a sudden hurry. —But later you and me, we can work it out. You and me . . . He stopped speaking. The burning green eyes were fixed on him.

—You and me . . . what?

—Never mind, never mind now, Stephan. We'll work it out, you and . . .

—Good God . . . will you . . . aren't you going?

—Yes, but later . . .

—Wait.

—What's the matter?

—Here, do me a favor will you? Get one of those . . . get me a fresh clean one-peseta note if he has one, will you?

—You haven't got any money? You want some money?

—Yes, damn it, I have some money. I just want a look at a fresh one-peseta note, I want to look at the

picture on it.

—Listen, I'll lend you . . .

—Damn it, never mind. Never mind. Go away.

Mr. Yák examined the dirty wad from his own pocket, then called the bartender and explained what his friend wanted, —por el dibujo sabe? . . . quiere ver el dibujo.

The bartender's expression did not change. He found the freshest one-peseta note he had, and put it before the man at the bar, watched the one with the blown rose pat his arm, heard him say, —Goodbye Stephan, I'll be back, I won't be long, be careful . . . and when that one had clattered out the door, pressing his mustache with one finger, smoothing the shock of black hair with the other hand, the bartender managed to look a little relieved, not having understood the parting threat. He crossed his arms and sighed, as though a party of twenty had just gone out the door, leaving one numb member behind, standing now, gazing, not at the bad engraving of the Dama de Elche, but returning the vacant stare of the sardines.

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In that quiet village, stacked three thousand feet above the sea against the southwestern slopes of the Sierra de Guadarrama, the province of Madrid, and the kingdom of New Castile laid out barren at its feet, there are thirty-seven bars, where, as in most of that country, the visitor is free to enjoy that privilege which distinguishes him from the natives to such advantage, and get morbidly, or helplessly, riotously, or roaring, drunk. No one minds. He is looked upon as a curiosity, one who has, perhaps, worked out an ingeniously obvious solution to unnecessary problems, and is mortgaging a present which is untenable to secure a future which does not exist. All but three (and they are known but to the learned hand), before that sunny day was out, became familiar with the draggled man whose greeting, and entire store of conversation, lay in the word *Manzanilla;* with the tune *La Tani* on the local barrel organ, which at first he trailed from one to another, and then, finding a tattered duro waiting at each stop, it trailed him; and finally, with the vociferous shock-haired figure whose boutonnière, by the time he found his comrade in Mis Niños, was no more than a twist of wire flying a shred of spotted pink paper, and his mustache awry as though stuck on in a hurry, for he adjusted it before each threshold he crossed. He also sported, by now, a cord of yellow and purple intertwined, knotted under the plexiglas collar where his tie had been, a manifest, as he hastened to explain to his glazed friend after his first recriminatory greetings, of a pledge made to Saint Anthony in return for the Saint's assistance in this impending project.

—No. No. Good God.

—Where have you been? I've looked all over the town for you, all afternoon. You said you were going to wait for me back . . .

—I thought you'd wrapped yourself up . . . in a mummy.

—What?

—No.

—Listen . . . what's the matter, you hiding from somebody?

—Yes.

—Who? Where? Where are they? Mr. Yák looked wildly round. —Hmmn? Come on. Stephan? Stephan, come on. Hmmn? At the door, *La Tani* played in thunderous broken chords. Mr. Yák finally brought his eyes round to find the two faintly green ones fixed on him. —All right. You all right? There was a withering crash as *La Tani* finished, something dodged between them, plucked a green duro from the hand hanging off the bar, got out, —Dios se lo pague señor . . . in one word, and was gone.

—Listen now, it's almost dark, and we . . .

There was a shimmering crash at the door: it was the opening chord of *La Tani*.

—Listen . . . Jesus! Mr. Yák brought his fist down, got to the door in two steps, and started to shout above the music, which continued, skipping notes it had lost during the day, but parading what remained with frenzied exultation. Mr. Yák finally managed to halt the spinning handle, and returned a minute later looking even more done in, after an argument which had become as deranged as the music it had sent packing.

—Una y una . . . tres. What do you want now?

—Listen, it's almost dark by now, did you know that? What are you doing here, anyway?

—I tried to leave. No trains.

—No, I mean in this dump. Mr. Yák looked around. It was a modest place, to be sure. There were barrels, bottles, and dirty glasses recklessly arranged behind the bartender, who put a dish of olives before them, and awaited Mr. Yák's order. When he realized that someone was eavesdropping, Mr. Yák spun round with, —Nothing! Nothing! . . . niente! Nada! . . . He was quite agitated, and returned to his comrade, propped before him. —I ought to just leave you here like you are.

—That's the spirit.

—Now listen, said Mr. Yák, taking a step closer, and he put a hand on the reposing arm on the bar. A crafty look came to his face as the sharp eyes narrowed over the expression which was almost a smile before him. —How would you like to make sure? he asked in his low confidential tone.

—Sure? . . .

—Sure listen . . . how would you like to go up with me, up the hill, see? . . . And look in and make sure that . . . that that's your mother's . . . resting place.

Some recrudescence mounted to the face before him: the smile fell away, at any rate, leaving evidence of sharp consciousness scattered in fragments of complete confusion, which the muscles of the face seemed to try to draw together into some single question.

—Listen, see? . . . I have to go up there anyway, on business. You can come up with me. Then you and me can . . .

—Damn it just . . . stop saying that. That you and me. Will you? Damn it. What do they want me for? What do you want me for? Damn it, what do they all want me for?! he burst out.

—Listen . . .

—Damn it. Damn them. And you . . . you . . .

—Come on out, we'll get some fresh air outside.

—They all . . . they all . . . want me, they want . . . damn it! What do they want? he cried.

—Come on. Come on. Mr. Yák put an arm round his shoulders, and led him toward the door. The bartender called, but not loudly, —Señor . . . se olvida . . . He held up a fresh one-peseta note, and Mr. Yák waved it back in a munificent gesture with his free hand.

Clusters of lights stood out on the mountain slopes like the lights of ports driven uphill by the sea, for it was yet light enough that the barren plateau stretched away levelly blue under the haze. They made their way up behind the town, and as they climbed the stone streets shocks of consciousness, and consequent revulsion, ran through the figure Mr. Yák supported, and pulled away from him, to come back the more heavily. Meanwhile, Mr. Yák talked. He explained the purple and yellow cord hanging from his shiny collar, and the debt incumbent upon Saint Anthony. He said he had made full confession, but in Rumanian, so the old párroco, who had not understood a word of it, had given him a light penance, —not like Rome, at Saint Peter's they can confess you in half a dozen languages, they got you going and coming. He said he had turned in three per cent of his money to the church, —to be devoted to pious uses, like it says, see? And he said the párroco was real old, —it won't take much to bring him around where we want him, I've got some ideas right now, see? . . . because I already gave him an idea I've got an in on the sacred mysteries, see? But there's this one guy I got to watch, we got to watch, I met him the last minute there . . . and as they trudged toward the rock-studded road up behind the town, Mr. Yák went on to describe Señor Hermoso Hermoso, who —had this real holy attitude about everything, see? Because they're getting this patron saint and he acts like he arranged everything, and he's not even a priest or anything, he runs a drugstore sort of, and that's one reason we got to watch out for him, see? And he speaks English, so he told me all about this patron saint they're getting. When they took her out of the graveyard here to put her somewhere else when she was beatified they thought she looks kind of big for an eleven-year-old girl, but the way the body was preserved after forty years almost, so that made them sure it's a saint. But that long, even no matter how well it's preserved they probably make a new head out of wax. Anyway that's not so long, you don't eat anything but beans all your life like these people around here they haven't got enough money to eat anything but beans all their life, then you don't decay so fast. Mr. Yák paused, but took up again almost immediately as though harried by the silence of his companion.

—Anyway so he told me all about the cures she effected, by her intervention, you know, like there was this one old guy who's deaf for six years, and so he prays to her for intervention and he gets over it just like that, what it was, it was an earwig that was in his ear all that time, you know? . . . and when it comes out all of a sudden then he could hear again. And then about this old guy who raped this girl, or he tried to rape her, see? . . . when he was young, he's real old now, he gets out of prison and he goes to this monastery where he's some kind of a penitent, you know? He's sort of like a janitor there . . .

Mr. Yák finally silenced, mainly for the exertion this walk was costing him. It was dark now, as they reached the hill and started up it. Then Mr. Yák heard something behind them, and stopped. He looked back. —What the . . . well I'll . . . that barrel organ, they been following us. A square shape, with two shapeless conductors, had stopped at the last corner behind them, and reluctantly turned back into the streets of the town. —See? See? Mr. Yák shook his companion as they climbed. —I told you not to go giving them money like that, they'll follow you around the world now.

About halfway up, as he stepped out of a soft mound in the middle of the rough road, Mr. Yák stopped. —Listen, why don't you just wait for me here? You don't have to come up, you just sit down here a minute

and wait, I'll be back in a minute, see?

At that, the man he was supporting suddenly came to life, and stepped back, almost falling over. —No, no, no, he said clearly. —I'm coming. I'm coming now.

—Listen there's no reason you should bother to come, see? And what I said before, I was just kidding, you don't want to go prying around up here, you just sit and wait here for me a minute, you . . . wait . . .

But the figure was already steps ahead up the hill in the dark, and Mr. Yák hurried to overtake him.

A light shone at the gate, piloting an unseen figure. It was the sacristán, and he groaned. —Quién es? he asked the specters, though he knew well enough, and turning without an answer, led them in. They passed through the inside gate, and the light from his lantern glanced away from the white bóvedas and here and there caught a beaded wreath, the Virgin stark in an icon looking like a playing-card queen, the Infant with a hand out as though hailing a passing cab.

The sacristán was pausing, helplessly, waiting for word from Mr. Yák, who was bending down along the way to look at ages and dates on the vaults, when they both realized that the man with them had gone on ahead. They found him, there where they had all met in the sunlight.

—Look, you don't want to go prying in there . . . Mr. Yák commenced, but too late, he'd already started to pull the unmarked vault down himself, when the light showed him where it was. Mr. Yák was trembling too, turning his face as though he did not want to look when they lifted it down; and they were all surprised at the lightness of it as they lowered it to the ground. Of the three, the sacristán appeared most distracted now, trying to loose the top with one hand, holding the light up with the other, and he kept looking up as though in fear someone, or something, might appear. When it came open, not with a wrench, but breakage of the wooden top, it was he who was first to shatter the pattern of shock which gripped them together, staring in at the dark, withered, and childish-figured contents.

—Coño! . . . Dios! válgame Dios! He banged the broken cover down and stayed, quaking on his knees beside the little girl who had been left behind. He raised his eyes slowly, beyond them to where their shadows were sundered over the sills of the empty compartments next to one another high in the bóveda. And Mr. Yák, still motionless, felt a shudder beside him, one which persisted in the shadow thrown flickering past the broken broom, back into the hollow depth bereft of the alien presence who had waited so long unchallenged by earth, through war, and profane seizure, and the destruction of names more ornate than her own, among decayed floral tributes and wreaths made of beads, to be removed at last from this domain of broken glass façades and rickety icons, and enshrined, to work miracles.

The sacristán crossed himself: and the leaping shadow was caught and reflected, twice, in the arms of the men standing above him. Mr. Yák turned, startled at that motion beside him. The hand he put on his companion's shoulder was not rejected, and he whispered —There Stephan. I told you, you weren't a bum.

The sacristán was struggling to his feet. Suddenly Mr. Yák's eyes were glittering again. —Now, see? back to the work. She . . . this, he motioned at the box without noticing the paper torn in trembling hands seeking a cigarette beside him. —This is just what we want. See? Stephan? You all right? Mr. Yák looked at him.

There in the broken moving light from the match and the lantern, his face appeared darker, and everything seemed to move in it though nothing moved there at all, lines drawn down from the nose holding the jaw up rigid, lines which broke the flat cheeks sinking away from the high-boned lines of the face. Then the sacristán was assailing them for help, to get the thing back up where it belonged before they were discovered, and Mr. Yák got hold of one side, but the third of them simply stood staring into the empty space where there was nothing but the wet end of a broken broom. When they got it back in place, he was gone. They found him a few minutes later, sitting outside the front gate on a stone, eating an orange in the dark, and looking at the moon which had just come into view beyond the mountains.

—Come on, Stephan. It's cold, Mr. Yák said taking his arm down the hill. —We want to make that train. His voice sounded loud on the night air, and he lowered it as though talking to himself to add, —We'll see about this thing tomorrow, when we get the old párroco in line, eh? He felt the figure beside him shrug, and said no more, busily planning in his head the immediate future. Neither of them spoke all the way through the town, where single lights cast clear separate shadows, stood doorways up vertically, none of the lights close enough to one another to confuse the night with multiple and exaggerated shades, or the shadows of these two moving figures behind with those before them.

They reached the railway station without speaking. On the empty platform, Mr. Yák shivered looking at the sky. —Look at that, that moon, he said, hunched up with his hands thrust deep in his pockets.

—Yes . . .

—What? After a pause, Mr. Yák muttered, —It looks so close there, don't it . . . Then he shivered again, and looked back over his shoulder to where a dull glow hung over the sign *Urinarios*. —Hey, Stephan? I got to go over here a minute, he said. —Stephan?

—Oh yes, do you know? . . . charms can even bring it down . . .

—What?

—Down from heaven?

Mr. Yák waited, half turned, and then his shoulders relaxed a little and he said, —I forgot to tell you, hey? . . . I had a Mass said for your mother, up there at the church today. He waited another moment, swaying with his knees together. —See? he added. But from where he stood, it looked to him like the lonely figure there, drawn back from the empty platform, was trying to brush a streak of moonlight from his sleeve, and Mr. Yák turned and went on in the direction he'd started. When he arrived and stood, occupied, staring above him at the sky, the silence of the country, that silence which keeps city ears awake, alert, provoked him to speak aloud, as though to hear what he said confirmed. —This poor guy, he's as crazy as an eagle . . . Then he sniffed, cocked his head, and seemed to hear the rush of the barrel organ pounding inside it. But everywhere was silence, and as a matter of fact, *La Tani* has not been heard through those streets since that sunny day.

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The Andalusian maiden looked down from her balcony, next morning, past her wooer, upon a scene of considerable activity. The air was enhanced with smells, mutterings, and occasional puffs of smoke, as Mr. Yák bustled among the confusion of newspapers so engrossed in his work that he almost dropped the glass test tubes he held in either hand when the dueño knocked at his door.

—Su amigo, señor . . . The dueño stepped back to introduce the bedraggled figure in the hall beside him, and Mr. Yák, who had put down the test tubes and pulled on the shock of black hair slightly askew, stepped back and said, —Come in, Stephan. Come in. Sit down . . . here, let me move this . . . there. Sit down. Now watch. Watch this. And he grabbed up the test tubes again. He began to pour the clear liquid from one into the other which was apparently empty, but the hair had slid over one glittering eye. He reached up impatiently, caught the black shock, tore it off and flung it across the room to the bureau top. Then his hand returned to his face in a reflex and gave the mustache a sharp tug. He yelped and almost dropped the test tubes, but recovered his purpose quickly. —Watch . . . The colorless liquid poured into the empty test tube, where it became bright red. —Now, what do you think of that?

—It's very nice, but tell me . . .

—Wait. Watch . . . He poured the red liquid into another test tube, and it became colorless again.

—Just tell me . . .

—Water into wine, wine into water. I can change it into milk too. Add a little sodium bisulphate . . .

—Will you please tell me . . .

—Here's another one. This one's even better. Water into blood, blood into a solid. Remember the miracle at Bolsena? Watch. A little aluminum sulphate dissolved, a few drops of phenolphthalein, and now . . . watch. Sodium silicate. Watch. See? Look at that, blood. Watch. See it? See it congeal?

—Yes, yes, but . . .

—What do you think of that?

—All I want to know is . . .

—I can eat fire too, if I have to. Mr. Yák hopped off among the flurry of newspapers, to see where some wads of blotting paper were drying on the sink. —See? he said, holding one up. —You just light it and wrap it up in cotton. And then, whoof!

—If you'll just . . .

—Whoooft! Sparks all over the place. Hey? Mr. Yák's eyes shone eagerly across the room, as he awaited some confirmation of his enthusiasm. But his guest simply stared at him. —Hey Stephan? What's the matter?

—Will you just tell me where I am? and how I got here?

—Where are we? We're in Madrid, where else would we be. This is the pensión I'm living at, I got a room for you here last night. You were drunk last night, you don't want to drink so much. I gave your passport to the dueño, he has to show it up at the police station, see? I told him you're a friend of mine from Switzerland worn out by the journey here, that's why you couldn't walk I told him, see? Now everything's O.K., you're safe as a nut. Stephan.

There was a tap at the door. Mr. Yák snatched up his hair and put it on. His excitement had brought color to his face, and while it might not be the blush of youth, he did look younger this morning, and capable of almost anything.

—It's backwards.

—What?

—Your hair. You've got your hair on backwards, said his guest, folded up there in the corner among the

newspapers, speaking in a tone which reflected the look in his eyes, one of patient, but wary, curiosity. He pulled a yellow cigarette from the green and black paper of Ideales.

—Oh! Oh! Oh! Mr. Yák spun the shock of hair round on his head, and opened the door the margin of an eye.

—Señor Asche? said the dueño from the dark passage. Mr. Yák started to make wild gestures of beckoning behind the door. His guest stared at him. —Su pasaporte . . . Finally Mr. Yák reached through the opening to snatch the Swiss passport, with a muttered —Gracias to the dueño, and he closed the door and bolted it. —Señor Asche, that's you, he said crossing the room. —I wanted you to come get it from him, your passport. Stephan Asche. See? He handed the Swiss passport over the newspaper barricade. —There, Stephan. Like I said, see? Safe as a nut. Look at the picture in it, go ahead. It's just like you, just like I said, that square face all screwed up around the eyes, see? Now you just want to wash up a little and get a shave. And he bounded off again, across the room toward the mirror over the washbowl, where the drying wads of blotting paper caught his eye. —Do you want to see me eat fire? he brought out, leering into the glass at the image of the man behind him. The image of Stephan Asche did not move. Nothing moved there, but the smoke rising gently behind the disorder of newspapers, the untended trail of a fire smoldering in a pile of debris where nothing retains its original shape, or purpose, among broken parts and rusted remains of useful objects, unidentifiable now, indistinguishable from other fragments of the past, shapes and sharp angles of curious design and unique intention, wasting without flame under the litter of news no longer news, pages of words torn by the wind, sodden with rain, words retaining separation, strung to the tear, without purpose, but words, and nothing moves but the smoke, rising from two bright embers.

—Stephan! Mr. Yák bursts out, turning from the washbowl. —Wake up! . . . you . . . you went to sleep with your eyes open it looked like, you . . . listen . . .

—Look . . .

—Listen, you don't want to smoke that stuff, see? It smells lousy, it makes the whole room here smell like the town dump. It's a third potato peel, the tobacco here . . . See? Listen, you want to wash up and shave.

—But I don't.

—Yes you do. Come on . . . what do you want to do?

—Nothing.

—You can't do nothing. See? There's work to do. See? All this . . . All this . . . The spotted cigarette-burned robe comes off in a swirl: Mr. Yák's neck is quite a long one, springing out of the neck-band shirt, caught, constricted with a preposter's dignity, in plexiglas, roped and drawn with Saint Anthony's earnest, Saint Anthony's hostage draws it tight to the throat. —The water into wine, and the wine into water, the blood that congeals and turns into stone, that's all for the old párroco, see? To bring him around to where he'll agree to sell us that . . . sell us the thing for the mummy. Nothing? You don't want to do nothing? That's the way you get into mischief. You get into mischief, doing nothing.

—Dies irae, dies illa, solvet saeclum in favilla . . . Tell me, did they sing that out here?

—Where?

—The Mass, you said you had a Mass sung for the dead. They sing that sometimes, in Masses for the dead, swinging the censer to kill the smell of the living. Look, what was that blonde I met in the hall?

Silence submits to the thud of an Ideal ash hitting the floor. From the wall, the Andalusian maiden stares down over her sturdy balcony, over the shoulder of him in the guitar's embrace, to coquette with her host, who disdains her directly their eyes meet, turning as though yanked to by the lead at his neck. —Just what you say, a blonde. Forget her.

—But I don't even know her yet.

—So that saves you the trouble. You don't want to get mixed up with that flashy piece of goods. See?

Somewhere, a clock struck. —See? Mr. Yák repeated, taking a step toward the darker corner, his head lowered, chin jutting forth, he looked searchingly where the smoke rose like a man looking on a refuse heap, finding a nondescript necktie worn and discarded among the cinders, some rags, two shoes which will never fit anyone else, still he looked searchingly, and his eyes caught a glitter. —You're here to get mixed up with some blonde that'll take them diamonds right off your finger? Then why are you here then?

—Why am I here? I'm here because I'm not any place else. Now look . . .

—Now listen, you and me . . . Wait! What are you doing? You don't want to open the windows . . .

Nevertheless, the floor-length windows were swung open, and the sounds of Alphonso del Gato rose to them, mounting on a chorus of *Francisco alegre* . . . ole!

—You don't want to get mixed up with that flashy piece of goods down the hall, Mr. Yák repeated, addressing Stephan's back, at the windows. —See?

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Nevertheless, awhile after everyone else had lunched on garlic soup, a simple cocido, dead fish, and an orange, and the blue angora sweater nowhere in sight in the small dining room, Mr. Yák, slipping down the passage between doors closed upon afternoon slumber, glanced in the dining room, and there saw his friend at a table, the blue fluff catercorner. She was biting his thumb.

Reproach filled Mr. Yák before he knew it, and he almost mistook his step; but there would be time enough for all his words of rebuke, warning, and censure: now there was work ahead, and he hurried toward it, feeling chilly and grown old.

As for Marga, she was a discreet person: there was a building in the Calle Ventura de la Vega where, up a flight, a dim shuttered room afforded but one furnishing above necessity, a mirror, mounted along the length of the bed, which that afternoon reflected with a fertile vigor undiminished by repetition liberties taken upon every natural part of her but her coiffure, though that, to be sure, was a crown of artifice whose consequent fragility she had good reason to protect: only in descent from the exposed and cultivated brow did the remontant powers of nature prove how, as the poet wrote, the natural in woman closely is allied to art.

•

—I saw you . . . Mr. Yák said that evening, standing in the spotted robe, holding his hair in his hand before him, and he looked weary. His day had been a busy one, inveigling the old párroco on the one hand, fending off the importunate Señor Hermoso Hermoso on the other. But more than the day's fatigue showed on him. The instant he pulled off that shock of black hair, a heavy decade of years weighed his shoulders down, and now his eyes, as though another day's application had exhausted their glitter, showed with a dullness which, but for the impatient promptings of his voice, might have been construed as disappointment. —Listen, we . . . we have work to do, and you, behaving like this, it's like cutting your nose off in spite of your face, he said. —You're not a bum.

— . . .

—Stephan.

—What?

—No, I . . . I just said that, I just called you that, so you'll get used to it. Mr. Yák lowered his eyes wearily, to the floorboards whose different lengths effected an unsteady parquet.

•

If the orange-colored cloth of that coat could be so quickly supplanted in memory by its leopard collar at full length, both disappeared from attention and memory alike when the coat was drawn open and nothing but Marga beneath it, for she wore it as a robe de chambre, or rather de couloir, on that last-minute trip between her room and the toilet, managed, like all of her public appearances, with a decorum which greatly enhanced her license in private. There, except for the armoire across the room mounting something the proportions of a pier glass which would have demanded taxing, if not unnatural, exertions, for its full employment, there was no mirror in her room to confirm one sense in what four others were making possible, no confirmation for that most immediate sense, that most used, most depended upon, most easily deceived, none but her lips too close, separated, teeth biting silence, and eyes demanding correspondence in closing.

•

—I heard you . . . Mr. Yák said next day. —I heard you in there last night. And now look at you, look at your eyes, you're getting this French influenza like everybody's getting, that ought to put you in bed a while and take care of yourself, see? Because in a day or two we're going to bring it in, for the mummy, see?

•

If she heard the heart pounding in the dark, or felt it shaking the whole frame she embraced, every beat splitting the head she held between her hands, the jaw rigid then shivering on gasps for breath, while every beat of the heart surged the flow more weakly and ebbed to withhold the life she drew forth, she gave no sign of knowing in the dark, the first time, the second, the third and her knee raised to manage gently insistent manipulation with her toes, to continue the rehearsal and then in a rush repeat the performance, no more sign than the animal trainer putting the sick dog through its paces.

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Two days later, when Marga had left for the country (a family wedding), Mr. Yák had his arrangements almost made. The párroco in San Zwingli was properly awed, the sacristán thoroughly intimidated, and Señor Hermoso Hermoso, convinced with such happy importance that he knew what was going on, had given up trying to find out. He had even at one point, and quite unwittingly, put Mr. Yák onto something most pertinent to the project, in a casual café conversation which turned to a local method for aging fine lace, a process Mr. Yák now considered employing to add some dozens of centuries to the linen bandaging, before it was finally baked on.

—So what we want to do, we want to bury it somewhere, in the ground, see? Listen . . . are you listening, Stephan? How do you feel, you feel better? Listen, then what you want to do, you go there where it's buried, and wet it down, see? You know what I mean, wet it down? I mean, like . . . like you stand over it and wet it down, see? You do that a lot of times, then you dig it up and hang it in the sun, and it's got that nice yellow aged color that makes it look real old, see? You listening? Come on, get your head out of under the covers. You got to come out with me and buy this linen bandaging so we get the right kind. See? Come on. You feel better. You're all well now. Come on, get your head out of under the cover.

The mound on the bed shifted, but remained silent, and Mr. Yák leaned forward to put a kindly hand on what he believed to be a shoulder. There was a growl from inside.

—Come on, you want to come out in the fresh air will do you more good than this here . . . Mr. Yák shook the mound, and the growl grew louder. Finally a cautious aperture appeared, with an eye behind it, and a clear voice said, —Go away.

—Good. You're not in a delirium any more anyway, Mr. Yák said, letting go the shoulder, and he sat down beside the bed, relieved. For these past two evenings, Mr. Yák had returned wearied enough with the work of the day, to the even more taxing demands of this friendship he had formed from the depths of what he could by now believe to have been the kindness of his heart. And just as there could be no doubt, after touching his forehead, but that Stephan had been ill, there was even less doubt of his delirium after listening to his conversation: Salamanders and Sylphs, and Mermaids, a regular Carnival, but wait, not carne vale . . . Ave carne! . . . Salve! . . . macte virtute esto! —Did you want me to end like Descartes, then? Larvatus prodeo, retiring to prove his own existence, and he kept a Salamander. She came to visit him like mine did then. But now . . . Copulo, ergo sum. Eh? Carne, O te felicem!

And Mr. Yák had shaken his head, and muttered something about "that flashy piece of goods down the hall," at which he was instantly threatened with blindness as happened to Stesichorus, —for slandering Helen.

—What an affliction, Mr. Yák muttered, but to himself, and thinking of himself, not Stesichorus.

—Why, proving one's own existence, you'd be surprised what a man will do to prove his own existence? . . . pursued Mr. Yák out the night before, crossing himself. —Why, there's no ruse at all that people will disdain, to prove their own existences . . .

—Get some sleep, Stephan.

—No ruse at all . . .

Now, Mr. Yák gave up once more, with a glance up at the Andalusian love scene on Stephan's wall, and returned to his own room where now hung the picture he had traded for it, Jesús del Gran Poder, which he had found leaning face-to against Stephan's wall. He stood looking absently at the dark bowed head of Christ under the weight of the Cross, and, after a full minute, cocked his head at a sound in the hall. A moment later he found Stephan trying to slip out of the pensión. He let him escape, followed, and then caught him up in the street below as though by accident. There they exchanged their usual contentious greetings, and Mr. Yák took him off to buy forty meters of linen bandage, on the promise that they go to a bar immediately after.

The comradeship between these two men by now had something inevitable about it. They were in ways mutually dependent, and at constant cross purposes. The older man seemed interested in what the younger did only in order to disapprove of it; and the younger man's total lack of interest in the elder's activity only spurred that one on to redouble it. They seldom entered a bar together, but that Mr. Yák ordered two coffees, and his companion stood, restraining one hand with the other, until he could get one of them on a glass of wine, or, more frequently now, coñac. What is more, there were moments when they strongly resembled one another, though that, perhaps, was only in an expression round the eyes, a tense look, glittering with impatience, a sort of alert vacancy, ready for flight.

Their pursuits were by now so mysterious to one another that neither showed surprise at anything the other did or said, each, in fact, depending more and more heavily on the other for encouragement, an arrangement somewhat similar to that magic formula of modern marriage, whose parties are encouraged by disapprobation and disinterest respectively.

Their present careers were reaching the first peaks at about the same time: just as Mr. Yák was ready to bring his purchase from the rural cemetery into town and commence actual work on it, his partner had passed the last lap on a Marathon of drink, and appeared to be scaling the heights beyond.

—What's that spilled on the lapels of your coat like that? Mr. Yák demanded, catching up with him at one point.

—I'm learning to drink from a bottle with a spout, you don't touch it to your lips. Getting it up there's easy enough, it's when you try to stop that it gets on you like this.

—What's that, those marks on your shoulders?

—That's from sliding down between the casks.

—You don't want to spend money like this.

—You told me it's so dirty it's unhealthy to carry around.

—Why weren't you in at supper tonight?

—Not after that gray artichoke. And that woman at our table, I can't tell whether she's crossing herself or fixing her napkin, it goes on all the way through the meal. And that woman at the next table, suckling the baby.

—What's the matter with that?

—Nothing the matter with it, it just takes my mind off the bread soup.

—You're not mixed up with some woman now, are you?

—What's the matter with women?

—I got nothing against them, it's just that no one of them can last a man his whole life.

—Good God! What, do you think I suggested that?

—No, but they will. I never knew a woman yet that the minute she came into the room I wasn't waiting for her to leave it. Try getting married some time. I even had a wife once myself.

—What did you do with her?

—I tied the can to her. What do you think I did. Listen, tell me something . . .

—The joke about the five Jones brothers? Have you heard that? Los cinco-jones? . . .

—We got work to do, why do you get drunk like this?

—Well I'll tell you, I have five monkeys in my stomach and four chairs in my head, do you know that one? The first coñac and one monkey goes up and sits down. Second glass, another one goes up and sits down, the third . . .

—Listen . . .

—The fourth . . .

—Listen . . .

—And when the fifth monkey gets up there, there's no place for him to sit down, so . . .

—You're picking up the language? Where.

—Marga taught me all I know. That's love. Or say, I'm encoñado.

—What's that encoñado?

—That's a local invocation to call men into bed.

—Where do you think you're going now?

—I'll go to sleep if I can. If I can't I'll go down and dance with the gypsies.

—You keep away from them down there. Tomorrow . . .

—Good night.

—Tomorrow . . .

But Mr. Yák was restless. It was barely eleven at night, and a good deal of noise came to him from Alphonso del Gato below. He went out alone for coffee.

The streets were thronged with people very different from those of early morning, the girls and old women in black, the line before the charcoal seller's. But the cries were the same, —Cien iguales me quedan! . . . Cien iguales para hoy! . . . The sound of English in the street was startling, a blond boy on the arm of a man, —But I'm not even sure where Spain is . . . A tall woman passed, speaking to her husband, —I've gotten used to poverty by now. —You mean other people's? —Yes, it doesn't bother me at all like it did, remember when we got here yesterday and I was giving money out everywhere? . . .

Mr. Yák found he had walked in a large circle, and returned to the Villa Rosa. He entered its Moorish interior, ordered coffee, looked sharply away from two girls, and was raising his cup when he heard something familiar from a room down the back hall. It was *La Tani*.

He found Stephan presiding at a juerga. There were bottles of wine on the table, three people were eating, a man was tuning a guitar, and the girl on Stephan's knee smiled uncertainly at Mr. Yák. Now, if Marga had put him off, Pastora stopped him dead. Her coarse black hair stood out round her dark face. And her large and dark eyes were gravely excited. They shone with a strained surprise, reflected in the face so

close there, and she turned them up with something fierce and proud in them. Her teeth were large, her nose slightly flattened, and her shaded upper lip was curled in what, on another face, might have been a pout, but here lay tinged with ferocity, suggesting the savage gifts her voice assured, and her quick simple movements confirmed. Her faded cerise blouse had pulled out of the skirt whose zipper was apparently broken, as was one of the straps on her high-heeled sandal, and she could not have been more than nineteen. From the hostility of the smile with which she greeted Mr. Yák's intrusion, her acquaintance with the man whose neck she got an arm round now was apparently not too recent.

—How long have you had this one? Mr. Yák demanded, sitting down. She watched him mistrustfully, understanding nothing but the tone in his voice, and sulked miserably when she was put down. —I see you still got your diamond ring, anyway, Mr. Yák said.

—Es un amigo tuyo? Pastora brought out, her voice harsh, uncertain.

—Tell her, she wants to know if I'm a friend of yours, Mr. Yák challenged. —Come on, what are you grinning about, you that drunk already?

—Krishna seduced sixteen thousand maidens.

—Listen, tomorrow . . .

—You'll believe me if I tell you . . . Krishna was the sun, and they . . . they were dewdrops.

—Tomorrow we've got work, do you hear me? You don't want to do this, you don't want to let yourself go to hell like this, do you hear me?

—No, he whispered, leaning abruptly over before Mr. Yák's face, —It's just the other way, he whispered, looking up craftily at Mr. Yák's eyes. —Have you ever heard of the . . . I am . . . encoñado, and she . . . she's acara . . . acarajotada, un . . . understand? Known in vulgar English as . . . as being in love, understand?

—I'm not going to stand by and see a tramp like this . . .

—They let the path stay dirty, you . . . you see? To fool people, to fool reasonable people, like you. But I . . . I . . . His head swayed, and he blinked his eyes in Mr. Yák's face. —See? he managed to add. Pastora got up suddenly, and stood beside him. The guitar broke a chord at the other end of the table. Someone there commenced to clap. Pastora put a hand on his opposite shoulder, nearest Mr. Yák, all the time watching Mr. Yák with animal alertness, even as he stood and reached to dislodge her hand and help his friend away.

—Déjame! she snarled across the sunken shoulders, and then in her hoarse whisper, —Déjale! . . . sounding that j with the guttural intensity of the Arabs' خ.

—Hoy los novios se van a casar . . . someone at the end of the table began singing. Mr. Yák withdrew his hand slowly, and lowered his eyes to the figure slumped at the head of the table, where he stared for a moment while Pastora watched him and did not move. Then he looked sharply up at her. —Ten cuidado, he said, warning her, and before she could answer he turned away and was gone, past the diners, the guitar, the bottles, the heels, the singer's —No sale la cuenta porque falta un churumbel.

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Pastora, at every instant with him as near to joy as to woe, waiting to be told, for joy to burst over her at the slightest assurance, despair at the first slight, tears of helpless anger at indifference, recovering in surly contempt, but still waiting to be told, —Me quieres? She with nothing of her own, not even her words but in question, until forced to cry out at last, —Yo te quiero y tu no me quieres.

They kept on there until the wine was gone. Then she lit one of the harsh yellow cigarettes and put it to his lips. —Vámonos . . . Esteban! Vámo*nos?* . . .

At night, —Vida! . . . Cielo! . . . no termina . . . mi vida! And still in the dark, and in fun so she means it to sound, —Vamos hacer un niño! . . . gone unanswered, Pastora listening in the dark, no answer but the sound of the bed and she goes limp through her thin body under the steady silent weight, or a hand at the brown nipple of her small breast, and flings up her arms to pull the weight closer, her head back, sobbing, sobs shaking her occupied body and that part so full, still unfulfilled, forgotten for this anguish, her face wet, turned away from the silent lips she has drawn down to her, waiting, to cry out at last, —Me quieres? . . . Díme lo, aunque no es verdad! . . .

Pastora woke alone in the damp bed, the sheets twisted, to call, —Esteban? . . . and hear nothing but her own breath in the dark. She got up naked and opened the inside shutters, and daylight separated the louvers of the outside. A blanket and her skirt lay on the dirty worn tiles of the ground floor. She put on her slip, her skirt, her shoes, shook the pitcher, found it empty, called loudly for water, and when it was brought she poured some in the basin, rinsed her face, wet her hair, and combed its coarse strands down with a comb from her purse. On the table by the bed, as she put on her blouse, she found an empty Ideal packet, and another one-hundred peseta note.

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Mr. Yák was out of bed and dressed before his morning coffee was brought. He did not wait for it in fact, but locked his room, tapped at the door down the hall, opened it and found the room empty, and interrupted a girl on a trip with two chamber pots down the chill front passage. She opened the front door for him, smiling, —Vaya Usted con Diós . . . and he went out, down the stairs and into the street, his hair square on his head and his mustache set stiff with purpose.

He passed the blind boy with the lottery tickets pinned to his coat, the line of women in black, before the charcoal-seller's, children carried by bundled like Eskimos, men in bedroom slippers, cloth hemp-soled shoes, berets, mufflers drawn over the chin, capes out of Goya across half the face. The sound of English in the streets was startling: the same tall woman passed, pointing to a tattered old man before her, —Now there, I want some sandals like those, see them? —Those aren't sandals, mumbled her husband beside her, —those are his feet.

Mr. Yák made a circle, looking in at every bar and café, from the Puerta del Sol back down the Calle de Atocha. It grew later, and his expression of impatience became more stern, entering the Plaza Tirso de Molina, watching, listening for *La Tani*, he stopped in at Chispero's for coffee, still searching every face for the one he sought, searching faces as though the great city were a perpetual masquerade, where every face, like his own, hid another, so that at last it was not that specific square face knotted about the eyes in mild surprise that he sought, but familiarity to emerge from this world of shapes and smells, the amber color of Genesis coñac, the green of the bottles, the fixed stare of the silver fish on the bar, the smell of oil, dark squares of fried blood on a plate, shreds of liver, the seat of the emotions roasted, cut up, served beside the tall stemmed glass, waiting, watching for familiarity to emerge from this world of shapes and smells, clad against the cold reality of the outside in the yielding armor of drunkenness. An elderly man stood against the wall opposite, drinking coffee beneath a picture of Adelita Beltrán who would appear later on the stage inside, to dance, pounding her heels, brandishing her skirt to *La Sebastiana*, to sing *La Zarzamora*, and Mr. Yák looked away from the old man quickly, aware that the resemblance he had sought and found in that face was his own. The coffee in his glass floated yellow globes of oil at the rim, and he drank it down and went out, pressing at his mustache with two fingertips.

It was not in a bar that he finally did find Stephan, but standing unsteadily outside one, a place called La Flor de mi Viña, where a car had just run over his foot, slowly, nudging him insistently from behind like a clumsy animal sidling up, leaving him with that expression of mild surprise confirmed in his face. And the only reason a policeman appeared was that one happened to be passing, and a handful of unoccupied people had set up a clamor. It happened so slowly. That gentle nudging might have been one of the burros that stand harnessed to trash carts in the streets of the city. The policeman was very polite, as Mr. Yák appeared, rescued his friend and set off with him in the direction of the Estación del Norte, walking briskly not speaking after his first reproof, —What did you want to tell the cop you're a . . . what did you tell him? A Pelagian? . . . he just wanted to know what kind of a nationality you are, can't you just say swisso? What if he asks for your Pelagian passport? Have you got your passport on you? What if I didn't come along just then? The day was heavily overcast, and they walked on without looking up at the even unchanging gray of the sky. —How long you expect to keep this up, anyway? Mr. Yák muttered, expecting no answer, and he got none. They'd walked some distance before he commented, —This place is getting on both of our nerves.

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They reached San Zwingli without incident, and very little conversation after Mr. Yák had outlined their plan. —We can't take it away in the box, that's too bulky . . . but if we leave about at dark . . . Then he looked closely at his companion, as though to see if he would be capable of carrying out his end of it when the time came. —How many monkeys you got sitting down up in your head now? he brought out finally, as they climbed the hill from the railway station.

—I? I haven't had a drink all day.

—Where you been all day then? Mr. Yák's tone was truculent, possibly to hide the surprise he felt at this answer. —I looked all over the place for you, he added, muttering, returning his eyes to the stones of the road. Up in the town, the bell of the church sounded, and both of them raised their eyes for a moment, then lowered them immediately as though in embarrassment, as it went on striking, and they continued side by side up the uneven grade, out of step, and so close they bumped each other. —Where were you all day? Mr. Yák asked again, when they bumped the second time.

—The Prado.

—The art museum? Mr. Yák shrugged. —What did you do there? He glanced up at the face beside him, and said, —You don't look like you liked it much. The art there.

—Well they . . . the El Greco, his companion began, as though called upon to comment, and he drew his hand across his eyes. —They have so many in one room, they're almost hung on top of each other and it's

too much, it's too much plasticity, there's too much movement there in that one room . . . He suddenly looked up at Mr. Yák, holding a hand out before them which appeared to try to shape something there. —Do you . . . do you see what I mean? With a painter like El Greco, somebody called him a visceral painter, do you see what I mean? And when you get so much of his work hung together, it . . . the forms stifle each other, it's too much. Down where they have the Flemish painters hung together it's different, because they're all separate . . . the compositions are separate, and the . . . the Bosch and Breughel and Patinir and even Dürer, they don't disturb each other because the . . . because every composition is made up of separations, or rather . . . I mean . . . do you see what I mean? But the harmony in one canvas of El Greco is all one . . . one . . . He had both hands out before him now, the fingers turned in and the thumbs up as though holding something he was studying with a life which Mr. Yák had not seen in his face before. But he broke off abruptly, and his hands came down to his sides.

After a pause, Mr. Yák said more quietly, —I didn't know you ever went there.

—I . . . I go there every day.

—You spend the whole day there? Mr. Yák turned on him in amazement.

—Well, I . . . not today, I . . . I had the strangest dream today, I . . . when I came back. And I woke up and I thought . . . it was almost dark, but I thought it was dawn and I thought I'd slept there all night, and all I heard was . . . I heard a child crying somewhere, that was all I heard. But I thought I'd slept all night and it was dawn. Then I tried to use my right arm, I reached out for a cigarette and it wouldn't work, my arm wouldn't work, it just hung there and fell over, and I . . . and all I could hear was a child crying somewhere.

They had reached the town. Mr. Yák glanced at him again, shrugged when he did not go on, and as they approached the doors of La Ilicitana muttered, —I just hope that barrel organ don't catch us out, as they entered, and his order for two coffees was not countermanded, or even qualified, by his companion, which, after the revelation concerning the Prado, brought Mr. Yák to observe soberly, —I even said you weren't a bum. Eh Stephan?

That brought a smile to Stephan's face for a moment, though it was one of detachment and when it faded away, left a vague abstracted expression.

—That girl you were with last night, Mr. Yák commenced, pressing his mustache and speaking with the ease of someone mentioning an event long forgotten, —I was glad to see you got away from her with your diamond ring.

—But you . . . wait, you don't understand, you see she . . . I don't know, never mind.

—You paid her, didn't you? Forget her. Mr. Yák shrugged, sipped his coffee, and asked, —That blonde, did you pay her anything?

—Well, I . . . that's just it, you see I . . .

—Forget it. That's nothing, forget it.

—No, because the blonde didn't ask for anything, at first she didn't ask for any money, I thought, she just came with me as though she wanted . . . to. But then after a few times, then she borrowed some money from me just before she went away and I thought, I lent it to her. I would have given it to her except I still thought she'd come with me because she'd wanted to, and I lent it to her.

—Never mind, forget it. The kind of tramps you're picking up now you're lucky you still got your diamonds.

—No no but that's the point! when the blonde pretended she didn't come with me for money but all the time she . . . don't you see? And this one, this . . . Pastora, she . . . with her it was money right from the start, and now, she couldn't afford to pretend because she needed the money, she really needs it but now, now with me what she wants . . .

—I know what she wants . . . Mr. Yák drew back as the diamonds came up in his face. —You gave her those rhinestone earrings?

—Those cheap things! Twenty pesetas. When I gave them to her I told her that, how cheap they were and she nearly cried just because . . .

—Just because you didn't go get your diamonds made into earrings.

—No, listen, look, those cheap clothes she wears coming apart at the seams, she doesn't mind, if they're clean, if I . . . if I tell her she looks good, but if I say anything like . . .

—You make quite a couple in the street, said Mr. Yák.

—Yes, he laughed himself quietly, looking down. —I was walking with my hands in my pockets, and all of a sudden she stops right there on the sidewalk, she was furious, Si tu no me coges . . . she wouldn't walk a step further with me if I didn't take her arm. He stood there looking at the floor and almost smiling, until Mr. Yák said,

—You could do better, if you're going to get mixed up with . . .

—Better? He brought his eyes up again, their vacant quality restored.

—If you're going to pay good money . . .

—But it isn't . . . paying!

—I get it. You just give her some money afterwards.

—Yes but, listen . . .

—You're going to catch something, you probably caught something from her already. Those kind of tough girls you meet like that . . .

—Tough, yes, the scars on her belly and down one leg, listen . . .

—You probably caught something from her already.

—Caught something . . . ? His hand was up between them again, squared fingers closing upon nothing; and he was staring there. —I was, I had her breast and I was . . . she, all of a sudden she said, No, son para la niña, she didn't want me to . . . to take what was . . . wasn't mine.

Mr. Yák shrugged. —If you were getting what you paid for . . .

—But that's what I'm trying to tell you! right in the middle of it, when I was still . . . His closed hand quivered between them. —All of a sudden crying out, she burst out crying, Me quieres? me quieres? Díme lo . . . que sí! aunque no es verdad . . .

Mr. Yák finished his coffee and studied the face before him with the composure of a man examining something unobserved. Then he shrugged again and said, —You get one every once in a while like that, they have to cry right in the middle of it. So you told her yes, you loved her? even if it wasn't true? He got no answer, put down the cup he'd been holding, and shrugged again. —You ought to have told her yes. A time like that, it's the only thing you can do, if you want to get your money's worth.

The town was quiet in the late afternoon. Mr. Yák tucked the purple and gold cord into his front as they came out on the street, and reopened the conversation on a more promising note. —Wait till you see this mummy thing when we get through with it, it will be so terrific it'll make your nose bleed.

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The sky was unchanged, except for seeming closer to the earth, more oppressive upon the mountains, as the light of day drained from it. The two men approaching the rock-studded road up behind the town did so in silence, the one swinging his arms as he walked, allowing sounds of anticipation to escape him, the other hands clasped behind, watching every detail of the pavement they followed. It is true, Mr. Yák's gait was somewhat irregular, his head bobbing up to the challenge ahead, then down, and aside, as the past threatened in the dull intent profile beside him. He wondered, if this climb would recall its earlier end, when they'd met over a past beyond them both, if this prolonged gesture of atonement of his should suddenly shatter between them while the future yet promised, if he should mention any of that simply to hold it at bay, before it attacked of itself.

—Good God! . . .

—What's the matter with you? Mr. Yák asked before he looked for reason, finding, for the first time, this hand on his arm.

A white carriage, all white, drawn by horses strung with broken white netting, mounting a small white casket beneath the white coronating cross, climbed before them, —Christ! are they always held at the fall of the day? Another one, up that broken road to the cypress trees, and the men follow, carrying their hats, and that girl on her bicycle, in her green dress, making the stupid windings of life in the road behind it, and she'll be back down the hill before they unload the box . . . As though that child had . . . chosen this time to die.

His hand had fallen away, and Mr. Yák caught his arm. —Listen, Mr. Yák said quickly, —you go back there and wait for me, go back to that bar and wait for me, see?

—Well I . . . then you'll have to lend me some money.

—You're broke . . . you've spent . . . you don't have any money?

—Point d'argent, point de Suisse . . .

—Listen, I don't want to let you . . . have you got your passport? Mr. Yák had pulled out a wad of paper money. —If they . . .

—It says I'm from Zurich. Quick! I'll speak to them in German . . . aber die jüngste war so schön, dass die Sonne selber . . . Quick! . . .

The procession gone up the hill had been drawn by two horses, and now, down through the town, came a cart drawn by one, loaded with refuse from the factory nearby. Watching it with the same apparent interest as she had watched the other, an old woman withdrew from her railed balcony, leaving her husband in his chair, put out there in the afternoon for the sun, to look and cough, with his piece of bread, waiting. And the sun, which had kept so close all the day, sought before leaving it to fill the sky with color, a soft luster of pink, and then purple, against the pure blue, color which refined the clouds to their own shapes and then

failed, discovering in them for minutes the whole material of beauty, then leaving them without light to mock the sky, losing form, losing edges and shape and definition, until soon enough with darkness, they disappear entirely.

—Allí se mueren, said the man behind the bar of La Ilicitana. He placed a glass there, and brought down the bottle of Genesis, answering a question with his voice, and an order with the bottle of coñac. —En invierno no, pero quando vienen las hojas por los árboles, allí se mueren.

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It was dark out of doors when the bartender at La Ilicitana leaned forth to direct his only client's attention to the couple waiting outside. Mr. Yák stood just within the dim shaft of light, beckoning. Beside him, in the shadows, a small figure draped in a shawl waited patiently; and a moment later, the man behind the bar there watched the three of them leave with no misgiving curiosity in his face at all.

—Take her arm, said Mr. Yák in the street. —But be careful. You're not drunk, are you? Are you? You got enough chairs for the monkeys? Come on. Be careful. We pretend it's an old woman, see? Only when we get on the train she's real stiff in the joints, see? But these Spaniards here are very reverent for an old woman, like it's somebody's mother, see? So be careful . . .

He was right.

The conductor even threatened to help the stiff figure aboard the First Class coach, but Mr. Yák was impressively filial, and they were soon seated abreast in a compartment. Mr. Yák pulled the shades down upon the aisle passing outside, for the figure between them sat stretched out at an uncomfortable length for her size, and there was no relaxing her into the cushions, —because we don't want to break nothing.

The moon, in its last quarter, had not yet entered the sky, waiting to come in late, each night waiting nearer the last possible minute before day, to appear over the distant gate more battered, lopsided, and seem to mount unsteadily as though restrained by embarrassment at being seen in such condition. And so the train rattled out into the rock-strewn plain in darkness. Mr. Yák stood up, slipped the door open enough to peep into the corridor, and then displaced the glass and removed the light from above the seat across from them.

—You're afraid the light will hurt her eyes?

—No. In case somebody should come in here with us so it don't shine in her face, Mr. Yák answered earnestly. —See? he added as he resumed his seat and leaned forward, solicitously arranging the black shawl, tucking its long ends round the extended feet. Then he straightened up and said, —There! . . . patted down the shock of black hair, pressed the mustache, and cleared his throat with satisfaction. The acrid smoke of an Ideal commenced to rise from the window side of the compartment, and they rode on, seated backwards, facing the place they'd come from, and looking in what light there was through the smoke like a weary and not quite respectable family.

The conductor, at any rate, showed no rude curiosity when he tapped at the glass panel, slid the door open, and took three tickets from Mr. Yák, who had bounded to his feet to meet him, with such zeal, in fact, that part of the shawl came along with him, exposing hands clasped one over the other on the sunken basin of the pelvis, above the wide separation of the lower limbs, and the head, tilted forward slightly, the surface of the face unbroken by a nose, the eyes sunken, the jaw dropped. But the conductor was gone.

—Come on! . . . cover it up! Mr. Yák burst out, getting the door closed, but the face he saw was a reflection in the glass. He pulled the shawl up quickly round the stiff figure, and drew it in a deep hood over the nodding head. —You got to keep alert, doing something like this, he went on when he got his breath, —you can't just sit looking out the window, you . . . Are you drunk? Hey? Stephan? How many monkeys got upstairs while I left you there? Did you? Are you?

With no answer, and nothing of his companion but the back of his head and the steady image of his face in the glass, Mr. Yák recovered from his impatience, sat down again, and turned to the figure between them. —You wouldn't think she's only a little girl, would you have. He stared abstractedly at the flat lap for a minute, blinked, rubbed his hands, said, —Now we can really get to work, and sat back.

But he could not sit still. His foot commenced tapping on the vibrating floor. —What we want to do first, we want to find a place to bury that linen stuff awhile, so you can go there and sort of wet it down, see? Then I got to get into touch with this guy, this Egyptianologist, so he don't give up hope and leave town. Then all I got to do is keep out of his way till it's all set. See? Then we . . . Are you listening to me? Mr. Yák leaned over and tapped a far knee.

—What's the matter?

—Are you listening to me? What's the matter?

—Nothing, I . . . Nothing.

—Nothing? You . . .

—Nothing. I was just thinking about something.

—What?

—Nothing.

Mr. Yák snorted, and tapped his fingers on his knee. Then he turned abruptly and his neck shot out of the plexiglas collar. —Listen, he said, —I feel like I'm alone in here with this . . . with this. He nudged the figure beside him. The face beyond did not turn from the window. —See? So . . .

—What do you want me to do? Get up and dance?

—No. The vagueness of the tone irritated Mr. Yák. —But we . . .

—Shall I sing something? Una y una dos, dos y dos son tres . . .

—Listen, we . . .

—No sale la cuenta . . . Porque falta un churumbel. What's churumbel?

—That's a gypsy word here, Mr. Yák answered, the irritation still in his voice, speaking to the back of his friend's head. —The bill doesn't come out right because there's a kid missing. It means a kid. His tone was belligerent, but he answered rather than have no conversation at all. —See? he added, paused, and prompted, —See?

—They don't die in winter, the voice murmured from the reflection in the glass, which held the blackness of the night right up against it.

—What?

—But when the leaves come to the trees, the bartender told me, then they die, quando vienen las hojas . . .

—That's t.b., they got a lot of t.b. here. The kids especially. Now listen, when we get into the station . . . Look out! Look what you're doing! . . . Mr. Yák bent down so fast he almost fell. —You throw your cigarette on her feet like that, she's liable to go up in a cloud of smoke. See? When he straightened up from blowing the ashes away, he went on, —Now from now on, we've got a lot of work to do, see? And you got to settle down now and be more . . . more serious, see? All this drinking, and these girls, you want to forget all that, you're not a bum. All that kind of thing, he continued, with no response, —it's a waste, it's sinful, living like that.

—Yes, I know. I know . . .

—What? See what I mean? It's sinful.

—I know.

—See? And if you go on like that . . .

—But . . .

—What? . . . See? What fun is it.

—But . . . it's not the sin itself that's what is . . . Good God . . . the voice went on dully, and distant, —staggering into one after another . . . and then . . . and lying in the dark knotted up in wet sheets, and . . .

—See? What good is it? Mr. Yák demanded, leaning across and resting an elbow on the brittle lap between them for the moment before he realized it, then he drew up, —it's always the same, isn't it, so why do you want to do it again.

—Yes, but . . . it's not the thing itself, it's not sin itself. It's never the thing itself, it's always the possibility that . . . It's always the prospect of sin that draws . . . draws us on.

Mr. Yák straightened up from his strained position, peering round the back of the head as he'd been doing, trying to reach the face if only in its reflection against the black surface of the night. —See? he confirmed. —After awhile you get tired of it, after awhile you get to the place where it doesn't satisfy anything inside you like. You get to the place, he went on, staring at the shivering floor, —where no matter how much you've got mixed up with all kinds of the wrong things, that they don't gratify you any more to do them, see? So then you have to kind of look up, and look for something bigger. See? See what I mean? He looked anxiously up at the window.

—Yes but . . . if you've done things . . . if you've done things to people, and they . . . and you can't atone to them for . . . for what you've done . . .

—No, you can't! You can't! . . . not to them, but you . . . if you've like sinned against one person then you make it up to another, that's all you can do, you never know when you . . . until the time comes when you can make it up to another. Like I once . . . this woman, I . . .

They paused, rocking together all staring in different vacant directions of the past.

—What?

—Nothing.

—What woman?

—You . . . Mr. Yák jerked his head up, to see only Mr. Yák's face on the glass. —I'm going out to the gents' a minute . . . He faltered a pause in the door to the corridor. —If anybody comes in to sit down, you

want to kind of talk to her, see? . . . Then the door slid closed, and he left them together, steadying himself down the corridor like an old man.

Almost immediately, lights appeared in the darkness outside, moving past the windows slowly, lights so dim that they seemed to do no more than illuminate themselves. The train stopped.

—Well *I* would have thought the name of the town was Urinarios, a tall woman said getting on, —it's the only word you can see on the station out there. She stopped while her husband opened the door of a compartment, and they went in. They sat down side by side, and she stared at the couple sitting side by side across from them. —So much *smoke*, she whispered to her husband. He offered her a cigarette. The train started. —And if we ever go all the way to a town like *that* again, if you could call it a town, just to see a church or whatever it was . . . I don't see how you ate a bite of that lunch. You'll regret it too, she added, trying to arrange her feet round the wrapped legs stretched before her. The spike of her heel caught the edge of the shawl, and she gasped. At that, the man across from her appeared to recover some long-lost consciousness, and he did so with a wild light in his eyes, darting down as though he were going to grab the tall woman's feet and pull her off her cushion. But he very busily brought the ends of the shawl back where they'd been wrapped, and then, lighting a ferocious-looking yellow cigarette, started chattering to the hooded figure beside him. —Díme lo, he said, —aunque no es . . . díme que tu me quieres, aunque no es . . . The tall woman cleared her throat, drew her feet together carefully, managed a prim smile across the way, and gripped her husband's arm. —Let's get out of here, she whispered, —this . . . She stood, straining her smile, sustaining it until her husband was up, fomenting it with embarrassment of being polite, whispering, as the door slid open, —And my God! . . . did you see her face? —Syphilis, her husband said, —they've got a lot of syphilis here, even in the children, it's inherited . . . as he closed the door, and Mr. Yák, coming down the corridor behind him, opened it and entered.

—Who was that? he asked, seating himself, squaring his hair as he did so.

—I told you, people . . . people will disdain no ruses, no ruse at all to prove their own existence.

—Listen, you . . . But Mr. Yák found that he was again speaking to the back of a pair of shoulders, and he wilted back.

—Good God, the desolation of that place, that station we just stopped at. The window again held off the black surface of the night.

—I feel like we been riding on this thing all my life.

—Yes, yes that's it, that's it, you know? It's like . . . like being at sea. Somebody's said that going to sea is the best substitute for suicide. Why, in this country . . . in this country . . .

—Suicide? . . .

—Look, what if we're caught?

—With this? Mr. Yák shrugged. He had recovered his composure.

—No, I mean . . . whatever you . . . whatever we're . . . wanted for.

Mr. Yak looked up quickly, to see him turning back to the window. —What's the matter, you scared now? he said, and then repeated, —Wanted for?

—Yes, I . . . I am. I am scared.

—Sometimes I think I ought to have gone to Brazil. But that's the thing, a place like that, Brazil, everything's too new, what you want to do, you always want to go to the mother country of the place you maybe should have gone to . . . His voice tailed off. He had recovered his composure, but he looked weary, and older, jouncing back against the seat cushion, his hair slightly crooked on his brow, staring vaguely straight ahead, and the shaking of the train kept him nodding thoughtfully. —But now you go one place, and then you go somewheres else . . . His own tone was vague now, as he turned his attention to the reflection in the glass.

—Sail on, sail on, like the Flying Dutchman. Why good God, in this country . . .

—Who?

—It was Herr von Falkenberg, sailing without a steersman around the North Sea condemned to never make port, while he and the Devil played dice for his soul.

Suddenly they were face to face, and Mr. Yák found the hand mounting the two diamonds clutching his wrist. The eyes he stared into were burning green, the face even more knotted than that first day he had seen its confusion in the cemetery, and the voice more strained with desperation. —Why, in this country you could . . . just sail on like that, without ever leaving its boundaries, it's not a land you travel in, it's a land you flee across, from one place to another, from one port to another, like a sailor's life where one destination becomes the same as another, and every voyage the same as the one before it, because every destination is only another place to start from. In this country, without ever leaving Spain, a whole Odyssey within its boundaries, a whole Odyssey without Ulysses. Listen . . .

—You . . . anyways, Mr. Yák interrupted, trying to break away from the eyes fixed on him and even to

withdraw from the hold of the hand he had sought so many times, —anyways you couldn't drownd on the land.

—You couldn't! Well it's . . . it's like that. It's like drowning, this despair, this . . . being engulfed in emptiness.

The grip on Mr. Yák's wrist quivered with intensity, as did the eyes and the whole face as though waiting for some answer from him. Mr. Yák broke the hold of the eyes, lowering his own to the hand there, and the diamonds glittering over the flat lap which separated them. —What you'd want to do maybe, he commenced, —you might like go to a monastery awhile, you don't have to turn into a monk, you're like a guest there, you . . . he faltered, staring at the hand, and the two diamonds, —you . . .

—Do you want it?

—What?

—This ring, this diamond ring? It's yours. It's yours now, if you want it.

Mr. Yák snatched his arm away and almost lost his balance. He looked helpless for a moment, and then managed to say, —No, no I . . . I didn't ever want it off you . . . He looked away from the hand there, to several places before his eye stopped at the extended feet between them, where the shawl had come off again, and there he bent down to pull it together. —We can get down to work now, he said from the shaking floor, —and then, when you have your work everything is . . . He was trying to knot the ends of the shawl, but it kept coming undone. He heard his own voice speaking with the tone of another, —And then all the love you've hoarded all your life, for your work . . . listen . . . His hands were shaking, and he could not make the ends meet to knot. —Have you got a knife, so I could cut this thing and tie it? Still he did not look up, aware that the figure was standing over him steadily on the shifting floor, and the square hand held a penknife before him. He reached up for it, raising his eyes at the same time. —Listen, he said, —listen, did you . . . really kill? . . . did you really kill somebody?

The train jolted, and he lost his balance on the floor. —Look out! Look out for her!

They were in Madrid.

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In the railway station, what they wanted to do, according to Mr. Yák, who was moving and muttering like an old man talking to himself, they didn't want to be in any big hurry, and they didn't need to act suspicious pretending they were having an easy time with their charge, —because if people think you're having any trouble then they don't bother you, they try to look the other way. Except here, he added, annoyed, looking round the station. —They're better in New York that way, here somebody's just liable to try to help you out, that's because they're used to old people here, in New York they pretend they don't know there's such a thing . . . and he went on muttering, in time with his shuffling steps, when his words were no longer distinguishable.

Near the luggage check-room, they paused and Mr. Yák said, —Wait here, I'll get a cab. We can't carry this all over town like this. His eyes darted about as he spoke, and then he muttered, —All these cops, these Guardia Civil . . . and he hurried away.

He was in more of a hurry, his eyes still jumping from one black patent-leather tricorn to another as he avoided the Guardia Civil, when he returned. He was in such a hurry, in fact, that he went right past the woebegone couple standing against the wall near the luggage room. A moment later he returned, looking more harassed, glanced up, away, and stopped dead. He turned his head slowly, to see the patient shawl-wrapped figure standing right where he had left her, but now she was waited upon, at a respectful distance, by a creature not much taller, apparently not much younger, and despite his activity, in an inferior state of repair. The numbered metal tag on his dirty cap shone like a diadem in the battered crown of this martyr to unkemptness, and identified him as one of that villainous horde who, for a nominal fee, will spare no effort in making the first moments of the traveler's arrival in these capitals a faithful foretaste of the worst possibilities for helplessness, confusion, misery, anger, blasphemy, and acute hatred, that may lie ahead. A single tooth appeared and fled from sight in the midst of the dirty field of stubble on his chin, pursuing words which leaped out the more exhilarated by Mr. Yák's incredulous approach. He had a strap for binding the handles of bags together, and this he waved in the air, spurred on, and still held to his proper distance, by the stiff reserve of the figure he was regaling.

Braving the threat of the flail, Mr. Yák stepped between them, put a dutifully protecting, and steadying, arm round the shawled shoulders, and with something near his last bit of energy turned to face his opponent who, far from being daunted, was carried to new heights of clamor by this doubling of his audience, and did not stop until he gasped for breath. It turned out that the Señorito who had stationed him here had, upon leaving, instructed him to talk to her, —la vieja . . . and he indicated the silent shawled figure with his strap, should anyone approach. And the Señorito had gone? —Sí Señor. Where had he gone?

—Yo no se, Señor, yo, mira Usted . . . That riot of gestures proclaiming a triumphantly total lack of responsibility for the vagaries of others commenced again; and it was some time, and with some effort, that Mr. Yák learned the police were on the lookout for someone, —Un extranjero, entiende, un norteamericano, sabe Usted . . . —Per ché? —Claro, mira Usted, un norteamericano . . . —Por qué? Mr. Yák demanded, gripping the shoulder he supported, mumbling, —Why? . . . what . . . ? . . . for murder? —Claro que sí, Señor, un falsificador, m'entiende? Un norteamericano, sabe Usted, un falsificador . . .

—Falsi-ficador . . . Mr. Yák mumbled, repeating it, —but . . .

—Sí Señor, mira Usted . . .

It turned out that the Señorito had asked the same question, and fled directly he got this same answer, leaving this mozo behind, to chat with her, —con la vieja . . . all of which the mozo had accepted, apparently, without it ever occurring to him to wonder about the Señorito, and his sudden flight, any more than it might occur to him to question the Señor whom he was serving at this moment, so used was he to the transient rewards of blind loyalty, and a life sustained by a blind faith in the innate depravity of human nature. And now he stood, wadding the first five-peseta note he had seen for some time into the depths of the only whole part of his pants, while he held out his other hand for another, leering at Mr. Yák from a face which only the heritage of centuries of ignorance could redeem, for there was enough guile in it to rule an empire.

It was like a night at the fall of the year, a chill borne on the air in light rain, out where the mozo installed the elderly couple in a taxicab, which looked, and set off, like something the age of all three of them and the driver together, a Renault fitted with a charcoal burner, whose few undefiled surfaces might still maintain, in strong daylight, that they had once been painted red. Heaving and shuddering, this intrepid equipage passed the wet palace gardens and the palace itself, picked up speed and careened past the Opera, toward the center of the capital, that storied arena the Puerta del Sol, once a gate of the city opened on the rising sun.

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In spite of his weariness, Mr. Yák managed to introduce his guest into the Pensión Las Cenizas unnoticed, down the dim passages and to his own room, which he locked and hurried to tap on the door down the hall, though he could see from the frosted glass panel it was dark. Past ten o'clock, he went to the dining room, dipped two spoonfuls of the garlic soup taking his usual care to avoid the sodden chunks of old bread afloat there, though he needn't have bothered for he didn't eat the soup, but just looked at it until it was taken away and four dead fish, gripping their tails in their burnt jaws, appeared, and he got no further than breaking one of the warped spines with his fork. The woman beside him was busy with her napkin, or crossing herself, it was difficult to tell which, and he looked away, crossing himself surreptitiously a moment later, for he'd forgot when he sat down, the first time since he could remember. And then a new guest entered, looked uncertainly about, and was seated at the empty place across the table. He was a stout man, and he filled his bowl with the garlic soup, whose thin surface reflected in orange-colored globules, and set immediately to eat. Mr. Yák looked up, to his left where a mirror on the sideboard had so often reflected the vivacious decorum of blond hair and the blue angora sweater that it was empty now as though it could contain no other. Then his eyes came down to the nursing mother, half his age, and he stared at her full breast. The man across the table finished his soup, sat back, and the sounds from inside him, like huffy pigeons in the open, brought Mr. Yák round, and to his feet. Without repeating his usual courtesy to the diners left behind, he hurried out, down the chill corridors, past his own door, to the dark panels beyond, and he opened that door without knocking, and reached above him until he caught the string on the light.

It was not the bright bare bulb he was accustomed to in his own room, but dimmed with the translucent paper wrapper from a coñac bottle. Atop the armoire there was a small forest of bottles, transparently green with emptiness. Its long mirror endlessly reflected one smaller, across the room over a single-spigot washstand, where a glass stood corroded with unfinished coñac whose smell hung in the room, rose to the molding of plaster garlands round the high white ceiling. Above the silvered bed (—a regular whorehouse bed, he'd called it himself once), the Andalusian maiden coquetted over her balcony and the shoulder of him in the guitar's embrace, hung at length across a faded vertical space where Jesús del Gran Poder had made way for her. Then noticing the cold radiator he remembered he'd meant to ask the dueño to put a brazier in here. He stepped from the carpet, a piece gray-blue and orange cut by the yard laid here on the uneven lengths of flooring, to a wicker table where a wicker chair with a red and black Indian-style cushion was drawn up, an empty coffee bowl and a stump of bread before it, and stepping, his foot rolled on something, and he stooped to pick up a .32 cartridge. It lay in the palm of his hand, the rim of the case cut in for use in an automatic pistol, and he weighed it there with a confused expression on his face, an expression which he snorted away as he pocketed the cartridge and returned to the table. A half page from

a book lay beside the stump of bread, torn from Calderón's *La Vida es Sueño*, and it was torn evenly along the line, "El delito mayor del hombre es haber nacido . . ." and this too he seemed to weigh in his hand, before he put it back by the stump of bread, and a crumpled one-peseta note on the wicker table, pausing, as though he heard something, that voice, and —Oh yes, was it? the greatest sin of man, being born? hehehehe . . . and then that broken laughter. —No, because there's more to do, more work, more work if it's true that even the gods themselves, can't recall their gifts. Because there's a moment, traveling. Quiere comer? they offered, shelter. Coming up to Madrid, it's a destination, Madrid. You can tell by the name. Quiere comer? Everyone used to offer shelter to travelers, who knows it might be a god in disguise. The whole family there, eating, the whole . . . all the family . . . Quiere comer . . . ? No, no I'm smoking, there's still so much work that's necessary, I'm smoking, I'm alone because, not hungry, because if it's true, then the love had to be hoarded for the work, locked up, there, there! is there a moment? traveling when, love and necessity become the same thing?

Then his eye caught the Swiss passport, thrown open on the floor.

—Aïe no, que no lo come, there, no don't eat that . . . son para la niña . . . tell me, for the love of Christ now will you leave me alone?

The outside shutters were almost closed on the narrow balcony, but sounds came up from Alphonso del Gato, the sound of voices and a barrel organ somewhere in the lame joy of some indistinguishable tune, through the shutters and the imposition of joy in the red-figured drapes that hung there motionless. Before him the mirrors, from the one tall and narrow mounted in the armoire to the small square one over the one-spigot washstand, and back, embraced one another's images, as the rain took up against the shutters, and reached the glass, and he stood there, chilled, his memory frantic for something precious left out in the rain, or a window left open, the rain pounding in, in the dark, engulfing a consciousness alert now in all the sudden perspicacity of terror, deepening round it so that it seems to have been falling all the time: sounds came from a great distance, a strange city, in a foreign land, and the sense he'd just been put down here this instant, alone, and for the first time, engulfed in the sense of something lost. He spun around on his feet, to confront who had come in the door behind him, but he saw no one there. He stood, off balance but still for a moment, and then he moved sidling toward the door, as though she were waiting for him to get out before she could enter, and once at the door he left like a crowd leaving, and the door open behind him.

—Vaya Usted con Dios . . . y que no haya novedad, Jacinta said opening the front door and wishing him off, and Mr. Yák repeated that phrase as he came out to the wet street, to crowd out other things from his mind. Novedad? . . . novelty, newness, change . . . That you go with God, and have no . . . novedad. He hurried down back streets, and then out past the Cortes, to the Palace Hotel, to leave a reassuring note for Mr. Kuvetli, saying that he had located what Mr. Kuvetli sought, and for a reasonable sum could see to its turning up within a few days; but he had forgotten his passport and was unable to remember his full name, though he did know the initial to his Christian name was J, and so he signed it J. Yák, and returned quickly to the streets.

The streets were thronged with people wherever he turned, crowds parading with such animation that one might at first think some major holiday, or grand catastrophe, had brought them out. He found himself approaching the Plaza Tirso de Molina, saw a blond boy pass on the arm of a man and someone said, —Los turistas, sí . . . pero los maricones . . . He bought some raisins from a cart, an unidentified flower for his buttonhole, and stopped in at Chispero's for coffee, glancing round him all this time but without much hope in his eyes of seeing anyone he knew. From the stage in the hall beyond the bar he could hear heels pounding, where Adelita Beltrán sang *La Sebastiana*, and he found himself mumbling along with the words, —Aunque tiene siete colchones . . . as he returned to the street, more nervous each minute at putting off his return to the pensión, and his work. —Un falsificador? he muttered, bumping people in the Calle de Atocha, —even though he has seven mattresses, la Sebastiana can't sleep . . . ? How . . . ?

—Adiós . . .

—Dios . . .

People passed in the wet recommending each other to God, instead of God to each other.

—Y que no haya novedad . . . he repeated to himself, approaching the Plaza Santa Ana, and glanced down in the shaft of light from the Villa Rosa. It was the remnant of a rose in his buttonhole. He brought his hands up before him to clap for the sereno, and they hung there, as he did, standing unsteadily, overwhelmed in the chill rain at being engulfed in Spain's time, and that like his guest awaiting him upstairs he would never leave it.

—Adiós . . .

— . . . ?

Pastora stood in the doorway of the Villa Rosa, the strap on her high-heeled sandal still broken, the cerise blouse pulled and protruding from her skirt where the zipper was broken. —Buenas noche, Señor, she

repeated timidly, her coarse black hair standing out round her face, and her lip drawn back from her large teeth no longer in the snarl he remembered, though it was the same expression but now pathetically defiant, waiting, alone, staring at him and waiting. He moved his arms with a quick shrug of his shoulders, and clapped for the sereno who came stumbling up with the keys and the usual observation on his job, —The worse I do my work the more people clap for me . . . and the street door came open.

—Adiós . . . Pastora repeated, desolately, without a look from him as he entered and climbed the stairs, muttering against the hollow sound of his feet on them. Jacinta let him in, and he hurried down the dark passages to his own room, still muttering something about the *work, the work*.

He pulled on the light and stared at the figure laid out on the uneven parquet of the floor. —Why would I have said . . . a thing like that? he mumbled, motionless, —The love hoarded all your life . . . for the work, and his lips still moved silently over that last word as he locked the door behind him, and continued to move, repeating it, until he saw them moving in the mirror where he went to pull off his hair, tug at the mustache, and startle when it failed to come off. He turned away from the glass to remove the plexiglas collar, though the gold and purple cord remained strung at his throat, and he crossed himself when his eyes fell on Jesús del Gran Poder hung upright over a faded length on the wall, forming a cross so. —All this, he muttered, and drew his hand across his chin. —Y que no haya novedad . . .

Then he snorted with impatience. A light came in his eyes, as he picked up the penknife and knelt at the left flank of the figure laid on the floor. As he commenced to work the light became brighter, until his eyes shone as though alive with sparks. Sounds still rose from below, the measured clatter of heels and palms, a voice in a constricted wail, from the Villa Rosa, and still he worked.

Then the blade stopped: the heart, was it? or the brain?

Until at last the only sounds were from the ends of the empty alley below, where the tapping sticks of two blind people approached each other in the darkness, that, and the scraping edge of the penknife, as the hag of the moon, the dark winnower, rose in its last quarter.

IV

> If the sun and moon should doubt,
> They'd immediately go out.
>
> —Blake

—Blessed Mary went a-walking . . .

The prow of the ship lifted from a swell, remained suspended and then dropped into the trough that followed. Everything shook.

—Over Jordan river . . .

—Please, don't sing that, Stanley interrupted. —Not here, not right now anyhow. Clinging to the rail, he looked uncomfortably over his shoulder, where Father Martin paced the deck reciting the appointed section of his breviary. She stopped, and gazed silently out to sea. Stanley looked at her face, the only one which (next to Father Martin when he was engaged in such supramundane pastimes as the one occupying him now) had preserved its equanimity throughout the voyage thus far.

It was not proving an easy crossing: several times Stanley himself had felt the saliva mounting in the back of his mouth, and tried to put his mind on something sublime and far away, or at least extracorporeal; but sounds and signs of adjacent suffering usually recalled him to the immanent prospect of his own, and he swallowed with great effort. He did so now. Behind him, beyond Father Martin's path, a mound of human misery heaved in a deck chair, clutching a small machine which clicked at regular intervals. It was a woman who had several times made the flat reasonable demand that the captain halt the ship. She was one of the Pilgrims; and as such, firmly convinced that the sea was aroused specifically for her and her fellows, whom she was ready to inform, at one moment, that infernal hands were responsible, working from anfractuous residencies far below to hinder them on their pious mission, and at other moments quite prepared to accuse the very Deity this voyage was designed to placate. In that case, He was certainly intent upon making it as memorably uncomfortable an excursion as any those medieval pilgrims enjoyed, setting off from Venice in the most deplorable conditions that could be arranged, which, for their times, is saying a good deal. Right now, the sky was blue and brilliantly clear, permitting a moment of hope, until the ship rolled and the boiling sea was raised before her eyes, which she closed forthwith and tried to dwell on the felicitous snarl of misconceptions which she had, over many devout years, managed to accumulate about her destination. They were not, after all, going to Jerusalem, and once landed did not run the risk of being

stoned by Saracens, or offered for sale such articles of commerce as the bodies of the Holy Innocents. Neither the prospect of getting hold of a shred of the True Cross, nor a casket containing the tears of the Virgin, nor even the toenail parings of some venerable ecclesiastic, all opportunities of which their earliest forebears had taken full advantage, drew them forth: but rather the reward of indulgences. That, and the spectacle of the canonization of the little Spanish martyr, whose reputation a number of these Pilgrims, and this woman foremost among them, were importunately trying to enhance by seeking her intervention in this present misfortune.

It is true, there were others on board prey to less disciplined superstitions who agreed that this plight might well be a visitation on the Pilgrims, and were inclined to be quite rude about being so freely included. The Swede was one of these. Dressed in a becoming wrapper, he lay indoors sucking a lemon, and brushing aside objections. —But Anna, baby . . . —No, don't argue with me now, it's those hideous vulgar Pilgrims. —But baby the reason *you're* coming is to join the Church yourself . . . —You know very well why I'm coming, because the only way I can possibly get *hold* of little Giono is to a*dopt* him, and I have to be a Catholic parent or they won't *give* him to me. —Don't you want to come out in the fresh air for a little? . . . you'll feel just *tons* better. —I can't go out in *this*. The Swede held up a pink satin hem. —Baby why did you give *all* your clothes to those stowaways? . . .

And among the lower echelons of the crew, those encountered mopping passages and lavatory decks, there appeared paper hats of crackled gilt and blemished colors, remnants of an exhausted carnival at some lost latitude whose banter still rode on smells and stains below the surface.

—Isn't there any more Dramamine? The tall woman raised her head from the pillow, seeing her husband enter. Then she lay back. —Poor Huki-lau, she's biting her nails again . . . breaking off her analysis . . .

And on deck, from the mound stacked heaving in a deck chair against the bulkhead, the clicks continued at somewhat irregular intervals. Almost gone inside her hand was the Machine, a "Recording Rosary," with the button under her thumb to be pressed each time she reached the Gloria, and an arrow ("Keep tabs on Mystery!" the ad had said) which pointed to the next bead to be prayed.

—Why do you keep singing that? Stanley broke out, seizing her wrist at the rail. Then he loosed his hold and apologized for startling her so; and a moment later a cry escaped him, and he lunged. Beneath him a book washed up on a crest, was gone, and reappeared in the white foam. He stared at that invitation to mortal sin being borne away by the sea, and then raised his face to the sea itself, as though to try to bring it all into his vision, and he said something like that to her, something about its immensity. He looked at her. She was looking at the sea. And then she said, but not to him,

—For some fishes the sea is a great big sky.

Stanley clung beside her. Then he turned, —Where are you going?

—For a walk.

—Yes, but . . . all right, but you're not going up to see . . . up to First Class?

—And see the Cold Man? She smiled to him; and Stanley lowered his eyes from hers. Who the "Cold Man" was he did not know, had no idea but of a tall figure he had seen, and then only at night, standing at the rail above, the left sleeve of a Chesterfield coat tucked empty in the pocket, the face motionless, obscured under the rim of a black hat. For Stanley was still pursuing the course he had set himself, asking no intrusive questions, making no demands upon her willingness which was, every moment she was near him, so candid in its expectation, so attentive to his wishes, as in the only renders he exacted of her, the devotions she secured with such care, and practiced with such grace.

Everything was going exceedingly well.

And her eagerness to learn the preparations he had set himself to teach her was sometimes pathetically touching, and sometimes it frightened him: touching, delicately absurd for there was no mockery in her when, for instance, she affirmed the dogma of the Assumption of the Virgin with that of Little Eva in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, as the only historical parallel she knew; frightening, when she brought from nowhere the image of Saint Simeon Stylites standing a year on one foot and addressing the worms which an assistant replaced in his putrefying flesh, —Eat what God has given you . . . Or her frank familiarity with the career of Saint Mary of Egypt: seventeen years of prostitution in Alexandria, talents put to good use when she was converted and paid her boat passage to Jerusalem so, all expiated by wandering unwashed in the woods for the next half-century. Or how she might ever have known of the seventeenth-century Sicilian girl Ana Raguza, who called herself the Bride of Christ and could, so she said, actually smell out sinners. Or that the right foot of Santa Teresa de Jesús is venerated at Santa Maria della Scala in Rome. Or that the pus of Saint John of the Cross smelled strongly of Madonna lilies.

Things seemed to be going exceedingly well, better than Stanley would have imagined had he paused at the beginning of this undertaking to consider the practical difficulties it would so surely involve. Her passage, for instance: he was prepared to pay it, but no one had asked him to. And though he was relieved

at the apparent lack of curiosity on the part of the other passengers, it had commenced to trouble him. No one, not even Father Martin, had asked her name; and though the fat woman had, at one point, risen in a gesture of myopic kindliness to include him in her own generation, asking if the "charming young creature" were his daughter, she had as quickly relapsed, clutching a shiny-surfaced paper book stamped with the *Nihil obstat* and *Imprimatur*, and entitled *A Day with the Pope*, and entirely forgotten that such a question, or any provocation for it, had ever entered her busy head. Licking her finger to turn each page of pictures, she visioned herself trundling in Vatican corridors, in the Court of San Damaso, and who can say where else? when she looked up to the boiling surface of the sea rising before her, and reached for a paper bag beside her deck chair.

Nevertheless, it was working out. Though Stanley, left alone below with his stack of palimpsests, and the clean scores onto which he was copying, made more mistakes than he had ever before, some of them maddening, copying the same bar twice; some strange, for here and there he found himself inserting grace notes which broke the admirably stern transitions, slipping in cadenzas which had nothing to do with anything, and, just this morning, writing in a throbbing bass which, as he realized when he stopped, was the steady vibration of the engines.

He could not get her out of his mind. When they were together, her smile, or often when she did not know he was looking the empty sadness of her face, forced him to lower his eyes, and fumble for something to handle, or something to say; and he usually found that tooth in his pocket, as he did now, and said nothing.

At all events, nothing had gone wrong yet. Even below, where they were at close quarters when they were together, being with her in illuminated silence or in prayer proved, in fact, less difficult than he had pictured, never having known temptation as it is usually succumbed to. And even at rising, or her going to bed, he found no temptation to touch her, or to tell her she was beautiful, though the warm brush of an elbow shocked him sometimes. But directly he was alone, it was all entirely different.

Directly he was alone, he was assailed by her simulacra, in all states of acute sorrow, or smiling, of complete abstraction or painful animation, of dress and undress, as he had seen her these last few days: directly he was alone, the images came to mock everything he had seen. Her sadness became shrieking grief, and her animation riotous, immodest in dress and licentious in nakedness, many-limbed as some wild avatar of the Hindu cosmology assaulting the days he spent copying his work on clean scores, and the nights he passed alone in his chair where, instantly the lights went out, everything was transformed, and the body he had seen a moment before with no more surprise than its simple lines and modest unself-conscious movement permitted, rose up on him full-breasted and vaunting the belly, limbs undistinguishable until he was brought down between them and stifled in moist collapse.

He woke in the morning exhausted; straightening his damp disarranged clothes, and there she lay, cool and unconsciously breathing and often uncovered; and when that was the case he covered her when he stood, no more allured to try her with his hand than he might have been a flesh-tone on canvas, and went out without washing, and up without even a pause on deck for the air of day, straight to breakfast. For there was that: he found himself with a great appetite, and sometimes he went to two sittings.

As yet, things were still under control, though he found himself avoiding Father Martin as carefully as he did the fat woman who sat drawing an enamel-nailed finger down her tongue each time she turned a page of a shiny-surfaced paper book stamped with the *Nihil obstat* and *Imprimatur*, and the title in yellow, *The Vatican and Holy Year*. (She had caught him at breakfast, starting off the day with a covetous reference to "the lily-white flower of her virginity" which the little Spanish saint-to-be had died protecting.) Now Father Martin passed behind, engrossed in what sounded in his murmurs to be a Psalm of David. With him, Stanley had formerly led off a number of interesting conversations: the etymology of "atonement" (at-one-ment); the Augustinian doctrine (this did not get too far) of the Crucifixion as a ransom paid Satan to release man from his power; of the decline of Satan (this got nowhere at all) from God's official tempter to His arch-enemy. But now Stanley avoided him, as though afraid he would blurt out some betrayal of his state of mind, some image of its nature.

As for the *Story of Barbara Ubryk*, he had slipped that away and dropped it overboard, only to find her with Margaret Shepherd's *My Life in a Convent*. "Wronged by a priest through the confessional" (he read), "when but a young girl, married to a priest, thrust into a convent with her baby and abandoned by the priestly brute who had promised to stand by her. It will hold you in its grip until through tears and heart-throbs . . ." That went overboard too, and was followed by the tale of Rosamond Culbertson (an American girl at the hands of Popish priests in Cuba), and Rebecca Reed's *Six Months in a Convent*. And each time this happened, she looked up at Stanley with the same dismay anew, which sounded in her voice when she asked, —But isn't that how it's going to be? . . .

He swallowed with an effort at constriction which ran right down through the hand clutching the

wrapped tooth in his pocket, gazing below at the shifting surfaces of white foam, and startled to see that he was not watching *Paradise Lost*, but a man's hat afloat down there.

The touch of her hand on his clutching the rail startled him to withdraw it, and he watched her go down the deck, swaying with motions scarcely incurred by the roll of the ship, or even compatible with it, nothing at all to do with the sea, this brilliant unbroken expanse of sky and the sea bound only by one another, by now reality's only terms: she walked off with the gait of the desert, the movements of a gypsy, or the ease of those women (though he had never seen such a company) who follow camels, and acquit the camels' grace from behind, as they share the features before, with their own.

Stanley followed her. It was an abrupt decision, and he kept well behind and out of sight, hesitating round corners, behind ventilators, too heated to know if he feared being seen, or feared what he would finally see himself. At one turn he paused too long, and he lost her. He took a moment to congratulate himself on giving up such a reproachful pursuit, and then set off again frantically. He ran aft until he reached the set of outside steps leading up to First Class, and had already started up them when he saw her. She was standing alone at the rail below and she did not see him approach, nor see his humiliated retreat, for she was weeping.

Stanley went inside, and wandered vaguely through the Tourist Class smoking room. He stopped to read the weather report again, and he reread the same news bulletins that had been posted there in the morning. He had read the third item, a cargo ship which had broken in half and gone down off the Azores, twice, before he realized that he had read it earlier, and was only standing here, instead of working, waiting for first call to luncheon.

For the first time on the voyage, he drank down a glass of wine before a bit of food appeared; and during the meal he filled his glass four times from the carafe on the table. When he went below, he found her lying down. She appeared to him to be asleep, her face turned to the wall. Her figure lay entirely still on the bed, with no evidence of her breathing nor even any apparent response to the motion of the ship, which kept Stanley replacing his feet while he stood over her.

On the floor was a small folded card, lavishly decorated. It was something which had belonged to his mother, used here to the best purpose, making up to her for those damned and absurd books he had thrown overboard, and now he leaned over to pick it up: *A remembrance of the venerable shrine of Saint Mary of the Angels*, with a picture on the outside of Saint Francis receiving the Indulgence of the Portiuncula. Inside, on the one hand were glued three infinitesimal particles, labeled as a piece of the door of the cell where Saint Francis died in 1226, a piece of the Portiuncula, the church itself, and a piece of the pulpit where the Indulgence was proclaimed by Saint Francis and seven bishops; on the left hand were four leaves from the miraculous rosebushes of Saint Francis of Assisi, and beneath the marvelous history of how "One bitter winter's night, Saint Francis being sorely tempted by the Devil to lessen his austerities overcame the evil one by throwing himself into a thicket of briars . . . rolling himself in it till his body was all torn and bleeding . . ." at which juncture the briars became full-blooming rose-trees, and in a heavenly brightness angels appeared to lead Saint Francis to the Portiuncula, where Our Lord with His Mother and a Heavenly Host granted the Indulgence, a "Plenary Indulgence which, after the devout reception of the Sacrament of Penance, can still be gained daily as often as one enters the Portiuncula . . . This indulgence can be applied to the souls in Purgatory."

The card now was curled and still damp, as though she had been clutching it in the hand open palm up beside his face as he started to stand, and the roll of the ship moved him toward her, off balance and his cheek touching her hair. For a moment he hung there, as motionless as she; and then he moved his cheek very slowly, and back, against her hair. In her hair he felt his own hot breath. Her hair held it and burned his cheek, and he came down on one knee, turning his face into her fine hair and breathing more heavily, his eyes wide open. His whole face was burning, but he became aware of something else; and then of nothing else but the beat of his heart, pounding unevenly in a gigantic shape which grew from the depth of his chest to his neck, and with each beat, going more slowly.

She moaned, and came over on her back; but he could not move. She moaned something almost articulate, and then her lips stayed open, and loosened, and the lower one was drawn in. Her tongue showed at a corner of her mouth, and her lips closed, still showing the tip of the tongue as her jaw became rigid and her chin rose, and her whole body heaved up from the bed and came back delicately taut, and distended rose again, and returned with gentle force as she breathed so heavily, her face thrown back, that it seemed to empty the whole upper part of her body. Her breath felt as hot as his own, pouring over her ear which touched his lips now: still he could not move, still on one knee, gripping the side of the bed with both hands and his eyes still wide open, all his senses confused into the one he projected, listening. Because he was listening for the beat of his heart, which had not seemed to him to fill that whole room until he became aware that it no longer did, and waited, each throb heavier, and separated from the last by a

dreadful distance.

Nothing moved, and he heard nothing. The metal plate under his knee was still, and he heard nothing at all, not even the engines; not even the engines which had paced his heart day after day and sustained it at night while he slept, so that its beats had vibrated through the whole ship, driving them on when it went faster and paced the engines with anticipation. Then the ship lurched, and a great surging sounded from behind. The engines started; and Stanley's heart doubled their measure as he stood, lost his balance and fell back against the door.

She came up on one elbow, eyes open with alarm as though they had never been closed. —What is it? she cried out.

—I don't know . . . he gasped, and pulled himself up against the door.

The engines had been reversed, and slowed now to a dull and far-off sound, as the ship rocked slightly and appeared to be still.

—Are we there? she burst out.

—There? . . . there? Where? he answered helplessly. Then he got hold of the door handle, and pulled it open.

In the passage, the fat woman had just reached that point. Her Machine came one way, a small three-penny paper book titled *A Modern Virgin Martyr* another, and she fell in at his feet. —I just know . . . she cried, —I just know . . . I just know . . .

Stanley stood there, staring dumbly at the wool-knit knee warmers drawn askew over knees the size of his own waist. —Cut armholes and I'd have two nice sweaters . . . He almost said that out loud, staring now with the glazed look of plain lunacy. Then her hand caught his knee, which almost broke, or gave way, and instead of reaching down to help her he grabbed with both hands for the door frame.

—I just know . . . She started to sink, and mumbling something he reached for her hand before she could seize his knee again. Everything seemed to be happening very slowly. He studied the inadequate ring on the hand he held, doubly miserable for having two mean pearls mounted at an angle to the thin line of gold which had almost been absorbed in the flesh: had she been given it when the ring and her hand still complemented one another? or bought it . . .

—*Water!* . . .

Sure enough, there was about a saucepanful of water in a quiet pool, with neither source nor destination apparent, there in the passage.

—*My rosary!* . . . The Thing glittered near his feet.

Stanley retrieved it, finally closed the door upon his guest, and came back and sat down. His shoulders were just beginning to sink when he leaped to his feet again. —What *has* happened? he cried out, losing balance again and coming down beside her on the bed. He took her hand, and together they hurried out.

The surface of the sea was blinding on the port side where they came on deck, and where other passengers already lined the rails. The days lost count of by now, people stared stupidly at the sea. Conversations inclined to tail off and disappear, as eyes were raised to that expanse of heaving indifference, as inevitable as it had been novel the first day out, and the face of one who talked, and one who listened at the rail turned from one another and lay as open and destitute of past, or future, or anything to give, as the vacant face of actuality they looked upon.

Stanley lifted a hand from the rail to hold the white hand which had been holding his. He looked at his wrist watch, then at her face, and then looking below again he simulated her expression, subdued but troubled, curious but not to know too much.

Lines were flung out, men's voices rose to them, and directly beneath a loading port was opened in the side of the ship. There were six figures in the lifeboat that was finally pulled up to the side, men in torn shirts with blackened faces looking up without the particle of interest exciting the faces that looked down on them. Their boat rocked as they drew on the lines, caught the end of a rope ladder, moving with agile assurance, all but one. He was laid out across a thwart, and when a canvas sling was lowered two men got him in it, and held the sling back from bumping the side as it was raised. It came up slowly, toward Stanley who was directly above, and then, almost to the port, there was a hitch in the line which caught, jerked, and one end of the sling came open. Passengers participating breathlessly shared a sound of shock, a sharp intaking of breath as the head fell back and hung from one end of the sling. The face was dark, and covered with oil-slick which shone in the sun bringing out, even at this distance, the square high-boned lines of the face, the jaw set rigid as though held by the lines drawn down from the nose, breaking the flat cheeks, and the eyes, even closed in unconsciousness, held tight as though with effort.

—You wouldn't think . . . Stanley commenced, turning to her. She raised her face from the one below slowly to his, paling, all the color gone from her lips which quivered round a word, and she fainted.

Stanley caught her against the rail and looked up for help. He met square with a face a deck above,

looking down beyond him with eyes which had their color and their substance from the sea beneath but too light, and even as Stanley looked, too watery, for the glare of the sea in the declining sun had turned to a vast surface of molten metal. The face up there was as pale as the one Stanley supported against his chest, and the figure, in a dark blue striped suit, one arm in a black sling rested on the rail, withdrew and disappeared.

—Now *he's* cute . . . came from further along on the promenade deck above, and Stanley, still craning, could see through the grating a tall blond creature in an overcoat, a bright pink hem hanging out beneath it, toes of a bare foot peeping through the scuppers. —If I'd only brought just *one* of those Boy Scouts . . .

—My dear boy, isn't this a divine miracle? The fat woman's voice brought Stanley back to himself, and the weight he was supporting. He held her still against the rail, and raised her face. Her eyes were still closed but a smile moved her lips.

—Now there's something, the fat woman said, —something I wanted to ask you. An American candy bar was flourished in Stanley's face for a tempting moment by the pearl-laden hand. —Would you like some? he was asked as though he were standing there empty-handed himself.

—No, I . . . please, please excuse me . . .

—Now what could it have been? . . .

Stanley turned to the face close to him. —Are you . . . can you walk now? he asked, and got no answer but the unsteady lifting of her weight from against him. He supported her with an arm round her waist. She walked with her head down, did not raise her face until they had reached the foot of the first flight of steps.

—We are going to him? she asked. Stanley mumbled something, —Mmhmm, pretending to be engrossed in the effort of helping her. They finally reached the passage where the pool of water moved from one side to the other with the roll of the deck, and not until he opened the door and closed it behind them did she utter a little cry, and then, looking round, —Where is he?

She asked with a smile, as though Stanley were playing a game with her, but he said,

—Now, lie down. Lie down. You lie down for a minute . . .

—But where is he? the smile left her face as she looked at him.

—Now you lie down for a minute . . .

—Where is he? she cried out.

—Who? Stanley brought out finally, standing as though afraid to approach her for she had come more alive than he had ever seen her, ever, he realized, except at night when the lights had gone out.

—The man . . . they took out of the sea? She became unsteady for a moment, appealing to him.

—Why they . . . he . . . the one they brought up in that thing, he's probably in the ship hospital, he . . . but you . . .

—Oh yes . . . she whispered hoarsely, —take me. She came toward Stanley, toward the door behind him. —Take me there, take me to him.

—No you . . . now you lie down. He seized her arm and they struggled. Her strength was remarkable, more than his, but desperate and unable to sustain itself, while Stanley fought to hold her away from the door, to hold her back and away from himself, as though he knew from experience what he was doing, though even this did not mitigate the terror in his eyes, struggling with certainty, and the certainty that he would finally lose: for he was shocked at her strength, but not with surprise, shocked with familiarity. It was the same strength he fought at night: the same dreadfully familiar twisting body, the same hard fingers twisted in his, nails cutting the backs of his hands bending them back, drawing them down, the same leg wound around his, the shoulder wrenching away and then dug sharply into his chest, the same arm suddenly flung round his neck, the same hot face, and hot breath, and the hair blinding him, suffocating him, wet with his own sweat and burning with his own breath, until now he got two arms under hers, and with his hands up on her shoulders from behind held her away, her head flung back, fingertips digging into his arms, he stood unsteadily with a leg through between hers and her body still twisting against his where they met.

He was weak, and he clung to her. All this time the motion of the ship had kept them up, where one who might have lost balance on a level floor and gone down was buoyed up from behind as the deck rose, but now, as the port side came up again, and no struggle to sustain them, they went down. His balance gone, Stanley managed to push one more step toward the bed, and there came down on top of her.

—Let me . . . take me . . . she whispered, almost piercing his shoulders with her nails, as he still held her, and could not let go. He could not move, though she writhed under him; he could not breathe, though her breath poured up at his face and was withdrawn sharply, raising his chest on hers; and though her eyes were closed he could not close his own but stared at all this, familiar and dreadfully light. Then Stanley's shoulders shook, and he twisted hers back in his hands. His elbows dug into the bed and his chin came up, his legs hardened and his feet lapped one over the other came rigid and straight to the toes, the rigor of

death setting into every extremity as life went out of him, dissolving his senses, melting everything in him until it was drained away, and his head dropped, eyes closed on the pillow.

He recovered suddenly, pulling himself up on his elbows, the same shock of consciousness that woke him every morning. It seemed a full minute before his heart took up beating, and then pounded relentlessly. He threw his face down into the pillow, and pulled the pillow up on either side of his head, his whole frame shaking. Then he raised his head and looked round the empty room. He threw his feet over the side of the bed and stood up, caught his balance on the back of a chair, started a step and then, his eyes fallen on his unfinished work, palimpsests on one side of the table and clean scores on the other, but vacant, staring eyes, he hung there, suspended, —Anathema . . .

Then he moved slowly. Stepping with feet wide apart he gained the chair, where he sat down and drew off his trousers and then, without looking down, his drawers. Then he got up and wet a towel and, looking away from what he was doing, saw first his face in a cabinet mirror, turned quickly to escape it from that to the wall and saw there the yellowed crucifix, moving gently on its nail. He closed his eyes and stopped, a hand to his forehead, and there was a knock at the door. He waited, his shoulders drawn tight, paralyzed. The knock sounded again. He stepped to the door, not knowing whether he was going to open it or hold it closed.

—My dear boy! . . . he heard from the passage, and waited, holding the door, until there was a snort, and heavy footsteps, receding. Then he opened the mirrored cabinet door, got out a pair of clean drawers, gazed at the blue suit unworn since his mother's funeral, hanging there, swinging gently as though to recall him to it, and turned his back quickly. He got on the clean drawers, hopping about on one foot and then the other, informally, as though pursued by puffs of wind from different and unexpected directions. He hesitated over the trousers he'd been wearing, fell back on the bed pulling them on, and was out and up the passage a moment later, the drawers and the wet towel wadded into a bundle which he threw over the side when he reached the deck.

It was dark, night swelling and falling around him, and there was a moon. He clung there staring at it. And in its light the ship seemed to fleet over the surface scarcely touching the water but to break its crests, a spectacular unreality which sent a shudder of excitement through his emptied frame, fleeing with no more weight than the weak ship's lights above him. He clung as though to save himself from going over, not falling, but simply going over the side and out onto that swarming brilliance where everything would be all right at last.

When he would look back over it all, what had happened, and what was yet to happen, this was the last moment of the voyage that he honestly, clearly remembered.

Father Martin's face was illuminated full from an uncurtained porthole, standing with his back to the rail on the First Class deck. Up the steps, Stanley started to rush toward him when a light sprang up in the face of the man talking to the priest, a light cupped in one hand against the wind, to show the face strong in profile, the eye shining from its surface. The light went down, drawn by a cigarette, flared up as the man shrugged, and went over the side a red speck. —Of course I still am, my dear fellow. We're both probably working on the same thing now.

—You haven't changed, the priest said after a pause.

—Semper aliquid haeret . . . you remember?

The priest turned his back and went up the deck. Had he followed him, Stanley might sooner have found what he was after, for a few yards on Father Martin was stopped by a hospital attendant to whom he listened for a moment and then followed quickly. But the shadow remained at the rail and Stanley turned away from it, and soon got lost.

In a bar, Don Bildow caught his coattail. —I didn't know you were on board! . . . I want you to meet Miss Hall. Mrs. Hall? Mrs. Hall.

—How do you do, excuse me I . . .

Don Bildow, in a threadbare light brown suit, yellow and brown necktie, and plastic-rimmed glasses, stood up looking translucent. —Wait . . . he said, turning his back on Mrs. Hall.

—But I can't, I . . .

Don Bildow was clutching a recent copy of the small stiff-covered magazine which he edited, and, from the stains on the cover, it looked as if he had been carrying it for some time. From his eyes, it looked as if he had had a good deal to drink. "Mrs. Hall" was watching him critically from behind. —Listen Stanley, I've always thought of you as a . . . somebody I can . . . somebody I share a lot with . . . said Don Bildow with a hand on Stanley's shoulder, appraising him for some mutual infirmity, —and I . . . listen Stanley, have you got any Methyltestosterone? I'm with this girl, see? This Mrs. . . . this girl, and she . . . you know she wants me to go up to her cabin with her now but I haven't got . . . I didn't bring any Methyltestosterone, I mean I had some but my wife . . . I left it . . . Have you got any?

—I . . . excuse me, I don't even know what it is, I have to go. Stanley broke away from the limp grasp, and turned a few feet away recalling, thinking he might have asked Don Bildow if he had seen her; but Don Bildow was back deep in conversation, telling "Mrs. Hall" about —My little daughter, she's only six and she was all swollen up when I left, I shouldn't have left I know it, I have terrible guilt feelings about it, all swollen up in the middle . . .

—And you're the young man who wanted to trade some Dramamine for some Phenobarbital?

Stanley turned to the tall woman, automatically held out his hand as he was accustomed to do when something was offered.

—But what do you need them for, you're all right, the tall woman's husband demanded. —You can walk, I can't even walk.

—They're not for me, she said to him, —they're for Huki-lau . . . now where did that boy go?

At the door, Stanley had to wait a moment.

—After you, Senator.

—After you, Mister Senator.

—Senator, you'll be doing me a great service if you'll go first and help me out, I can't even see the door, sir.

Stanley saw her pass, outside on the deck, running. —Excuse me, I . . .

—What? . . . Senator?

—Excuse me, sir, I . . .

—Oops! . . .

—I'm sorry, I . . .

She was not in sight, but Stanley hurried in the direction she'd gone. He dropped the sticky pills into his pocket, found the tooth, and ran clutching it. Rounding another corner, he saw her feet through a flight of steps; but when he reached them, and got up them, she was gone again. He stopped to get breath. A man in a dinner jacket approached, and Stanley, thinking, stopped him to ask for the ship's hospital.

—You don't look ill, my boy. Stay out and get a little air, thet'll straighten you up quicker than all the ductors . . .

Stanley ran on over the metal plates, and finally he did reach the ship's hospital, but she was not there. At any rate he did not see her when he came in. Few of the beds were occupied, and round one stood a screen against which shadows moved, and he went there.

From within came the steady murmur of Spanish, interrupted but unbroken by subdued words in Father Martin's voice. Stanley stood listening to the confession, bound, not understanding its features but only what it was. Then the murmur subsided, broke in a cough, took up again more rapidly and abruptly ceased. There was silence. The shadows on the screen moved, and then Father Martin's voice took up, a monody hardly breaking the reciprocal sounds which bound the ship in motion, no more pressing or importunate, and no more faltering than the movement of the ship itself into the darkness. Bells sounded somewhere, clear tones which penetrated the misereatur, hard separate sounds which signaled the Latin syllables with consequence: Stanley was counting them. For no reason, he had never learned the simple system of ship's bells and seven might be any hour; but now each one pinioned his tension, waiting for the next, listening, as he waited watching the shadows, for one of them to take form and move of itself. Then the bells stopped and left him swaying on the firm undulations,

—Per istam unctionem, et suam piissimam misericordiam . . . He smelled oil, or it seemed, burning oil, —indulgeat tibi Dominus . . . the shadow of an erect thumb drew out elongated on the screen. —Quidquid deliquisti per oculos . . . Then he saw her, moving slowly and more clear as she approached the light, her dress wrinkled and torn at the bosom, hair in disarray, and catching light her eyes were wild. —Deliquisti per aurem . . . the voice came on with intolerable slowness, and that because its progress seemed to draw her on and restrain her at once. —Deliquisti per manus . . .

When she broke and ran toward the screen Stanley stayed her no more than a shadow thrown across her. Nor did her body when she flung it forth heaving with sobs, seem to disturb more than a shadow so suddenly fallen upon him the figure laid out there, exposed for the last touch of forgiveness upon the flesh where all of its impulses reared in one. And like a ragged shadow her hair almost covered his lined face, and her left arm round his head and his shoulder in her other hand so forcefully that it appeared to rise slightly from the bed, nothing moving but her lips on his ear, —Oh yes . . . her voice broke but she would not leave it, —Oh yes, oh yes . . . Oh yes . . .

The left hand of the man on the bed came up slowly. It moved as though with life of its own into the shadow of her thigh, and there under a final hieroglyph of veins it came to rest.

Then there was no sound, of voices nor of any voice: and without, her shape flung down there appeared no longer dirigible. The only thing to bind time together was the reciprocal motion of the ship: yet in the

moments of the prow dropping forth into a trough far ahead and shaking the fragments of its advance down in shudders all about them, Stanley had long since begun, repeated every motion of battle, every twist of the past convulsed nights, every skirt and dash in this sciamachy brought up firm now with Father Martin's hand on his shoulder until he straightened himself back to its force, straining away at last, rending away his spoil and leaving a dead man laid out in the light.

Together they staggered down decks, down steps, companionways, passages, nearly fell in the pool shifting just before their own door, and once inside it was as though they'd never left: buff-painted metal walls studded with double rows of rivets, metal above transected by a steel I-beam, steel under foot in plates lapped with rivets, the closed door flush and no way out but the ventilator, and this whole severe enclosure of angles driven by vibrations, in motion with no direction, it was more than as though they had never left it, as though they could never leave it, and had never been anywhere else. Stanley looked at his wrist watch, as though knowing what time it was might confirm something.

—Why did you take me away from him? she asked quietly.

Stanley looked up from the watch face to hers, and gaped at her. —But he wasn't . . . he isn't . . . you . . . That's all he could say; but she was still waiting, standing still against the roll of the ship and staring at him, her plain dress wrinkled and torn at the breast where he'd torn it, and on her face a look like she'd had that day he found her in the hospital, a day in his childhood it struck him now. He took one step toward her and raised his hand. —Now . . . and he stopped as though something had caught in his throat: he had started to tell her to lie down, as though that could ever be an innocent proposal again, and a pain of a novel and intimate sort shot through him from behind to confirm the cleaned empty feeling his weak legs supported in witness.

—Why?

Stanley recovered the step he had taken forward, back. He saw streaks glistening on her face, but not tears. They were streaks from the anointed face she had thrown herself upon. And throwing both hands before him Stanley burst out, —But why did you . . . who was he? . . . how did you know who he was?

—He was? . . . she repeated, and —Oh, he was. She put fingers to her forehead and lowered her eyes, and then let her hand go down to an ear and stop at the empty lobe. —For he knows who I am, though he had so little to share . . . so precious little. And did you never know him? she asked, raising her face to Stanley, —his eyes, not the eyes of a lover, no, never but once. He brought lilies when selling them was against the law. Against the law? . . . to sell lilies? Still touching the lobe of her ear, she was looking away from him now, and went on, her voice low, —Not a lover, not looking to find what was there but for what he could put there, and so selfishly take it away. But he didn't! He didn't! He didn't! she cried, and she threw herself on Stanley.

He fell back against the door, and his arms raised, prepared of their own accord to fight, for he was not, found themselves supporting her, sobbing in weak broken cries which were caught up in desperate gasps for breath. But even these sounds so close that his own chest shook with them seemed far away as he dragged her across the steel plates, staggering, catching his foot on a riveted seam, and ready to smash his head on the floor before her weight could pull him down on the bed with her distant sobs, for the sound of his own heart engulfed them both, the steel room shuddered with its pounding, a half-measure and then a full one, and both of them shut inside it, locked in the riveted steel enclosure, a heart in motion with no direction.

—Let me out! she screamed, and he pushed her, catching himself on the sharp corner of a metal bureau as she fell back on the bed, the port side rising behind him, and she hit her head against the rivet row, and the crucifix fell and stabbed her shoulder.

It was the crucifix Stanley recovered first, and he stood there with it in his trembling hand staring at the drawn yellowed legs, rigid, hard-muscled straight to the toes, and then, the chest raised stiffly motionless, the chin thrust up and the unseeing eyes wide open. He had stopped breathing. The trembling crucifix lowered from his fixed gaze and he was staring at her, only a blur before him.

Her head lay over on one shoulder, lolling gently against the steel behind her, eyes closed, and she whimpered. Faint streaks and blotches had begun to show on her pale face, and Stanley bent over her. He started to talk loudly as his heart took up again with the engines and the whole thing of metal angles straining against each other enclosed overtook him, —Listen, listen . . . listen to me . . . He dropped the crucifix beside her and took her shoulders. Her head fell forward. —Listen to me . . . He laid her back on the bed, got her legs up, and then pulled the crucifix out from under her and put it over beside her head. He stared at her still face for a moment, then got up and got a glass of water. He looked for a towel, found none, and so he dipped his fingers in and drew them over her forehead, saying now, —Listen, you can't have . . . I didn't mean . . . you can't have hurt yourself, you . . . listen . . .

She opened her eyes staring straight at him, and said finally, —Will you always keep me here?

—No, no, I . . . because even I, I can't stand . . .

—Will we go to him now?

—Yes, I . . . no, you . . . now, now you have to rest for a minute for a little while. Now we, listen, both of us have to . . . where did I . . . Where did you put that . . . that rosary I gave you, that . . . those silvery beads I gave you, where are they? . . . because we . . .

She just stared at him. Stanley got up and started looking frantically round. In a pocket, a hand as frantic as his eyes found the tooth, and two sticky pills clinging to its wrapping.

The rosary was Italian, of silver filigree beads, with a filigree cross at the end of it. He saw it in a heap on the bureau where he'd just come from, and brought it back to her, going down on one knee beside her. —Listen, now we both . . . after what we've both . . . listen, the Angelic Salutation. The An-gel-ic, Salutation, do you remember it? Ave . . . listen, repeat it with me. Take this . . . He thrust the rosary beads into her hands, still on her belly. —Ave Maria . . .

Her torn dress was pulled to the tip of her breast, which lay still as though she were not breathing. The beads lay over her motionless fingers with their colorless nails. She stared at him.

She stared at him through four repetitions, her breast just as still, the beads unmoved by her fingers and their colorless nails, the streaks on her face reddening. Then she burst into laughter.

The port side came down with a shudder; and Stanley went back on his heels: he'd never heard such a sound, thrown down on him from every side from the metal walls. All he could say was, —No! . . . No! . . . until he did manage to get hold of the crucifix. —No, now . . . now listen, you . . . Him who . . . He who . . . whose love was so great . . . whose love for us was so great that He gave up His life . . . He . . . He . . .

—He! . . . she cried out, —then take me to him!

—No, I mean, not him, I mean . . . here. Stanley thrust the crucifix into her hands raised before her, the beads in a heap in her lap. For the moment his hand held it, his fingers trembled on the rigid yellow figure. The new significance his own body had given it made him dizzy, and he swallowed with the effort seasickness cost him.

She was staring at it too. Her eyes shone brilliantly, and she gripped it with great excitement. Stanley stood up before her. He watched her, waiting for her to confirm him in some transfiguration of faith, what, he did not know. She raised her eyes. They were glittering from her hollow face.

—This h-horrid thing, she said, and threw it at him.

Stanley reached automatically to catch it, but the instant his fingers touched it, they stiffened and it fell.

—Your terrible little man with nails in him, she cried, —your muttering and your muttering, and that . . . terrible thing. She stood up. —For love? For love? Oh never, never, never. I know whose love must save me as I must be for love. And you cannot keep me from him. You cannot keep me from him. You cannot, nor Him dead with nails in, not for love.

There was a knock on the door, and before Stanley could open it or hold it closed, there was the fat woman filling the doorway. —My dear boy, my book, I lost it and I must have lost it here. My book about our little Spanish saint?

She stared at Stanley and beyond him. Stanley found the yellow three-penny pamphlet on the floor, and got it.

—But I won't take it if you're reading it, the fat woman said, standing curiously still in the rocking doorway. —The lovely child! . . . preferring death to sin. I liked the part . . .

—Here, take it! Stanley said.

—I liked the part like where she's getting ready, for First Communion? "Take care of your tongue," the priest told her, "for it's the first part of you to touch the body of Our Lord . . ."

The fat woman stood there, filling the doorway. She had a small mouth, lips lined with a coral shade, which she pursed impatiently. She stood there, curiously still.

The rosary flew through the air.

—Go fuck yourself!

Stanley turned his head slowly. He saw no features, only livid red streaks. The silver filigree beads rolled all over the floor. He leaned over to pick up the crucifix.

—You are possessed, said the fat woman. Stanley brought his head up slowly before her, as he recovered the crucifix, afraid of the expression on the coral lips, afraid the fat woman would knock him down in an attack on the figure behind him, whom she'd just judged: but the fat woman was looking straight at him. She watched what he was doing, and as he stood, fixed her small eyes on his. The coral lips continued to twist silently. Then she turned from the doorway and went up the passage, the yellow three-penny pamphlet in the hand with the two mean pearls.

Stanley bolted the door, and turned his back against it. The cross he held was whole, but the figure mounted there was broken across the knees, and the chin was gone. He laid it face down on the bureau and turned with a hand in his pocket, where he felt the tooth and the two pills stuck to its wrapping.

Then he was grappling with her again. At one point they were thrown a hand or two apart, and Stanley looked up to the mirror in the cabinet door for reassurance, but he saw only himself. The ship heeled over, the door swung gently to, and the mirror embraced them both again but he did not see, for at the moment he was forced to renew the struggle, with the single mirror image before his eyes.

Her strength gave out suddenly; and he finally managed to get her to take the two sleeping pills, thinking, as the second one disappeared, that he might have kept it for himself. Then he started to pick up the filigree silver beads. He found the Portiuncula card torn in half, and paused, piecing it together, but his shaking hands could not make the edges meet. He gave that up and laid it with the crucifix, stared for a full minute at the bed, and the silent figure he saw there, then looked wildly about as though indeed himself seeking a briar patch. He shuddered as though with cold, and went back to hunting the beads.

Each time he reached for one it rolled away from his hand, as he concluded a Gloria Patri on the last. Mumbling Aves in between, each time he caught one he renewed the devotion with a Paternoster, recovering, after sixteen centuries, the pebbles which the hermit Paul threw away to keep count of his daily three hundred prayers.

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The stem broke a path in the water as the ship ground its way into the night, and the sea washed well below the nineteenth-century monogram on the side, a more intricate device than the cross painted at the load line on those Pilgrim Galleys carrying devotees on their quest for relics, to Jerusalem for stones from Saint Anne's church, for pregnant women, reeds for women in labor from Saint Catherine's fountain at Sinai, and for barren women, roses from Jericho.

Asleep in the chair, Stanley had a bad dream, the worse for its dreadful familiarity, though, waking in the dark, he could not remember what it was. But at hand he heard twisting, turning, moaning —Yes, if there is time yes, oh yes . . . Oh yes . . .

Stanley found himself perspiring freely. His clothes were damp and his drawers almost wet, still he did not dare turn on the light, fearing its confirmation of everything he imagined the darkness to hold in abeyance as he pulled a coat round him and shivered, listening, to her sounds, and the pounding of his own heart driving them forward toward Gibraltar and the inland sea, as hearts have driven them down through centuries, from the ones peering into the cave at Bethlehem where the bodies of the Holy Innocents were hurled (and more than willing, upon turning round, to pay a hundred ducats for the knife-slashed body of a still-born Saracen child), to their descendants gathered at the burning of a celebrated poisoner of Paris, the Marchioness of Brinvilliers, her gifts thus solemnized at the stake, and her ashes sought as preservative against witchcraft.

•

Dawn broke, in the full glory of the dawn at sea. Some white birds had appeared. They hung behind the aftermast, breaking now and then to come down to the water for a look at anything thrown over the side. The rising sun found Stanley running damp and disheveled down a starboard deck. He paused at a ladder, hung on its wet railing to get breath, and then buttoned himself up in a number of places. He looked slightly surprised at the sun, as though it were an intruder, and might be a helpful one; but soon gave that up and carried on. His mustache looked like something he had fallen into, and his hair stood out in a heavy tangle behind. A waiter from the Tourist Class dining room stood to the rail out of his way, apparently taking for granted that Stanley was being pursued. But Stanley slid straight up to him, making a grab for him with one hand, waving the other,

—Have you seen her? Have you seen her?

—Ma signorino, che . . .

But Stanley was off again; and the waiter stood there at the rail for a good half-minute looking in the direction Stanley had come from, with the unhealthy expectancy of someone who has seen a number of American moving pictures.

Stanley covered a good part of the ship. At one point he almost made the chart room. At another he skidded into a tall white-haired man in a blanket robe and straw slippers, with the same question.

—Heving a bit of a run, eh? Good thing, better for you then all the ductors . . . good heavens. Ghood heavens! . . .

Stanley caromed off the rail, made another ladder, and was up it. In the ship's hospital he found the bed which had been a center of activity the night before, empty. Though Stanley could hardly know it, waking as he had, alone and moist, to jump up and spill those silver filigree beads all over the floor again, she hadn't got much head start on him, and perhaps as little idea, he did realize when he found her still

running, of where she was going as he had.

And —Dead! she said when he did find her, and caught her wrist to hold her back.

Up the deck, now a covered one and near the water line, a group of silent men surrounded a long canvas sack, where Father Martin presided, a book in one hand, raising the other at the regular somnambulistic intervals of ritual.

—Dead! . . . and that damned black andro-gyne. He did it.

—But now you . . . now you . . . now . . .

—You know, you saw him, too, apply the poison, and the envenomed words . . .

—Now now now . . .

—No! . . . don't hold me here . . .

—Some Spaniard's all it is, I heard him talk. I heard the Viaticum last night and heard him talking Spanish.

—Let me go!

Upwind on the deck, none of them heard her cry out, none of them turned at any rate; and holding her, Stanley finally realized that she was making no effort to escape him.

With a sign, Father Martin was still, and the other figures took up his motion, as slow and as careful, they slid the weighted canvas bundle over the side.

With the splash, the birds came down immediately. The men and the priest had left the rail and gone forward, for the dawn was very bright on the water, and dazzled the eyes. Then she broke away from him and ran toward the rail. Stanley hesitated in surprise, and then started after her to hold her before she could jump.

But she stopped, and stared down at the dazzling sea.

Stanley stopped, and recollected enough to cross himself. Then he looked out, at the glare of the sea stretching everywhere the sky was not, and the notion of land as impossible to him as daylight on wakening from a nightmare, the sea the man had come out of, and gone back to. Then he recalled his dream: he had been crossing the street, carrying a tiny shawl-wrapped figure, and he met Anselm.

—No! . . . she cried out at the rail; and Stanley shut his eyes on the dream, opened them again on the sea, which had lost the glare of sunrise. The sea, romantic in books, or dreams or conversation, symbol in poetry, the mother, last lover, and here it was, none of those things before him. Romantic? this heaving, senseless actuality? alive? evil? symbolical? shifting its surfaces in imitation of life over depths the whole fabric of darkness, of blind life and death. Boundlessly neither yes or no, good nor evil, hope nor fear, pretending to all these things in the eyes that first beheld it, but unchanged since then, still its own color, heaving with the indifferent hunger of all actuality.

Stanley looked down, to steady himself as he took a step toward her, and the lines in the grain of the wooden rail swam over against themselves in imitation of the surface of the water, stretching like this beyond the morning mists which belied the horizon to where Africa lay, unknown to the senses, but borne in insinuations on the wind from the south. The ship heaved, shuddered, dropped its bows on the water. Down below, the white birds, finding nothing, startled by the clap of the hull, fled coming up all together, and away, like the fragments of a letter torn up and released into the wind.

•

—O Christ, the plough . . .

—O Christ the what?

—the laughter, of holy white birds . . .

—What you reading? a poem? You know, you don't look so good. The man at the rail held out his glass. —Take a swat at this? He shrugged at the look of horror with which his offer was received, but continued to stare at the figure in the deck chair, a man who, in any other circumstances, might have been described as of comfortable middle age. Engulfed in the flow of a tartan lap robe and folds of Irish thorn-proof, he stared fixedly at an open book and moved his lips with precise effort.

The man at the rail took a bottle from his pocket to replenish his glass, and stared out over the water, through the morning mists toward the indistinct mound on the horizon. —That broken-down bump doesn't look like a life-insurance ad from here, he muttered, spat over the side, and wiped his chin. He had appeared on all fours, though somewhat taliped because of the glass he maintained upright in one hand, growling at a dog leashed to a tall woman who passed in the opposite direction, —a Hawaiian poodle dog, he explained. —Did you see what it's wearing? I asked her what the hell it was. A chastity belt, it's made out of plastic. Made in England. Huki-lau will need it among those naughty Spanish doggies, she says to me. Jesus. Grrrr-rouf! he lunged after the dog. —You getting off at Gib too? The figure in the deck chair responded with a feeble sound, amended with a nod. —Me too. Some spic sued my newspaper, they pay the

bastard off and then send me all the way the hell over here to see what the hell is going on. They think he's blowing the money on a patron saint. You know, you don't look so good. He had straightened up and leaned back against the rail, sipping. —What you got in the paper bag? To be sick in?

—Bread.

—Bread?

The figure in the deck chair made an infirm gesture overhead.

—Oh, for the birds? The newsman steadied his glass at the rail and got a handful of bread out of the bag. —You look fermiliar somehow, you know? It's the first time I've seen you on deck the whole trip. The man in the deck chair made a vague gesture, down. —Oh, you been sick in your cabin? You missed all the fun then, you hear about it? the shipwreck? The man in the deck chair startled visibly. —We picked up these poor bastards in a lifeboat, one of them died yesterday and they dumped him back where they got him. An old tub called the *Purdue Victory*, it busted right in half. He paused to dip a bit of bread into his glass, and throw it at a seagull. —A foot of barnacles on the hull, salt water leaking in the fresh water tanks, rust flakes like your fist painted right over, they get in this storm and the rudder chain snaps, the sea swings it right around like a fighter turns a guy around in the ring when he's groggy to finish him off. Pow! The damn thing broke in half and went down in two minutes, both ends of it. They were going to scrap it anyway after this trip, you know? But that company's got a good lobby in Congress or it would have been scrapped ten years ago. So now with deep remorse for the guys who were drownded they collect a quarter of a million bucks insurance. Breaks your heart. He flung another whisky-soaked wad of bread heavenward, and watched his new deck companion labor a deep swallow and return to the printed page. —Whose poems? He squatted to look at the cover. —John Mansfield? You get them out of the First Class saloon? The man in the deck chair nodded. He tried a smile but it was obliterated by a grimace of swallowing.

—Sail on! sail on and on and on, you remember that one? Columbus? Behind him lay the blue Azores, behind him lay the Gates of Hercules, you remember that poem? Speak, brave Admiral, what shall I say? Why say, sail on, sail on, sail on, sail on . . . The newsman struggled to an almost vertical position against the rail and drank off half his glass. —He knew where he was going all the time, Columbus did. Did you know that? he confided. —Sail on, sail on, he knew he wasn't going to India. You know how he knew? Because the Portuguese already discovered America. The King of Portugal took one look at it and said to hell with it. You know who his mapmaker was? It was Columbus's brother. All the King of Portugal wants to do is get the spics the hell out of competition in the spice trade, so his mapmaker slips Columbus these maps so he can go discover America for Ferdinando and Isabella, give them something to keep them busy and get the hell out of the spice trade. The stout mate said, lo! the very stars are gone. My men grow mutinous wan and weak . . . And all the time Columbus is keeping two sets of logs on the ship, he fakes a set to pretend they're only half as far out as they think, while he knows they're going to America all the time. You know what Columbus discovered in America? Syphilis. They all crossed the ocean to get laid. Now speak brave Admiral, what shall I say? . . . With a full slice of whisky-soaked bread, he lunged into —Sail on! . . . tripped over the foot rest of the deck chair, and caught a foot under the rail. The bottle flew from his pocket, slid down the scuppers and smashed. He lay for a moment staring at the glass still gripped upright in his hand. Then without changing his position he raised his chin from the deck and drank it down, struggled to his feet, and calling out, —Here, chum, to a seagull flying as though hung suspended beside the ship, threw his empty glass at it.

The man in the deck chair opened his eyes. The hulk of Gibraltar was closer. Direct above, a white gull fixed him with a cold eye. He looked back at his book, and a few minutes passed while he looked up nervously and back at the page, until finally he got the paper bag and with an indecisive gesture attempted to toss a bit of bread up. The bird swooped.

—What's the matter, scared you?

—Up there flying, they're beautiful, but so close . . .

—Scared you, huh? The newsman recovered the rail limping, and pulled up his trouser cuff. —It's going up like a balloon, he said looking at his ankle. —Look at that broken-down rock, they ought to sink it. But oh no! Not the limeys. That would make too much sense. Instead they have this crazy superstition about these baboons that run all over the place there, that they'll lose Gibraltar when there aren't any more. So what do they do, they fly these sunset-assed baboons in from Africa when the stock gets low. They run all over the place there. How would you like to look up and see some sunset-assed baboon looking in your bedroom window? he challenged. —They don't hurt anybody, you know. Except the Y.M.C.A. It's yellow, the building. It makes them mad as hell. They come down and throw rocks at it. How'd you like to be a member of the Gibraltar Young Men Christians Association with a bunch of sunset-assed baboons throwing rocks at you? Favoring his swelling ankle he leaned on the rail and gazed back at the wake of the ship. —Behind him lay the Gates of Hercules. The blanched mate showed his teeth and said, brave Admiral,

speak!

The man in the deck chair mastered a liquid swallow, and heaved slightly fixing his eyes on *The Everlasting Mercy*, reading under his breath in precise gasps, —Chra-hist, the laughter of hu-ho-white birds flying . . .

—A light! A light! Sail on, sail on. The son of a bitch knew where he was going all the time.

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Stanley woke to cold hands opening his pants from behind, and lay there with his eyes wide open for a moment as the fingers became more intimate.

From somewhere, there came music. It was the tango, *Jealousy*.

Then he almost leaped out of the bed. —What are you . . . who *are* you? he cried, turning on the woman in white. She had a generous Scandinavian face. —Now wait, now wait, now wait . . .

—Now you lie down, she said. —You just lie down. I want to give you this suppository, sonny.

—This what? He stared at the cone between her fingers. It was Nembutal sodium in a cocoa-butter base. Then he stared at her. She smiled, and got his shoulder in a bone-breaking grip. Then he looked round him. The place was rocking gently. —I'm in the ship hospital? he asked. Then he looked at his wrist and said, —Who stole my watch?

—You'll be all right, now you just roll over and let me give you this suppository . . .

—Get me out of this bed, he burst out.

—You have to stay in bed for a little while longer . . .

—No but not this bed, not this bed . . . look all the other beds are empty, put me in another one, put me in that bed but not this bed . . .

With a pleasant smile and a turn of her wrist, she spun him round and his face went into the pillow. —But you . . . can't you . . . wait . . .

—Just relax the buttocks now . . . tha-at's it . . .

—But can't you . . . ummp!

—That will help you rest, sonny.

—But I don't want to rest. You can't just keep me here. Where's my watch? What day is it? And where . . . where is she?

The woman looked concerned for the first time, and she said, —Now we mustn't start that again, must we.

—Start . . . what again?

A waiter entered and started to approach with some food on a tray. Then he saw Stanley was sitting up, with eyes wide open. He put the tray down a safe distance away, and said, —Coraggio . . .

—Now what was that? Stanley demanded as the waiter got out the door.

—He's the one who saved you from jumping over the side.

Stanley lay back slowly. —The side of what? he murmured, but she did not hear him. She was busy unmaking a bed.

Spots of sun danced brokenly off the ceiling and down one wall. Stanley's head came back to rest against a metal bar of the bed. —But no . . . why would I . . . he commenced, raising a hand to his face. He touched his cheek, then his chin, pulled his hand away and stared at it, then began to rub his chin again. It was rough with stubble. —But how long have I . . . how long have I been here?

—Lie back and don't try to remember everything now, sonny boy, said the woman in white. —Lie back and get some sleep. She emptied a pillowcase briskly.

—But I do, I remember everything. I remember everything perfectly. Everything except . . . except that, if I did that, but I . . . I wouldn't do that. No! . . . He came up on his elbows again, —No it wasn't me that tried it, it was her, don't you remember? But wait, listen, first put me into another bed, I can't stay in this bed. Any of the other beds, they're all empty and it doesn't matter but . . . Then he stopped. There was someone two beds away from him. A face, clean-shaven but weary looking, rested on a doubled-up hand, the elbow dug into the pillow, watching him with patient curiosity. The covers were pulled up over the head, so that only the face showed. —What do you think I am, a seagull?

—Oh no, I'm . . . I'm sorry, I didn't see you, I hope I didn't disturb you but I . . . I didn't see you.

—That's all right, chum. I been listening to you for a long time now, I'm used to it. Have a swat at this? A bottle appeared, from under the pillow.

—Oh no, no thank you, no but listen . . .

—Play cards?

—No but listen, what do you mean you've been listening to me for a long time?

—Right up until you were excommunicated, since then you been real quiet, you know?

—Since I was what?

—You got excommunicated, right up at the high altar with a bishop and twelve priests, don't you remember? It sounded pretty swell, all of them carrying lighted candles and talking Latin, you know? And then they all shouted Fiat! Fiat! Fiat! and threw their candles down. And then she gave you a shot.

—Who? Stanley asked helplessly.

—That squarehead. She's got a nice ass, hasn't she.

The woman in white was approaching again from the far end, carrying some linen. She stopped to put the tray in front of the man two beds away, and smiled threateningly at Stanley, who sank back.

—It sounds like you were in trouble with some dame, said his neighbor, trying the mashed potatoes with his finger. —Just tell me one thing, will you? Who the hell is Saint Mary of Egypt?

—Why she . . . that's when I came down and found her in front of the mirror making up her face with make-up and lipstick and everything, and black around her eyes, and she had those streaks on her face, from the poison, I mean that's what she said, from the poison the black androgyne, I mean that's what she called Father Martin, the poison Father Martin put on him and it came off on her but only on her face. Because she said, See? and pulled up her dress to show me her . . . to show there weren't any marks on her . . . anywhere else on her body.

—You mean on her snatch?

—I mean then she said, This was covered when she lay with him, for he was poisoned here and so he died, but she shall not. That's what she said and then she said we're going to the Holy Land and she's going to be Saint Mary of Egypt going to the Holy Land on the boat.

His neighbor looked at him a moment longer, and then started to eat, saying —Thanks, through the first mouthful. —That clears up everything.

—And talking . . . Stanley mumbled, looking down with a fixed stare, —about the beast with two backs, he mumbled to himself, —about . . . making the beast with two backs.

It was quiet for a minute, except for the sounds of his neighbor's eating, and the distant radio playing something Italian. Then the blond woman loomed over him, and Stanley jumped as though she were going to strike him.

—Now you just lie back and try to get some rest, sonny boy. Don't try and remember everything.

—But I do, Stanley whispered desperately, —I remember, I . . . because all that time I repeated the Angelic Salutation and then I repeated the Apostles' Creed, and those beads were rolling all over the floor and the . . . the crucifix was . . . I couldn't hold it because . . . and then Father Martin came, you can ask him, he came in, that fat woman must have sent him because he came in and he put a hand on me and said something, and she was laughing. And I said thank God you've come Father she needs you and he just looked at me and she kept laughing. She called him a funny old hermaphro-ditic and asked him if he could relieve a possessed camel like Saint Hilarion did once. And then he held up his crucifix and she changed all of a sudden and said, Take him away he's hurting her, and she spat at him. But he kept looking at me, and he had his hand on me and I said, Do something for her, Father, I kept saying that, but he didn't pay any attention to her. He sprinkled some plain water around and nothing happened and then he sprinkled some holy water around and she started to cry then and she said her shoulder hurt her.

Stanley shivered, and stopped speaking. The woman in white had turned away, and was walking with a firm silent tread toward the other end of the place, down the aisle of beds. The man two beds away spilled the last forkful of his lunch in his lap, and swore.

—And then when I confessed, all the time I was kneeling, she kept . . .

—You better have a swat at this, said the other man, getting the bottle out again. He took a long swat himself, and offered it.

—No, because listen . . . Stanley commenced again.

—How about a hand of casino?

Stanley sat in the bed with his knees drawn up, and he let his head fall forward on them. He swallowed, and started to talk again, more rapidly, less loud and, with his head like that, less coherent, —Because when he said, "I exorcise thee, Stanley, being weak but reborn in Holy Baptism, by the living God, by the true God, by God Who redeemed thee with His Precious Blood, that thou mayest be exorcised, that all the illusions and wickedness of the devil's deceits may depart and flee from thee together with every unclean spirit, adjured by Him Who will come to judge both the quick and the dead, and who will purge the earth with fire. Amen. Let us pray . . ." when he said that she just looked at him and I could see her there, and she looked . . . she looked . . .

The blond woman had returned with a small tray full of bottles and syringes. She stopped at the other bed to clean the mashed potatoes off the counterpane, and the man slid a hand round her waist and ran it up and down her starched thigh. As she bent over him he blew into her ear.

—"to bestow Thy grace upon Thy servant who suffereth from a weakness in the limbs of his body," Stanley mumbled on, —"that whatever is corrupt by earthly frailty, whatever is made violate by the deceit of the devil, may find redemption in the unity of the body of the Church. Have mercy, O Lord, on his groaning, have mercy upon his tears . . ."

—In a minute, said the woman at the next bed, pulling away with a giggle and a snap of elastic.

—You see? I remember all of it, even all the words, Stanley burst out, as the woman in white put the small tray down on his night table and pulled one of his arms out straight. —And then . . . because then the streaks, those red streaks she had on her, it seemed like they were leaving her face, like they just sort of disappeared and she was as white as . . . as this, and then he said, "Therefore, accursed devil, hear thy doom, and give honor to the true and living God, give honor to the Lord Jesus Christ, that thou depart with thy works from this servant whom our Lord Jesus Christ hath redeemed with His Precious Blood. Let us pray . . ." and she . . . she'd started to talk too, and she was crying too, and she said, She will be a nun and sweat blood too, and sweat blood like Blessed Catherine Racconigi, and like Saint Veronica Giuliani and like Saint Lutgarde of Tongres, yes and like Blessed Stefana Quinzani on every Friday the sweat of blood, and conceal the Four Wounds, and hide the Crown of Thorns under her veil like that Poor Clare of Rovereto . . . *Owwwoww!* . . . Stanley screamed.

—Jesus Christ, chum . . .

—Now hold still, sonny boy, this doesn't hurt, just a little needle.

—But you . . . but you . . . no, listen! No! No, because I'm . . . don't! He cowered back at the head of the bed, away from her. The sun no longer danced off the ceiling and down the wall, but it shone in a steady weakening light of its own, no longer reflected off the water, but shining in through a porthole upon a heavy glass ashtray on another table, where he stared. The corner of the ashtray caught the sunlight and broke it into colors which changed slowly before his eyes, red, to green, to violet, to green, as the ship rocked gently. —Listen! . . . Stanley whispered hoarsely, drawn up rigid against the bars of the bed, the tendons in his neck standing out, —*Listen* . . .

There were distant voices, indistinct, broken by shouts from closer by, and sounds totally unfamiliar by this time, all sustained on the throbs of a dull pulsation, which went on, and had been going on all this time like the beat of another heart, but not his own.

—Listen . . . he repeated weakly. Then he appeared to fall off the end of the bed; but he was up, and with energy not his own, so far as he knew, for he knew his heart had stopped, he got to the door and pulled it open. What he saw stopped him. He staggered, and fell in two or three steps toward the rail where he caught himself.

He stared at the static landscape. It would not move, and he could not accept it that way, not moving, and so crowded. Here and there fragments moved sharply and separate, small boats offside, and people on the dock, cars moving slowly but steady against the hard land, and everything separate; even the noises rose with the discordance of differences, whistles and sharp cries, bells and motorcars breaking their edges against one another.

—Where are we? he said, as the woman in white caught him there at the rail.

—Naples, but you . . .

—But Naples, I have to get off, I have to get off here, I have to get off at Naples, tell them . . . wait . . .

—All right, sonny boy, you come back in to bed, we'll stop at Livorno and Genoa, and you can . . .

—Wait wait wait look look there she is, there she is, don't you see her? Look don't you see her?

He twisted out of the grip on his shoulder and almost went over the rail, pointing to the figures on the dock below. —Look don't you see her? . . . there she is, don't you see her? . . . with that man, don't you see her with that man, with that man in the black hat and the black coat and the . . . with the sling, don't you see them? Don't you see her? Wait! Wait! Wait! he cried, over the rail. —Wait . . . wait for me! . . .

The woman caught him by both shoulders, and dragged him back on his heels, back from that sudden landscape so crowded with detail. The ship's whistle shivered every fixture aboard. Stanley was heaving helplessly when she got him back inside. His eyes were closed, but he kept mumbling, —Now wait . . . now wait . . . now wait . . . as she filled the syringe again and thrust the point of the needle into his arm.

He lay shivering in the dim light, the sheet drawn perfectly straight across his shoulder, trying to speak but even as his lips moved, he could not make a sound. In his staring eyes, the image of the woman in white came up the aisle between the beds, carrying a screen, up the aisle. His lips formed, Now wait, not this bed, any other bed but not this bed, now wait . . . But he could not make a sound. He choked on a scream, Not this bed . . . but he could not make a sound. He felt for his pocket, but he had no pocket. He found his left wrist with his right hand, and all he felt was the naked wrist.

—Not here . . . not this bed . . . not yet . . . he whispered; and the screen stopped there two beds away, and came open.

Stanley listened: he thought he could hear the beads rolling on the floor; mounting, pausing, rolling back. —Pater noster, he whispered as they rolled, —qui es in coelis . . . His tongue found the hollow on his gum. —Qui tollis peccata mundi . . . no I mean qui . . . qui . . . who . . .

He coughed, and tried to say, Wait! . . . but found he was throwing up, and put his head over the side of the bed. Then he put a foot out, and it touched the cold floor. The sound of the engines rose, and with that his heart took up beating heavily, and he caught his breath and was able to breathe. Both feet on the cold steel floor, he steadied himself with a hand on his night table and tried to whisper Wait . . . but he heard, —What? . . . what am I . . . doing here? all I have . . . all I have lost . . . He was dizzy, standing.

The ship bumped, and shook. He held to the foot of the bed, and held the more tightly when the whistle sundered the only sounds he had, and failed, coming back from the harbor in fragments to augment them: the steady energumenical force of the engines, filling his heart to a shape rising from his chest to burst the bounds of his throat, and the squeaking, squeaking, squeaking behind the screen. That sound had begun unevenly, and then stopped, and commenced again with the regular mounting thrust and withdrawal of the engines and of his heart, faster, all of them as he came closer to the shadowless screen and behind it a moan, and gasps, the wary and then attacking steps and panting of the beast he approached silently, whispering unheard, —Wait . . . don't . . . don't . . . leave me alone.

It was nearly dark. The whistle sounded again, halting everything. Even the reversed engines stopped; then there was a consummate pause, and the engines, and his heart, took up slowly, as the starboard side rose, and he took another step forward. He had seen Naples.

V

> Run now, I pray thee, to meet her, and say unto her, Is it well with thee? is it well with thy husband? is it well with the child? And she answered, It is well.
>
> —II Kings 4:26

Day did not dawn. The night withdrew to expose it evenly pallid from one end to the other as a treated corpse, where the hair, grown on unaware of the futility of its adornment, the moment of the brown spot past, is shaved away like those early hours stubbled into being and were gone, and the day laid out, shreds of its first reluctance to appear still blown across its face where dark was no longer privation of light but the other way round as good, exposed passive and foolish at the lifting of chaos, is the absence of evil. The day existed sunless, its light without apparent source, its passage without continuity, not following as life does but co-existent with itself, and getting through it was to blunder upon its familiar features, its ribs and hollows, impotent parts and still extensions, with neither surprise, nor hope, like the blind man identifying with a memory-sensitized hand the body of a familiar in what they had both called life.

The sound of the bells sank on the air and was gone, while the clouds in shreds of dirty gray, threatening like evil recalled and assembled hurriedly, blew low over the town clinging for refuge to the embattled walls of the Real Monasterio de Nuestra Señora de la Otra Vez.

In the muddy plaza open beneath the wide porch of the monastery church, whose gothic façade and unfurnished rose window overlooked it, the village fountain spouted, and women with stone and copper jugs came to fill them. Their voices rose on hard sounds whose delicate edges went quickly to pieces and the words were lost, recovered and composed in that gentle mitigation, —Adiós . . . and gone on the soft monotonous confirmation until it was repeated, and every minute repeated, —dios . . . an expression of sound so much a part of that harsh chill and gray tranquillity that only lacking would it have been remarkable.

With the church doors unlocked, the porter stood a full minute on the wide stone porch, tapping the keys which he'd got strung to one end of a stick, most of them the length of his hand, and he was a big man, with long hands. He was old, and his face was scarred with memories of a disease half a century gone, a heavy face broken by ridges like the land before him where walls were built everywhere to clear small spaces of the stones. He wore a black cloth jacket closed with a single button at his throat, and after standing a full minute looking on the muddy plaza, he turned his bare head back to the walls of the monastery, and disappeared from view.

At that, the figure watching from above turned from the window, was gone the time it took to pace the length of the room and back, and then stood there again, staring down at the muddy plaza. There was a narrow balcony before him, and the window itself was set in the façade of the church, though it was a guest room. He raised his eyes, over the roofs of the town, and fixed his vacant stare on the cloud-steeped

mountains. He was a comfortable man of middle age, dressed in an expensive suit of Irish thorn-proof, the last two buttons of the vest undone, or rather, never done up at all, in token of the casual assurance he afforded himself as a novelist successful enough to be referred to by his publishers as distinguished. At this moment he wore an expression of intent vacancy, his face that of a man having, or about to have, or at the very least sincerely trying to provoke, a religious experience: so it appeared to him, at any rate, when he passed the mirror and confirmed it.

He stood now, staring down at a boy poised on the balustrade of the church porch below, a boy big enough for the Boy Scouts, constricting his person to see how long a stream he could send out into the muddy plaza, where a sow and three pigs were passing in a dignified procession of domesticity. The distinguished novelist stared, to see, he was bound to admit to himself afterward, if the stream would reach, when a bird flew up against the glass square before his face, and continued to flutter there as he staggered back and almost lost his balance on the bricks of the floor. He recovered, returned the length of his room, and sat down on the bed. Notes for the magazine piece he'd begun lay on the table beside him. He saw them there and looked away. The moment of religious experience was gone again. The boy directing his stream from the very porch of the church had upset it; the bird had dispatched it. The distinguished novelist clasped his hands between his knees, and wondered if it were a mealtime.

The room was large and, in spite of not being especially warm, a comfortable one. On a white wall to his left hung a color print of a Raphaelite Madonna; on the wall to his right, a picture of his hostess in stiff dark effigy, Nuestra Señora de la Otra Vez, the features of her deeply browned face marred and irregular from years spent underground during the Moorish ascendancy. In this picture, he could barely make out if she had a nose; he certainly could not tell if she were returning his stare, so he withdrew it and sent it elsewhere, wrinkling his nose with the sniff of impatience which had become more and more frequent the last day or so. He began to look uncomfortable.

The bed was set in an alcove. It was one of the softest he would find in the country, made up with a blanket of rich wool, and in this clandestine arrangement highly suggestive of pleasures beyond the walls, reminiscent of illustrations in Boccaccio, stimulating to every sense but the ascetic. He stood up abruptly, looking severely uncomfortable. And he was. He had come all the way from Madrid, along roads which got worse at every turn, changing his bus at almost every town for another more battered until the one he arrived in appeared to have been rolled to its destination over the mountain rocks like a barrel. That was a promising start, and it might have been difficult to know what his thoughts were as he approached the gray walls whose greatness gave way to delicacy in the gothic tracery of the spandrels over the arched doorway where he knocked. It might have been difficult, that is, had he not written some of them down before the spell was broken by the old woman who showed him to this guest room. ("Since it was well known that people from the world without seldom if ever win admittance to this almost inaccessible retreat, I felt throbbing within my breast the thrill of a deep emotion which I was powerless to describe, as I approached the soaring walls after an exhausting climb, and reached up to pull the cord of the centuries-old bell. Its gentle voice, sounding distantly just as it must have on that sunny day (snowy night &c) when Saint X (fill in) appeared at this same door, quickly summoned a lay brother of the Franciscan Order, who opened to me. He was still young, a slim yet virile figure, in the depths of whose piercing gray eyes I could read a message of patience and kindness seldom seen out in the bustling world of affairs . . .") The old woman, who had delayed opening to him, explained it by saying that they had to be careful of beggars. Since she spoke in Spanish, which he could not understand, he acknowledged her greeting with a few words in English, mustering an expression somewhere, he believed, between humility and beatitude. Seeing what appeared to be signs of illness rise to his face, she hurried away, and returned with a young monk who had been plaguing him ever since.

Fr. Eulalio was in his twenties, a fact which he never allowed to interfere with those exercises of gravity so necessary to his profession, which was not so much being a monk, as being a Spaniard. —Somos españoles, he would repeat with stern grandeur, —que es una de las pocas cosas serias que se puede ser en el mundo. And with these words of his, and indeed everyone's hero, José Antonio, on his lips, he had made that historic choice between church and state because, under present conditions, there were few other choices to be made. There was not much more to it than that, each occupation alleviated somewhat the miseries which the other magnified, and, in the absence of either, took possession. It was certainly no question of fear, or bravery: a recent civil war had shown the cowl as dangerous costumery as the uniform. And, in the case of Fr. Eulalio, neither would have smothered his busy curiosity with whatever came near him, his simple ambitions, and the naive audacity which led him to consider people from the outside world, outside Spain that is, as objects of rare interest, and present himself to them as the living breathing spirit of this land they were visiting. He came from somewhere in Andalusia. He had that primeval way of becoming friends, which was to go through the possessions of any new acquaintance, busy with comment on anything

he recognized, questions for what he did not. The first thing he noted among the equipment of the distinguished novelist was a handful of books, and his first question, upon attacking them, was if there was among them a copy of *Como Ganar Amigos y Vencer Todos los Otros*. He spoke broken English with enthusiastic effort. Then he saw the typewriter, and he gazed at it with an expression much like its distinguished owner tried to muster when he saw the original figure of Nuestra Señora de la Otra Vez, in the chapel. He had already rolled a cigarette and offered it to the guest, who did not smoke, so he lit it himself, spat on the bricks of the floor once or twice to indicate that they both might consider themselves at home, asked how high the buildings were in New York, how many Catholics there were in America, and the amount of an ordinary laborer's weekly wage, when he put the cigarette out with a sandaled foot and hurried away. The distinguished novelist was just about to settle down and seek a blank spot on the wall to stare at, in an act of contemplating what he would describe as being "overcome by this overwhelming solitude" when, with a precipitant tap and a whispered, —Se puede? . . . Fr. Eulalio burst in carrying a large volume under one of the brown arms of his robe. The older man folded one hand over the other, assumed a somber air before what he gathered would be an exposition of the history of the monastery, or the Order, or some such, so carefully did the young monk handle it, and found himself gazing at the large pages of a private scrapbook. One after another, the breathless owner turned the pages, slowly enough that each might be thoroughly perused. They were all pictures of typewriters.

Neither the gray sky, nor the darker shapes of the landscape which lay beneath and seemed to have sunk there out of mere heaviness, had changed since the distinguished novelist had looked out at them a few minutes before. He had no idea of the time, for he had let his watch stop in a gesture of submission to the "lonely abyss of eternity" on whose edge he had expected to perch here. He turned his back on the window, and pounded a heel on the floor as though testing it for hardness. After a vexatious look at the bed, that is, as a matter of fact, exactly what he was doing, and he did it again, though the second time he used less force, and brought forth a less alarming ring. For somewhere, in this vast pile, were the plank beds, or straw pallets at the very least, which he'd expected to have been led to, and laid out on, there to glimpse the world these "good monks" lived in for long enough, at any rate, to pass it on to his fellow man. He struck a brick in the floor with his heel: obviously, he owed them something.

The sound of the church's bells reached him from outside, and he turned and struggled with the catch on the window, the gates of his heart already flung open, and its humble furnishings waiting to be flooded and swept away on the sonorous waves of those sentinels' voices ringing out their message of faith, to . . . He pinched his finger in the catch, and muttered something.

For he was not here to be converted. Neither did he have any intention of trying to convert his fellow man, or those earnest women, at home. He was not a Roman Catholic, or any other kind, and had no idea of becoming one. He considered himself, quite free and simply, Christian. If pressed, he might have been called Protestant, simply because he was not a Catholic. He limited himself to no special denomination, subscribed to no segregated cult, but held them all in equal esteem. As his writings showed, he found his duty to his fellow man in proselytizing for those virtues which bound his fellow man's better selves together, favoring none over another among the systems of worship he saw round him, honoring all, advancing in the name of some amorphous, and highly reasonable, Good, in the true eclectic tradition of his country, a confederate of virtue wherever he found it, and a go-between for the postures it assumed, explaining, not man to himself, but men to each other.

All of which meant that he reached his fellow man in large numbers, as his serene face (on the dust jacket), and his royalties, showed.

The windows burst open as the last bell faded from the air, and he found himself listening to the strident raucous tones of a barrel organ, pursuing some vulgar tune through the wet village streets below. The distinguished novelist banged the windows to, could not close them tight, and retreated toward the other end of the room clearing his throat. The bed reared before him, and he spun on his heel and sat down at his writing table, to stare at the papers, the few books, and the sign hanging before his eyes. The books included, instead of a dictionary, a Thesaurus of the English language, well thumbed; a book of quotations, which stood him in the stead of a classical education; Baedeker's *Spain and Portugal*, the most recent edition (1913); and the Holy Bible, which he inclined to leave out, and opened, in token of the sanctity of his purpose here. One of the books had some pages missing, after a sudden attack of dysentery brought on by the oil used in the cooking; and as his eye fell on it and he realized again which of the books it was, he looked up quickly, and stared at the sign on the wall, composing his embarrassment by rereading these words he could not understand: *Se ruega, por lo tanto, a nuestros visitantes la más estricta moralidad y compostura en todos sus actos y conversaciones, y se recomienda a las Sras. que en el vestido se atengan a las prescripciones de la modestia cristiana*.

He made out the last word there, and the small initial troubled him. Then that look of intent vacancy

spread over his face once more. True, he would have been more startled than anything else, if the Raphaelite Virgin on the wall above had rolled her eyes (like that Virgin of Rimini, first up and down, then laterally, then in opposite directions); or if the dark featureless figure on the wall behind him had spoken, or beckoned, or reached out and knocked him to his knees. Yet in a way it was something of this order that he awaited, something less threatening, less sectarian that is, for he could hardly admit to having come, like a vulgar Greek, seeking a sign: no, it was rather some vague, exotic manifestation of some equally vague and exotic Presence, a mystery of euhemeristic proportions and, brought forth in his own prose, amenable to reason.

The bird hit the glass. He jumped, and the vacancy left his face as details of irritation crowded to fill it. The bird was fluttering at the partly opened windows, and he hurried over to try to shut them again. This time he managed it, and stood there once more looking down. A young monk in the brown Franciscan robes was leading the bent figure of the prior of the monastery, Fr. Manomuerta, who was almost blind, across the porch toward the doors of the church. The old porter appeared briefly, dropped his shoulders and made a sign between his chin and his chest, and waited for them to pass. The prior was dressed in flowing white vestments which barely cleared the wet stones. All of which made the middle-aged man in the window above clear his throat behind the glass, and shift his weight from one well-shod foot to the other, as though caught intruding. He watched the doors close upon them with that self-conscious look which he meant to be read as respect, the look he wore when they opened drawers and showed him chasubles worked with thread of gold and studded with seed pearls, the wall where the chains of freed Christian slaves were hung, the exquisitely carved rail of the choir in the church, the superb retablo behind the main altar (which did impress him, for it was sixty feet high), the paintings of Zurbarán, an El Greco, and two or three sixteenth-century Italians in bad states of repair, in the sacristía, the marble penitent Saint Jerome by a Milanese, the tomb of a king of Navarra, the Moorish cloister, with orange trees, the gothic cloister, with boxwood. They had showed him all these things quite freely, and answered his intelligent questions readily (they, that is, through the person of a reserved man about his own age, and similarly built though the brown robe showed his prosperity to better advantage than Irish thorn-proof, and he spoke a few peremptory words of English). Even the prior, Manomuerta, who appeared and then disappeared with the silent ease of a ghost, smiled and bowed the head to him with a brief greeting. In short, he was treated on all sides (but for the forays of Fr. Eulalio) with a kindness and consideration which kept him a good arm's length from any of the revelations he had come all this distance to explore. There was, to be sure, the language barrier, which persisted almost everywhere but for that breach made under Fr. Eulalio's assaults, crashing through to ask the price of a suit in the United States, or after that book he so wanted, *How to Procure for Friends and Vanquishing of Everybody*.

So it went on, day after day. And now, if truth were known, he had prepared himself in advance to guard against any wiles which might be designed toward his conversion: but no one was trying to convert him at all. The meals were excellent, and this room, this bed . . . but no one seemed faintly concerned with his "spiritual side" as he called it in his fellow man: no one, in fact, even seemed to notice that he had one, however diffidently he approached. They treated him with the same gentle formality, from the same courteous distance of gracious condescension, that he had come prepared to treat them with.

He stood still at the window, staring through his own faint image in the glass. It is true, he did enjoy novel burning twinges on odd parts of his body at night in that bed, which might be a manifestation of some sort, though he suspected the coffee (for he did of course abstain from wine at table). In the same bed, he had developed a sort of dream, though it seemed he was but half asleep when it occurred to him: he was walking somewhere unremarkable when suddenly he tripped, or almost put a foot off something, or into something, and drew his foot back with a violent start, which woke him. That was all. And that too might be the coffee, for he did not smoke.

If he had, he would certainly have lit a cigarette now, as the sight of a soiled limousine parked up the street and almost filling it, clouded his face with the memory of the girls from the American Embassy in Madrid who had rolled up the day before. They got quite a kick out of the place, they said, and offered him American cigarettes which they were going to give to the Embassy chauffeur anyhow, if no one else wanted them. They left right after lunch, but their chatter and blank interchangeable images stayed behind well after dinner. —Well why are you in Spain? . . . if you don't especially like it? the distinguished novelist asked, once recognized and trapped. —A job's a job. —And you wish you were back in the States? —That's all we ever talk about, going home, but a job's a job.

His eyes followed the only moving thing in sight now, the slight unsteady figure of a man who had come out of the bar across the plaza, and was approaching the walls. He moved with uncertainties in his gait, hesitations before mud puddles as though unsure which way to take round them, though at that he often did not stop until he'd already got a foot into the water. There was none of the swaying vacillation of

drunkenness, but a nervous combination of insistence and uncertainty.

Then the plaza was still, and he raised his eyes to the profiles of the mountains where the clouds had lifted, exposing the same gray sky at the horizon as the one stretched above. The distinguished novelist turned resolutely back to his writing table, sat down, sniffed, and wrote, “High in the brilliant sunshine of the Sierra de G——, weary and footsore after climbing the bridle path from the peaceful which wends wending its way ever upward from the peaceful valley town of Logrosán (?) into the forbidding landscape of Estremadura . . .”

A knock sounded at the door, and —Se puede? in a hoarse whisper.

—Fra Eulālio? . . . he gasped.

The door came open enough to permit the old woman to show herself pointing down her throat with her thumb, as though there were something lodged there. —Café, she whispered, sounding as though there were, and disappeared back into the dim tortuous passage leading to his apartment. He got up, put on a black necktie, let the ends of his mouth, and his eyes, sink, and set out. But in the door he stopped to look back, as though afraid of missing something. He had, after all, been here, waiting, for three days.

•

—Oh my God! . . .

—Whmmp?

—She wet on that . . . whatever you call it. Bad doggie! Bad sacrilegious doggie! . . .

—This would make a nice place to throw a party, said the tall woman’s husband, pausing to look round him, as the poodle strained in the harnesses encumbering it at both ends, and pulled her toward the boxwood hedge.

—Parties, my God! . . . don’t start that. What did we come all the way over here for? I hope I never see another party. She jerked the dog away from a gothic column, and added, —All you’ve been talking about is drinking ever since we landed.

—Well all you’ve talked about is eating.

—I have not, I’m dieting and you know it. What else can you do in this country but diet?

—Well, when you don’t talk about eating, you talk about not eating. It’s just as bad. He stood gazing round the gothic arches of the cloister. —Anyway, he murmured, —the food’s usually better in these places than in a lot of the hotels.

—I still don’t see why you wanted to get here at the crack of dawn.

—You would if you were paying for the car. And there wasn’t any dawn, as far as that goes. Look at it. It might as well be . . . cocktail time.

—See? . . . there you go. They ambled on in silence, until she pointed with a scarlet-tipped finger, —Look at those old chains hanging up there, they save anything they can get their hands on. And look! . . .

—What?

—That man, isn’t it . . . in the tweed suit, did you see him? I know I’ve seen his picture on book jackets.

—Yes, him. I saw him. Might have known you’d find him hanging around a place like this.

—I’ve heard things about him, that he was . . . Is he?

—What.

—That way?

—I don’t know. He hasn’t touched a woman since his third wife left him.

—He’s gone, I guess he didn’t see us. What do you think he’s doing here? I’ve heard things about life in monasteries.

—He hasn’t got that much imagination. He’s probably writing another book.

—He’s written fifty of them. If he had anything to say you’d think he would have said it by now. Why do they keep publishing them?

—Because he keeps writing them. And it costs a publisher more to lay off than it does to keep his presses running, so they feed anything in. A morose note of reminiscence had crept into his voice.

—Now come on, the tall woman said, taking his arm in five scarlet nails, —we’re going to forget all about all that. She looked round for something to comment on, and her eyes fell on the dog. —Don’t you think she *should* wear her belt when she comes into a monastery?

He laughed, or moaned, it was difficult to tell.

—Just the same, I saw a bad goat out in the street give Huki-lau a very suggestive look.

But her husband was not beside her. He had stopped to gaze back on the cloister.

—What are you thinking about now, turning into a monk, for God’s sake?

He turned to follow her obediently, and mumbled when he reached her side, —Oh sure. A monk. I’d just as soon be dead.

•

But the man in Irish thorn-proof certainly had seen them and, for perhaps the first time in his adult life, he did not want to be recognized. He backed away from the colonnade, along the wall until he reached a door, and he backed through that. He went through a gallery, out into another court, was almost run down by a perambulating figure in the ubiquitous brown robe busy with the breviary, caught a hand in the swinging tassel and almost went over in a reeling attempt to avoid mashing the bare toes protruding from the sandal, grated out the first words of an apology and was silenced by a sweet and gelid smile, narrowly escaped falling backwards into the Moorish fountain, tucked in his black necktie and at last, coming sideways through the door, found himself entering the sacristía at one end as a man, the same he had seen making his unsteady way across the plaza earlier, disappeared from the other carrying something large and unwieldy under one arm. The distinguished novelist was, by now, not only breathless but excited to a considerably alert degree, and it took no more than a glance at the wall for a square unfaded expanse to assure him that a painting was missing. Whether it was the desperate hope of managing some measure of atonement for the collision of a moment before, or the sudden opportunity to repay the complacent hospitality shown him here, or just the chance to get into things, he did not stop to consider, but rushed the length of the room trying to get enough breath to cry out. Now although he had seen the man clearly, even clearly enough to be able to swear that he had screwed his already knotted-up face into a leer as he escaped, upon arrival at the far end of the sacristía the pursuer did not know which of the two doors he'd gone out. He did not stop to consider that either, but pulled open the first door to hand, summoning enough breath to call, —What are you doing there! . . . into the depths of the church. Whether his cry was heard over the *Te Deum*, he did not stop to consider, but got that door closed as fast as he could, and the other open. The stone passage was almost dark, but a bulb glowed at the far end, and he hurried toward that, bringing forth, with what breath he could spare, —Where are you going with that! Who are you?!

—Yes, what are you doing with that? . . . Where are you? he repeated, when he reached the hanging bulb, whose glow barely cast his shadow on the stone floor. He paused, and thought he heard nothing. —Where did you go? Where are you? he demanded of the walls. —Here now! He looked down at the hand he held before him. It was quivering. Then he thought he heard a faint scraping sound, and he followed it on tiptoe until he reached a small room whose sole illumination came from the space of gray sky in the window well out of reach up the wall. And there, sitting on the floor with the painting propped up before him, was the man.

—Here now, you . . . what do you . . .

The man looked at this intruder hanging in the doorway with a hand on either side of the door frame, steadying. He stared attentively, but from a face with no expression at all, neither surprise, nor curiosity, nor interest, nor any betrayal of intelligence at all. Then he returned to the painting, and the blade in his hand made scraping sounds on the canvas, barely more distinct than they had been from farther away.

—What are you doing to that picture? You there! . . . But the Irish thorn-proof was already beginning to sag precariously, with doubt, or possibly plain weariness. The delicate scraping continued. The painting showed a man in religious habit kneeling before a crucifix suspended in midair. —Do they know you took that picture? Do they know what you're doing?

—They? the man on the floor repeated dully, without looking up.

—They, the . . . the monks, the brothers up here, up there, they . . . I thought . . . The protest began to fail, as the intruder got in against the wall and quieted his breathing. Finally he brought out, —You don't have very good light. He stared at the moving blade. —Do you.

—That's all right. The blade went on, removing the corner of a windowsill, a high small window much like the one in this room. There were no chairs, but a table against one wall was laden with pots and bottles, sticky pools and spots and some bread. —I can't see very well anyhow.

—But . . . but you . . . isn't it cold? . . . to be sitting on the floor? The scraping continued. —And you . . . who are you? The scraping continued. —I . . . my name . . . my friends call me Ludy. People who know me call me Ludy.

—That's all right, said the man on the floor, still not looking up, his voice dull and even. —People I've never seen before in my life call me Stephen.

The Irish thorn-proof hitched slowly down the wall, and Ludy came to rest on his heels, squatted inside the small room.

When the damaged portion of the windowsill had been scraped away, Stephen turned and stared at him again, but with no more interest than before. Once turned so, his eyes did not move after details, but stared lifelessly for a good half-minute before he turned back to his work. After studying the painting with this same look, he commenced a meticulous attack on a table leg there. —Are they after you?

—Are who? . . . after me. Who?

The man shrugged over the picture. His lips were drawn tight, as though in concentration on his work; nonetheless there was something regular and mechanical about his movement, as the blade moved and its sound was the only one in the room.

—Who? . . . after me.

He stopped and put the blade down on the floor, rummaging in pockets until he found a bent cigarette wrapped in yellow paper. He lit it, and asked, —You're not wanted? The thick smoke rose over his face. It clung to the squared hollows of his cheekbones and curled slowly in the hollows of his eyes. He shrugged again, and returned to the painting. Blue smoke from the coal of the cigarette ran up its yellow length, broke round his nostrils and rose over his eyes, still he made no move to take it from his lips as he worked.

Ludy came forward, elbows on the thorn-proof knees. —Wanted? he repeated. —I? . . . I don't understand. I . . . I'm afraid you don't understand. When I followed you I . . . I took you for a thief.

—That's all right, Stephen said quietly, and no expression appeared on his face through the smoke. He went on working at the table leg in the painting, but he muttered —A thief . . . under his breath.

—But of course, now I see . . . you're an American too, aren't you. I started right out, calling to you in English, it's funny, I never thought . . .

—It's all right, Stephen brought his voice up enough to say. —I'm lived as a thief. Don't you know? All my life is lived as a thief.

—But you're . . . you're working. You're an artist?

—Yes, and lived like a thief. Then he turned his face up again, abruptly, though the cigarette retained its ash. —You're looking at my diamonds, aren't you.

—Well, I had noticed them. Ludy cleared his throat. —They're very nice, aren't they, he managed to say.

—They were a present, this ring. A present from the Boyg, was it? Yes. There. Why did you come here? What do you want of me?

—Well, you know, a little conversation in English for a change. And the tourists here. I didn't expect tourists. Women.

—Girls . . .

—And those awful girls from the Embassy. Coming right in. Right into the monastery. Eating here. They ate here. Did you see them?

—One of them gave me some cheap cigarettes.

—But you, being here this way . . .

—What way?

—Just . . . just working here, I mean. Living here, Ludy said looking round the stone walls again. —Do you live down here?

—No.

—Am I disturbing you? Your work?

—No.

—And . . . how long have you been here? Finally Ludy got no answer but the scraping. The leg of the table was almost gone. —You see, since you . . . since you're familiar here, I thought you might tell me some things about the place, since you speak English. It's a very wealthy monastery, isn't it. Why, I've seen cloth of gold, and seed pearls . . .

—The lay brother Eulalio speaks English.

—Him! I know it, but he . . . I didn't come here to talk about typewriters.

—Why did you come here?

—Well of course, something . . . an experience of a spiritual nature . . . possibly. Stephen looked up at him blankly. —A need for spiritual . . . something more spiritual than typewriters, Ludy finished, and shifted his hams on his heels. He cleared his throat and lowered his eyes from the blank gaze. —And when he does get enthusiastic about something spiri . . . something about the place here, this Brother Eulālio, it's even worse, he went on petulantly. —You can't explain to him that you don't shout about beautiful things, you don't try to . . . you know what I mean.

—You suffer them, Stephen said evenly, and the blade went right on, and the smoke rose against his face filling its hollows.

—Yes, why I was listening to the bells out there one morning, the campanilla, and he showed up and tried to raise his voice above them to tell me how beautiful they were. He's up and about early, isn't he. Why, he was showing me a chalice of some sort and he got so excited about it I thought he was going to jump on my shoulders. I couldn't appreciate it properly after that, of course. I wonder if they know what a nuisance he makes of himself, just because he speaks English, if you can call it that, prying around everywhere. Smoking. I didn't think that was right at all, a monk smoking cigarettes in my room. I almost reported him. Prying around . . . I suppose he's been through all your belongings too? Waving them in the

air and spitting on the floor . . .

—That's how he found the pistol.

—The what? Found what, did you say?

—In the drawer. I had a pistol in the drawer, and he found it that way.

—A pistol? . . . Well, that . . . that must have put him off, a . . . a gun?

—He looked quite disappointed.

—Scared him, yes a . . . a gun like that . . . in a monastery.

—Oh no, no. He just looked shy, and then he looked at me and closed the drawer. He didn't say anything. He just looked disappointed.

—Yes . . . yes, I . . . I see. Ludy cleared his throat, and looked up so sharply at the profile before him that the impact of his glance seemed to knock the long curve of ash from the cigarette, for nothing else moved there. Then he looked down at the painting, and asked who it was.

—Navarrete . . . Juan Fernández.

—Oh . . . yes.

Stephen had leaned back from it, to spit the cigarette on the floor and reach for the bread on the table. He sat there chewing the bread with no more apparent sense of what he was eating than showed in his eyes for what he was looking at, though the half-loaf was gone quickly, and he was back at the picture with the blade.

—Navaretty, he was a monk too, was he? Ludy showed his interest in this religious by bringing his weight from his hams forward on his toes.

—He studied with Titian, the man bent over the painting muttered, working the blade more busily now. —Titian's paintings in the Escorial, he saw them when he went there to paint for the king, and his whole style changed. He learned from Titian. That's the way we learn, you understand.

—And you, you're . . . restoring this work? Ludy bent closer, got no answer, and went back on his heels against the stone wall. —You ought to have better light for such delicate artistic work, he said. —Especially if you can't see very well.

—Yes, ver-ry careful, it's very delicate . . . Stephen hunched more closely over the picture with his blade. —But that's all right. That's what they say about Leonardo now. Doctors say it, eye doctors. You'd be surprised. That's the secret of her enigmatic smile.

—What? Whose?

—The *Mona Lisa*, the *Mona Lisa* . . . whose! he muttered impatiently, without looking up. —Science explains it to us now. The man who painted her picture couldn't see what he was doing. She didn't really have an enigmatic smile, that woman. But he couldn't see what he was doing. Leonardo had eye trouble.

Ludy watched the blade approach a bare sandaled foot.

—Art couldn't explain it, the voice went on clearly, but low as though he were talking to himself, as he worked the blade. —But now we're safe, since science can explain it. Maybe Milton wrote *Paradise Lost* because he was blind? And Beethoven wrote the Ninth Symphony because he was deaf. He didn't even know they were clapping for him at the first performance. They didn't have an applause-meter, you understand. Somebody had to turn him around to the audience so he could see them clapping for him. Then Stephen turned his face up abruptly. —I have passed all the scientific tests, you understand, he said earnestly, his voice taking tone for the first time. But when he repeated, —You understand . . . stopping his work to reach down another of the small loaves of bread, he spoke with the same dull voice. Though the loaf was hard-crusted, it broke easily between his fingers. The bread crumbled because of its fine gray texture. He crammed half of it into his mouth, offered the other half to Ludy, who shook his head quickly, and then threw it back up on the table. As he chewed, a thoughtful expression came to his face for the first time. Though he may only have appeared thoughtful because his eyes, directed at the painting, were focused far beyond it. He chewed on.

—There was a Beethoven Street in my home town, said Ludy. —We pronounce it just like it's spelled. Beeth-oven.

—If you're going to make loaded dice, you have to make them perfect first. You can't just load ordinary dice, they have to be perfectly true, to start with.

—Ahm . . . yes, what I meant to ask you . . .

—I've passed all the scientific tests, Stephen murmured, picking up the blade again and bending over the picture. —With science you take things apart and then we all understand them, then we can all do them. Get things nice and separated. Then you can be reasonable. Leonardo just needed glasses. That's the enigma. He got busy with the scraping again.

—I meant to ask, who's this a picture of?

—This is Saint Dominic. He thrashed himself three times a day.

—What?

—He invented Rosaries. Our Lady revealed the Rosary to him.

—You're Catholic, then?

—Once a possessed person confessed that anyone who's constant to the Devotion of the Rosary will surely be rewarded with life eternal. But you've probably read Ganssenio's *Vita Dominici Ordinis Praedicatorum Fundatoris*.

—Why no, I . . . I'm afraid I haven't . . . run across it.

—You may have forgotten it, Stephen reassured him, going on busily. —It's all in chapter five, De auctore Sanctissimi Rosarii, ejusque efficacia. Now do you remember?

—Ahm . . . vaguely, but . . .

—He enclosed nuns too, he went on without looking up. —Strictly cloistered. Most of the Inquisitors were Dominicans.

—Ahm . . . this, Ludy commenced, bringing his weight forward again to inspect the picture, —this little figure of . . . the figure on the cross here is interesting, isn't it.

—That's Jesus Christ.

—Why . . . yes, yes of course. What I meant was . . . Ludy cleared his throat. Stephen straightened up, and held the blade before him as though it were a brush, and he was sighting some line along its tip before adding another touch to the canvas. Ludy sniffed helpfully. —This crucifix, what I meant was, the figure isn't . . . it looks alive . . . He sounded embarrassed, at having got into this, but he went on, —A little . . . almost a live little mannequin . . . ahm, responding to . . . ahm . . . you see a great variety of ahm in paintings of the Crucifixion, the expressions on the face, don't you, some of them show an agony that is downright ahm . . . you can hardly say human, but . . . and then some of them . . . I mean to say, others . . .

The man sitting on the floor brought out another yellow paper cigarette and lit it. —In some of the cheap prints He just looks bored, Stephen said, and got back to work with the blade. —Have you seen El Greco's?

—I . . . I don't think I've come across it. Ahm. There's an El Greco painting here, isn't there. Here in the monastery, up in the . . . one of those rooms, a picture of ahm . . . there's a white bird coming down . . .

The blade stopped. Stephen darted a look at him, an instant in which the same leer Ludy thought he had seen on his face reappeared, but he got immediately back to work, even more busily, the cigarette smoke clinging to his face. —The *Descent of the Holy Spirit*, he said, a suddenly hungry tone in his voice. —He studied with Titian too. We all study with Titian.

For almost a minute, there was nothing but the rapid scraping of the blade, and Ludy came forward further and further until he almost went off balance. —But . . . he finally brought out, —the foot here, it's almost gone. You . . . why are you taking it away, it . . . this whole part of the picture here, it's not damaged.

—Yes . . . Stephen whispered, —it's very delicate work. Why you can change a line without touching it. Yes . . . "all art requires a closed space," ha! remember Homunculus?

—But wait, stop! What are you doing? Ludy brought a hand up as though he were going to interpose. —You can't . . .

Stephen turned to him sharply. —Be careful now, he said, as Ludy dropped his hand and sank back against the stone wall. —I've passed all the scientific tests, you understand. And I have a lot of work here, very delicate, strength and delicacy . . .

—But you can't . . . Ludy protested weakly.

—That El Greco up in the Capilla de los Tres . . .

—Yes . . . ?

—I'm going to restore it next.

—But you . . . there's nothing wrong with it at all, it's . . . it's in fine condition, that painting.

—Yes, he studied with Titian. That's where El Greco learned, that's where he learned to simplify, Stephen went on, speaking more rapidly, —that's where he learned not to be afraid of spaces, not to get lost in details and clutter, and separate everything . . .

—But you can't, they won't let you just . . . take that painting and . . . and do what you're doing . . . Ludy was rising slowly, the Irish thorn-proof back against the stones, sliding upward with his weight as he drew away from the figure on the floor, still busily working the blade. But his stare was transfixed by the squared hands, one of them gripping the picture with the long thumb along the top, the other blinking the two diamonds from the middle finger as the sound of the blade went on. Ludy closed his eyes, and opened them again, as he neared his height, and sniffed. —You . . . He was looking at the face, where nothing moved but the curls of thick smoke against its hollow surfaces. And then he cracked his head against the stone wall behind, so startled that he threw both hands up before him.

Stephen had jumped to his feet. —Do you want to see . . . see one I've already restored?

—But you . . . you . . . The Irish thorn-proof, the back of his head and his hands drawn back,. Ludy stood flattened against the stone wall. He stayed so as though pinioned there, staring at the moving figure before him in the dim light, as the table was dragged away from the opposite wall, all the while Stephen was talking in a voice which was strangely breathless and at the same time unexcited,

—A painting . . . a . . . a Valdés Leal, I worked a long time on it, it . . . yes there's warmth in it, I worked a long time on it, you'll see that. Venice, Venice . . . we all studied . . . yes Titian, you'll understand, we all studied . . . with Titian, working out this . . . harmony, yes, it . . . you'll understand when you see it, this . . . this picture.

Holding to the end of the table with both hands, he stopped and stared at Ludy, who had begun to wilt against the gray wall. And when he repeated, —Yes, in a hoarse whisper, the same shock of a burning showed in his eyes, but he turned back to the table quickly, looked there uncertainly and mumbled something, grabbed up the half-loaf of bread he'd tossed there a few minutes before, and went on, looking behind the table and talking and chewing at the same time, so that his words were at once muffled and disconnected.

Possibly if he'd been still and talked evenly, Ludy would have turned and got out the door; but now he stood against the wall, moving his lips slightly as though trying to finish the sentence which would dismiss him, bringing his hands out loose and empty to press them back against the stones immediately, then bringing them out again if only the distance of their own warmth from the wall, to complete the gesture which would allow him to escape.

Meanwhile Stephen was muttering and he kept looking up as though he were talking to people in all parts of the small room, at one moment looking over Ludy's shoulder and hemming him in that way, then addressing an empty corner, or the table itself, with things like, —Separateness, that's what went wrong, you'll understand . . . or, —Everything withholding itself from everything else . . . and the moment Ludy started to turn away the eyes caught him again and he sank his weight in Irish thorn-proof back against the gray stone wall, as the voice broke out,

—You'll say I should have microscopes for this . . . delicate work. Yes, egg white, egg yolk, gums, resins, oils, glue, mordants, varnish, you'll be surprised how they're put together just to bind the pigments. We could take X-ray pictures, infra-red, ultra-violet . . . Layers and layers of colors and oils and varnish, and the dirt! The dirt! Look at that, that picture there, look at the crackle on the surface, that's from the wood panel expanding and contracting and the paint crackles when it gets dry. If we had a microscope with a Leitz mirror-condenser, we could turn it up to five hundred diameters, put on a counting disc and make a particle count of the pigment. Then we measure its thickness with a micrometer, put the Micro-Ibso attachment on the camera and you . . . If we had a micro-extraction apparatus we could bore holes in it too and get some nice cross sections out, put them in wax and then you slice them in half just like that with a microtome knife. And when you get that under a microscope with polarized incident light then you can really see what's going on with a carbon arc lamp, you'll see when we get into the high oil immersion series of lenses. You'll see, if we can fix a microscope up with polarized light and put a particle of the pigment under it, we can see whether it's isotropic or anisotropic, for that we use nicol prisms. Then we determine the refraction index of the particles of pigment and then, well then of course, then we know exactly . . . the dirt that collects, and one layer of varnish after another, and the dirt that collects in every little ridge and crack century after century, then we'll know. Here's the secret, laying transparent oils on heavy thick ones. Bosch . . . not Bosch. The transitions . . . Leonardo put on wet paint with the palm of his hand . . . dark brown underpainting all the way, and . . . that plasticity, that plasticity. And . . . and . . . if we can get a good reliable particle count, the refraction index on each particle and whether it's isotropic or . . . when you get down to the gesso, you . . . what was it? What was it? . . . You . . . yes, the El Greco, I . . .

—No, you . . .

—Next.

Ludy still stood with his back flat against the stone wall, and it was not only the eyes, each time they darted at him, which held him there, but the stifling sense, which increased every instant, that the doorway was not open, that there might be no doorway at all; and inching in fear of confirming such a possibility, his hand moved as slowly as he could let it, toward the door frame.

—Yes, the El Greco . . . that . . . using carmine for shadows, and . . . the red and yellow ochre for the flesh . . . the flesh, the . . . hematitic . . . painters who weren't afraid of spaces, of . . . cluttering up every space with detail everything vain and separate affirming itself for fear that . . . fear of leaving any space for transition, for forms to . . . to share each other and . . . in the Middle Ages when everything was in pieces and gilding the pieces, yes, to insure their separation for fear there was no God . . . before the Renaissance. He stopped speaking with the effort of lifting a panel from behind the table, and he rested it there, its face turned to the wall. But once he got it there he commenced to mutter again, —Everything vain, asserting

itself . . . every vain detail, for fear . . . for fear . . . Then he snatched up another of the small loaves of bread in the hand that bore the ring with two diamonds, steadied the panel with his elbow and tore the loaf in half.

Ludy's hand had reached the door frame, and his fingers began to curl against it, pulling his whole weight in that direction of escape, when they touched cloth, and stopped.

—Yes, do you remember, Cicero, in the *Paradoxa?* . . . and he gives Praxiteles no credit for doing anything more than removing the excess marble, until he reaches the real form which was there all the time. It was there all the time, and all Praxiteles did was to remove the excess marble, and here . . . here this is the . . . the one I just restored, the Valdés Leal . . .

—Hahauuuu! . . .

—You . . .

—Who? . . .

—He? He's been standing there, Stephen said calmly, as calm as he had sounded when first intruded upon. —Didn't you know he was standing there? Stephen asked, with the same simplicity he had shown when he was discovered at work. —You know him, don't you?

—Yes, he . . . he's the janitor here, Ludy got out, staring up at the porter who filled the doorway, and with apparently no idea that his presence had provoked any more than mere notice, showed no sign of moving. He stood there a good head taller than the figure in Irish thorn-proof, and seemed to stand as massive and motionless as the walls, out of respect for the engagement he had interrupted.

—Casa con dos puertas, mala es guardar, eh? Stephen addressed the old man easily, and pleasantly. The porter answered him in the same familiar manner, and shrugged his heavy shoulders. He lowered his head, and a smile commenced to break the lines on his face, pressing the disease scars away until they were almost out of sight in the flesh. But the smile stopped there: the lines restrained it, and the scars showed out.

—He's like all the old men I've ever known, Stephen said quietly, as the panel under his elbow came slowly face down on the table.

Ludy stared at the square of gray sky in the wall above while they talked in Spanish, pressing his heels against the wall as though he were going to leap for it, though their voices were low and casual, and Stephen shrugged and almost smiled as he spoke, a shock which brought Ludy down full-footed on the floor, slowly, but looking at the figure standing by the table with incredulity as though he had emerged from the stone. Nonetheless Stephen's smile stopped where the other did, unrestrained by deep lines and scars, but it stopped.

The old man was talking, and Stephen, looking at him as though listening, said in a low tone, —He comes to watch me work sometimes . . . and got out a sharp constricted sound near a laugh as he picked up the remaining loaf from the littered table. —He says it's like Sigismundo in the cell. You've read that haven't you?

—No, Ludy answered helplessly, looking down at the space between the leg and the door frame as though he might try to slip through it.

—You haven't read about Sigismundo in the cell? "Vive Dios, que pudo ser!" . . . falling off a balcony into the sea, though there's trouble there because Poland has no seaports. Vive Dios, que pudo ser! You haven't read *La Vida es Sueño?* Here . . .

Ludy saw a piece of bread held thrust before him. He took it and stood holding it. He could hear the old man chewing beside him. The two figures seemed to be crowding him to the wall.

—He is a penitente, Stephen said, close upon him, —when he came out of prison. Though think! . . . for him she's still a child, and beautiful in wax, while his face is old and broken like the ruins everywhere here, the past left where it happened. There's a permanence of disaster here, left where we can refer to it, the towers of the Moors lie where they fell, and you'll find people living in them, whole cities jealous of the past, enamored parodies weighed down with testimonial ruins, and they don't come running to bury the old man, but give him the keys to the church, and he rings the bells. He says she comes to him carrying lilies that turn to flames when he takes them. You see how I trust him.

Ludy looked down at the bread, which was crumbling in his hand. —I . . . I have to . . . go . . .

—I have to trust him. That it comes to this, envying an old man. Why, two thousand years ago, thirty-three was old, and time to die. "A curse on youth, that age must overcome; a curse on health, that illness destroys; a curse on life, which death interrupts!" You know Buddha's immaculate conception, and dead of an indigestion of pork? "Age, illness, death, could they be forever enchained!" I have to trust him, for we're here together now, and penitent for rape and murder.

—You've . . . killed someone? Ludy said looking up at last from the bread crumbling in his hand, to see the lines round the same dull eyes draw into the beginnings of a wince, so close he could see the clotted

buds of veins broken beneath the skin of the eyelids, as the lips tried to force the wince into a smile but only become tighter and tighter as Stephen spoke, breathless but not excited, a purely physical halting of his voice, as though there were not enough breath at once to finish all that he had to tell.

—In Africa, Algeria, the bullet went right through and broke his neck, in Sidi-bel-Abbès, I'll tell you. *J'ai le Cafard* he'd got tattooed across his forehead, in the broken letters of a child's hand . . . He paused, looking into Ludy's face anxiously, an appealing moment, until he brought up the last of the bread and bit into it fiercely, hunched to catch the crumbs in his empty palm.

—"Mon Légionnaire!" A ghoum, simpering up to the table where we sat, I and the poor policeman arguing if daylight time was black upon the moon. "Et toi, divine Mort, où tout rentre et s'efface, accueille tes enfants dans ton sein étoilé . . ." The poor policeman read Leconte de Lisle. And he called me romantic! for planning escape to the desert. "Shave and clean up a bit," he says, "or I must arrest you." No money, no papers, it's more shameful than being naked out in the streets in daylight. But at night we talked, the girl gashed with tattoos in Djelfa, or her in Biskra wearing louis d'or at her throat and a safety pin in her ear. "The desert is well patroled, and you're dead in four hours without water. It's romantic! I won't permit it. I have my duty to do. You speak of reality. No, I know these stunts," he goes on, we were friends, understand, "hiring a camel and setting off in secret, to journey a night and a day and turn your mount loose in the desert, and lie down and wait for the dawn. 'Affranchis-nous du temps, du nombre et de l'espace, et rends-nous le repos que la vie a troublé.'" Then he looks at his watch. We were friends for some time there. The blue gash down her forehead, and up the chin and the heels, three hundred francs in Sfax on a Saturday night, the gold louis d'or and the feathers and bars in the door. Or tea in Bou-Saâda, she offers it bristling there on the rug on the floor, the porches ready to fall from the fronts of the houses, and her mother stays in the room, guarantee that she's Ouled-Naïl for the dance that shocks the French tourists, the musicians play to the wall and it jumps like something was living and jumping inside, in town, while their stripes stretch over the edge of the desert near the shells of colonists' houses. But here where the Legion's quartered, the black beard grows, "Défense de raser," she tells me, "les médicastres français s'entendent," encouraging crabs. And the guards wilt with bayonets fixed in the street. So here's Han, in the Legion, a ghoum, coming up to our table on the walk outside the café. Le Cafard tattooed on his forehead, but wait. That's nothing, you'll see, when they took down his pants. He stops to spit on the road, and looks up like an animal, "You! You have come here to join us! What pleasure this is, to see you, at last, here, to join me again. Hey? . . . how fine it will be now, together. Where have you been all this time, since Koppel, remember? Do you remember? The old fool he was. And Frau Fahrtmesser, and Minchen, the pig and her daughter, remember? How happy we were! Die Jungfrau? And how young! Do you remember all that? And now! my dear friend, how fine it will be, together. At first it is hard, but I can watch out for you, hey? At first the Legion is hard, but with me, you and me, you . . . but you . . . but that's why you're here? to join us? to join me in . . . this? . . ." And he holds up his khaki shirt bunched in a fist, standing over me. "Yes, no other reason for coming to bel-Abbès, but to . . . come in . . . with me?" So the sun had gone down, and when I drew back and said "No," he stared for a minute. He stared, and he hissed, "And now you! We were cheated, now you . . . I will tell you both how we were cheated. They betrayed us, and now . . . I will tell you." He spoke low, he was gathering force that might have escaped in his voice, and his shoulders climbed higher restraining, until he could say, "I hate you. I hate you very much. Do you understand how I hate you? Even then, I hated you . . . there was something missing, and I always hated you, even then, or . . . it wouldn't be so missing." Then he rushed at me. The bullet caught him right through, and broke his neck. Sir-reverence, the bastard was dead. And since then, I've been wandering. The policeman turned up his face with the toe of a boot, and then let the blue letters roll back in the dirt, and the wind blew the blond head full of dirt from the street, and since then I've been traveling. "Get away! You were not even here! Do you understand? Get away!" And what could I do? The policeman . . . we were friends for some time there. He stood over that thing in the dirt with his gun in his hand, and when two or three people had seen it he put it away unfired, and looked at his watch, and since then I've been moving. He knew. We'd talked so much together, he knew he was sending me on, and since then I've been voyaging, until I came here. It's a place here to rest, to rest here, finally, a place here to rest, and the work, to start it all over again, alone . . .

—But these things . . . don't happen . . . I have to go.

—But wait! Wait! I haven't told you, when they took down his pants he's a face tattooed on his fundament! There's homage for a whole coven, wide eyes on the cheeks. Wait! . . . there's a kiss he'll remember. Ehh? And I knew it, going around with a bum like that, blue eyes . . . Wait!

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Fr. Eulalio, his eyes fixed reverently on his toes flattening in the sandals at each step, emerged first from the Capilla de los Tres with a measured tread, one which he was, however, seldom able to measure for more

than ten paces. At that point, some enthusiasm usually took hold, and he inclined to break into a disciplined but irregular dance, no matter how retiring his partners proved, so they were from Outside. At this moment he even had his hands clasped, and for a parlous moment, stood stock still at the door.

—I don't know whose tomb it is, but we might as well go the whole hog while we're here and take it in, said a woman, emerging.

—Boy, that big picture was some mess wasn't it, the Rubins, said a fat man in a brown suit and yellow necktie, who had apparently joined them. Two cameras swung from his neck, and a light meter, all in new leather cases. —Rubins, was he a Spaniard?

—Look at his name, Peedro Pablo, where else do you get a name like that? the woman with him answered. She was totally undistinguished, but for the ring she wore. It was gold, and large, and very modern, and suggested those articles which are advertised as "silent defenders."

The tall woman waited for her husband. Fr. Eulalio stood entranced with the morning's haul. But looking up, he commenced to vibrate, as though a marvelous set of springs were concealed under his robe; and if anything was required to set them in motion, it was the sight of the figure he saw now in fleeting glimpses of Irish thorn-proof, dodging behind the Moorish columns which surrounded them. For next to introducing himself to Americans, nothing gave him greater pleasure than introducing Americans to each other, and the opportunity of introducing four to one, and that one a noted writer, —un escritor muy distinguido, muy culto . . . He almost sprang across the Moorish fountain.

The distinguished novelist saw there was nothing for it but surrender, and tried to compose himself as he was led forth, if only for that minute of courtesy which his position demanded. He came out wiping his hands on the seat of his trousers.

—We didn't know you were Catholic! said the woman with the ring, delighted, extending that hand, and withdrawing it more slowly, separating her fingers and glancing down surreptitiously to see what the sticky gray matter lodged between them might be, while her husband, bobbing amid the leather cases, lost his good-natured grin as he shook hands, and retired to wipe his on the seat of his pants.

—Well, you see . . . the distinguished novelist commenced; but he was unequal to it. He tried to arrange his debilitated features into a smile, and turned to the tall woman with a weak inclination which he meant as a bow.

—We're going to see a tomb, she said, —the tomb of . . . somebody or other, have you seen it?

—Yes, he answered instantly, and stared at her so oddly that she turned to her husband and said,

—We can't just leave poor Huki-lau out there all alone, even if she is wearing that . . . protection, you never know.

Fr. Eulalio, meanwhile, moved busily enough among them to give everyone the feeling that they were in a crowded room, and as though for reassurance that this was not the case, the tall woman's husband turned his blank gaze up to the shreds of gray cloud which fled over the Moorish cloister. The distinguished novelist excused himself: he had a little work to do before lunch, and he got away.

—It was him, that stuck his head in the church and asked me what I was doing there, the woman with the ring announced. —You wouldn't think he'd act that way here in a place like this.

—Maybe he's just playing a game, the tall woman said vaguely, preoccupied with a high heel caught between the teeth of a broken mosaic. —My God . . .

—It's hardly worth all this walking around everywheres, the woman with the ring said, —We haven't got any color fillum in the camera at all, they don't have it here.

Fr. Eulalio, meanwhile, explained that the distinguished novelist had recently suffered the death of someone very close to him, a sobering conclusion which he had drawn from the customary manifest of the black necktie.

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Thus they were all slightly put off when the distinguished guest appeared in a calming Glen Urquhart plaid suit, and the necktie of the Honourable Artillery Company, though none of them knew its signification any better than he (for he'd just picked it out one day, passing Gieves's window in Old Bond Street, in London where he'd gone for first-hand experience of quite a different nature). It was a bracing pattern of jagged dark red strokes on a blue ground, and he looked quite restored.

It is true, he was happier taking lunch in the chill room at that small table near the windows, knee to knee with a calm lay brother appointed to the task, the heavy red cloth drawn over their laps and warm to the waist from the brazier underneath, with a cage over its coals to protect toes protruding from sandals, an arrangement rather like a communal Persian bed he had seen somewhere (not Persia).

—We've had plenty of experiences to write home about already, said the woman with the ring at the long table where lunch had just commenced, presided over by a placid Franciscan who spoke no English. The tall

woman closed her pill box with a snap, as her husband poured his second glass of wine, and the woman with the ring crossed herself and got her napkin in place in one utilitarian gesture.

—We even got held up by a highwayman, her husband confirmed.

—It was on a train.

—You still call it a highwayman anyway, her husband said patiently, smiling his cheery smile. —And he even talked English.

—It was broken English. And what do you think he told us? That we're just as much to blame, because we're there, that the victim abets the violence just by being there, he said, and he even made a quotation to prove it.

—From Dante he told us. He took all our money, at gun-point.

—Every peseeta we had on us.

—But he didn't take the cameras, the fat man said, —I guess he didn't know how much they were worth.

—He said he ought to do us a favor and throw them out the window, can you imagine? My . . . don't they keep it cold here, she shivered.

Her husband got out his billfold and found a scrap of paper. —Here's a souvenir of it. He made me write this down so I'd remember to get this book and read it. *Transcendent Speculations on Apparent Design in the Fate of the Individual*, that's a mouthful isn't it. I wrote this down at gun-point.

—Can you imagine? she demanded of the distinguished novelist, and he shook his head as though indeed he could not. Then he turned to the soup which the old woman put before him, and commenced to eat with a look on his face as though, perhaps, he could.

—Well you can't complain, said the fat man good-naturedly, —when you set out on an adventure trip in a country like this, like Mamie and me here with nothing but the clothes on our back. Right, Mamie? Then he lowered his attention, to wipe a spot from his yellow tie on the edge of the tablecloth.

—We didn't even bring a car over this time, said the woman with the ring. —We're going right down to the Holy Week in Seville as soon as we leave here. I wanted to see the big fair they have in Valencia too but I don't know how long we're over here for, it's not till later. They call it the Fallas, it's all fireworks. Then she turned to the tranquil figure at the table head, and addressed him in what she believed was his language, for she, with some of the girls back home, had taken a course, preparing for exactly such opportune exigencies as this. —Cuando tiene las Fallas en Valencia? she asked, and repeated, —las Fallas? . . . but since she pronounced it phallus, the good Franciscan answered with a gelid smile and offered her the bread.

The tall woman cleared her throat, passed the wine decanter in answer to no one's request as far up the table as she could reach, and said that somewhere she had read that in this very monastery a monk had been put under a pot for refusing to go out and beg, and that he was still there. Had anyone seen it? —The pot, I mean.

No, but when the woman with the ring and her husband were in Granada, a guide took them on a tour through the Hospital de San Juan de Dios, and they had had to look at the crippled and deformed orphans, —which wasn't really the kind of thing we came all the way over here to see, we didn't know where he was taking us.

—That cathedral they have there, it's the biggest one I ever saw.

—And the sound when that gypsy boy's head hit the pavement . . .

The distinguished novelist remained bent over his plate; and whether or not he appeared as contemplative as he believed, he did at least thus thwart any attempts to draw him into conversation, until, that is, someone asked him directly if he liked the art here . . .

—Ahm . . .

—Like that big El Greco, the picture of the . . .

—What? Is it safe? Is it still . . . he broke out, looking up abruptly.

—What?

—No . . . nothing, I . . . I was thinking of something else. The . . . ahm, yes it's a . . . an excellent picture, the ahm plasticity of the modeling, the transition of ahm the heavy oils laid on transparent ones, a great clarity of ahm religious purpose without getting lost in a maze of details, of ahm . . . for fear that there may be no . . . Ahm . . .

—I've seen another picture of his, they make me nervous, everybody seems to wiggle too much in them.

—We saw a big Pietà in Granada, I like him better. Aren't you chilly?

The distinguished novelist attacked the fish on the plate before him. It stared up with one round insolent eye, and he severed the head at one blow. The world of art settled, that of religion reared intrepidly.

—That was probably the village idiot.

—But won't they let him in church? the tall woman demanded. —In our church at home, of course I

haven't been in it recently but we used to have one, an idiot I mean. Every small town had one, just like they had a town drunk and a Jew, but of course we didn't have any of these little boys in red sleeves to get him out the door. And that boy swinging that brass thing on the end of the chain made me frightfully nervous. It looked like it was going to blow up any minute.

The fat man looked self-conscious, and stopped to rub another spot from his necktie.

—And were you in the sacristy when they were getting that old priest ready to send on? I don't know, all that lace, and the way those little boys flit about . . . She saw the distinguished novelist looking at her uneasily, and went on hurriedly, —I don't mean to say they're that *way* or anything but . . . one hears things, she murmured, looking down at her plate. —Tell me, she whispered to the woman next to her, —what are these perfectly weird little things we're supposed to be eating.

—Lentils. Haven't you ever eaten them?

—I've read about them, the tall woman said and put down her fork.

—To tell the honest truth I don't really see how they eat like this all the time. I've had the johnny-trots ever since we got here. From all the oil. Do you have . . .

—I take reducing pills. You swallow one before a meal and it blows up like a balloon in your stomach. You lose your appetite. Not that one wouldn't here anyhow. Have you looked at the bread? I don't mean tasted it, but just look at it. It's practically turning red.

—My husband would know what it is, said the woman with the ring, examining a piece of the bread. She broke it, and the fine gray texture crumbled. —My husband's in food chemistry. He studied toxicology at Yale. Her husband took the bread from her and examined it with a pocket magnifying glass. —He's with the Necrostyle people, she said, —you must know their products? Then she nudged her husband, and whispered that maybe he was being impolite, —because they're very sensitive, these people. Even if they're monks.

—Micrococcus prodigiosus, he pronounced, snapping the glass closed and looking up with his cheery smile. —It forms sometimes on stale food kept in a dry place. Looks like blood, doesn't it.

—He's giving you a funny look, the woman with the ring said to her husband. And when at a sign from the figure at the head of the table, the bread was taken unobtrusively away, she whispered, —Oh dear, I wonder if we hurt his feelings . . . And she'd just started to speak to the tall woman, in a very low tone of frank confidence, —They're pretty behind the times over here, when we landed the customs almost arrested me, they thought my Tampax was incendiary bombs . . . Then she realized that the figure at the head of the table was addressing her, in slow careful syllables.

—He's explaining about the bread, she whispered aside, listening, —why it's funny. Concentrating, her lips moved as though to wrest the words from his, syllable by syllable while he spoke, and turning to explain when he paused, —because it's real hard to get flour over here, especially if you're poor like monks, they have to get it off the black market. That isn't exactly the way he put it, she amended when his silence unleashed her full confusion. —He says they even get food packages from America, like there was this Protestant minister who came here on a visit about thirty years ago and he always sends them these packages of food, they just got one lately. Then this is where I got sort of mixed up, she confessed, while the figure at the head of the table watched her querulously. —I think it's something he wants me to explain to him, because in this last food package they just got there was some kind of powdery stuff in a tin box they mixed with the flour when they made this bread, and it came out funny. Maybe it was cereal, except I'm not sure what's the Spanish word for cereal. Maybe it was wheat germ, my husband could probably explain it to him, like enriched bread like we have home, except I don't know what's the Spanish for wheat germ. She sighed, looking almost wistfully at the scrap of bread by her husband's hand on the table, a hard crust, the crumbled fine gray texture flecked with spots "like blood." —Home, she repeated —Now, with it's almost Easter . . . She sighed again, and smiled pensively, looking far away and rubbing the slight hair shade on her upper lip. —Isn't it nice we're all merkins.

At the head of the table, the figure nodded to her his thanks for her explanation to the other exotic guests and she, seeking to please him still further, was fishing for something in her bosom. The ring got caught, and finally she extracted it along with a string of beads which proved to be a rosary. —And see this here? she said to the others. —This little heart-shaped thing in the middle is full of Lourdes holy water, see it's stamped right on there, certified. She passed it up the table. The Franciscan looked at it with the polite interest he might have shown for a Zuñi prayer stick, and returned it as she went on, —My family's in religious novelties. Mostly plastic ones. Last year we got out a plastic shofar, for Yom Kippur. It was filled with candy. It went real well. Show them your key chain, she said to her husband, digging him with an elbow. —See? she said, showing it. There were a good many keys, but she got the plastic-enclosed picture free. —See? you just move it a little and his eyes open and close, see his lips move just like in prayer? And the hand he's got up in a benediction even wiggles a little, see? See the halo move when you tip it? . . . These go real well. It's a whole series of art-foto key chains. She started to pass this devotional object up the

table, but the good Franciscan appeared to be absorbed studying his thumbnails.

—Of course, not being Catholic ourselves, the tall woman said to her, —my husband and I don't always appreciate these things, you know. I'm sure he thought he was going to get a free drink in church.

—Well we're converts ourselves. You catch onto things after awhile. She lowered her voice and looked vacantly past the ceramics on the wall. —The spiritual meaning of the Mass, the elevation of the Host, and the when they break the bread . . .

—Well of course in our church we had the Lord's Supper . . .

—And everybody got a drink, the tall woman's husband came in. He'd recovered the decanter. —This morning the old man in the middle up there got three drinks, he mumbled, —and nobody else . . . could you understand him?

—Well, they do it in Latin, the woman with the ring said soberly.

—It sounded to me like he was singing, I can play dominos better than you can . . .

The tall woman rescued the decanter and started to pass it back up the table, but put it down because it was empty. —To tell the truth, she said to the woman with the ring, —my father was born one, but of course he never told anybody at home that, you have to be so careful in a small town. He had an awful time, he even had extreme unction.

—When he died?

—Oh God no, he's still alive. That was before my brother was born.

—But once you have extreme unction administered to you, then if you recover you have to eat fish and . . . renounce matrimonial relations.

—Then it must have been something else he had.

—I can play dominos better than youoo cannn . . . came in a cooing chant beside her.

—Frankly, she said in a low tone to the woman with the ring, —I don't want to see *him* getting mixed up with any of this. He's already got two analysts waiting for him when he gets home.

—better than youoo cann . . .

—You can see what I mean.

The figure at the head of the table rose, and the woman with the ring, brandishing it like a weapon as she undid her napkin and crossed herself, turned to him and said with oppressive clarity, —La comedia está muy bien. And the Franciscan, who had not been to the theater since he took orders, inclined his head to acknowledge her kind manner, though she could not see if he wore his kind smile because he held a napkin over his mouth with one hand, picking his teeth behind it with the other.

When they got outside, Fr. Eulalio, who had been confined somewhere in the depths of the great fortress this past hour or two for reasons best known to his superior, joined them again, and hoped they could find room to take him to Madrid. It was something urgent. If he went now, he believed he could get a ride back somehow that night, or early next morning (he was going to see about flour on the black market). The distinguished novelist excused himself, looking haggard and unsteady despite the bracing stripes of the H.A.C. He tripped on the stairs.

—My, he is odd, isn't he. One almost wonders . . . The tall woman's voice tailed off, as she looked abstractedly up at the walls, and murmured, —My God, you'd think they were expecting the Russians. Then she recovered, adjusting her hair with her scarlet nails. —You know frankly, I haven't seen a soul around here who looked frightfully holy. They all look quite easy-going.

—They've got the life of Reilly, her husband said, licking his lips.

—Here, we ought to leave them something, an alms or whatever you call it, to pay for the lunch. Have you got some of those big brown bills? And there's the old porter out on the front porch, should we give him something? They always show up like this at the last minute . . .

She came back looking quite confused. —He wouldn't take a penny!

—They're very proud, said the woman with the ring, —even the poor ones.

—Well he has so few teeth he certainly can't eat much, but I thought he might buy himself a drink, he probably drinks, and from those marks on his face you can see he probably *has* something . . . she went on, closing her pocketbook, turning toward the soiled limousine where Fr. Eulalio was already climbing in. —And that one asked me what Huki-lau's belt was, my God! What *could* I tell him? Nevertheless, she added as she watched the brown robe disappear inside the car, —I *am* glad she's wearing it.

—Goodbye . . .

—We may get down to Holy Week in Seville ourselves, it sounds a riot.

—Or if you're still here, or maybe next year, Valencia . . .

—Next year we *are* going to Hawaii for the Narcissus Festival.

—For the Fallas.

—Goodbye . . . Isn't it a God-awful day . . . The soiled limousine rolled, choked on the hill, barely missed

a mule approaching the fountain with solitary dignity, and a child squatted in the gutter, and turned from sight.

—Look! Bernie, look! said the woman with the ring, waving it toward the porch on the gothic façade, —that man, that funny man talking to the janitor, don't you see him? Haven't we seen him before? on the train? at gun-point on the train! Wasn't it? Look, or . . . wasn't it?

Her husband was turned in that direction, but he was busy. The yellow necktie, which appeared to have pictures of brown sailboats on it, kept blowing in his face, and he was trying to adjust a light meter to the bleak even color of the day.

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"The world is too muhvh with us, late ans soon, gettijg and spendinf we lay wasre . . ." The distinguished novelist glanced up to read what he had written. The ribbon was sticking. He pulled it. Something snapped. He sniffed. A soft scent of perfume reached him. He raised his hand, and sniffed. It was the tall woman's perfume.

He did not leap to his feet, but sat there at the writing table a minute longer, gazing at the machine, the papers, the spines of the books, and the sign. He sagged, and the bold strokes of the Honourable Artillery Company appeared to support him. There, at his elbow, were the notes he had made toward a touching and inspiring novel about the Children's Crusade, that deeply moving episode out of religious history which served incidentally to disembarrass the South of France of the remnants of the Albigensian purges. There was also the list of those concepts he tried to keep before him while he worked, and pass on to his fellow man. The separate words were in capital letters, and included: FAITH HOPE CHARITY CONSCIENCE FAIR PLAY COURAGE and HUMBLE.

Both hands braced on the table, he rose, poured cold water into the basin, washed his hands, and pulled out the stopper. The water fell loudly into the pail below. Then he lay down on the bed and pulled the soft cover over him, noting it had begun to rain lightly outside. His foot twitched once or twice, and then nothing moved in the room for some time.

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Dull patches of the olive trees tempered the deep green mountainsides. Columns of smoke rose straight up. And everywhere were those blue tones which Leonardo observed in nature, and warned the painter against as an optical illusion.

The muddy plaza was as busy as any local at the end of a work day. Mules and burros arrived, singly and in pairs, horses appeared at a trot, shied, threw up their heads, illustriously horned cattle sauntered up, some for a quick drink at the fountain and they were off home, some hung around for another. A sow and three pigs went up the street and in at a doorway. Goats climbed to the porch of the church, butted each other through the, balustrade, and left pebble-droppings on the steps. Smoke from the pitch-top chimneys of the village carried the kindred discord of their bells over the tiled roofs. For a minute or so, there was not a human being in sight.

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The distinguished novelist waked with a start, as though someone had yanked his foot. The room was dark. He huddled there for a minute with his eyes wide open, and pulled the soft wool blanket over his shoulder protectively. Then he turned his head slowly, to see who had roused him. There was no one there. He sat up, sniffed, licked his lips, and then threw off the blanket and hurried across the uneven floor to the windows, which he pulled open. At first all he saw was the moon, a sharp shape in the clear sky waiting in continent ambush. Then he made out the jagged black rim of the mountains, and he smelled the smoke loitering in the valley. From somewhere, he thought he heard music. And then, from the very doors beneath him, figures appeared, to form a procession. Led off by a boy in white, two lines of women in black came adjusting their veils. Between them, two boys with candles enclosed the tall white-figured priest. He watched them down the steps, past the dark fountain, singing softly into a narrow street where lights appeared at windows on their way. He watched them out of sight, and then hurriedly closed the windows, pulled on the light, sat down at the writing table and cleared his throat, trying to clear his head of all he had seen and heard during the day, from the worldly pastimes to those which he could, at this distance, be assured had never happened.

"As the brilliant spring day drew to its peaceful close, I stepped forth from the cell to which I had been assigned by the spare yet virile old prior, and where I had come to know unwonted pangs of loneliness,

sleepless nights and Spartan fare . . .” He had to type with one hand, for he was pulling the ribbon along with the other, so he worked with reverent slowness. Through some vent in that vast stone pile, exhalations of the organ reached him, and the overhanging light, dim at its best, went dimmer each time the organ rose. Beside him on the floor where he’d thrown it, lay the crumpled writing of a day before, the delicately telling description of the preparations in the sacristy before a high Mass, which, upon rereading it after overhearing the tall woman’s remark, appeared too delicate and too telling, and he realized it might be misunderstood. (It was that sniff of her perfume that did it.)

“Beneath the clear star-studded canopy of the spring night, the darkness was transfigured by the voices of these men raised on high in a shining message of faith to all men mankind. At this moment I recalled the simple candor in the face of Saint Dominic Francis Dom a saint painted by the great Spanish artist El an unknown Spanish artist of long ago, and it was this same glowing faith that showed in the figures cowled figures before me, moving into the shadows without a faltering step. One felt, at that glorious moment, that their faith lit the way before them, escorting the Eucherist to their beloved Superior, who lay now hovering between life and death. The same Gregorian chant, perhaps, that rose to these very walls some thousand centuries agone, rose came gently forth once more yet once more, too soft to echo from the stones. Rather, there was the inspiring suggestion that the simple and beautiful melody lived on in the stones which had witnessed and overheard devotions from time immemorial, and the diving divine errand passing before them now drew it forth. Their pace did not hasten, despite the crucial nature of their divine er purpose, but moved at once inexorable and resigned to the will of Him who drew them forth on this divine, carrying the Eucharest to that beloved humble man figure even now being delivered from the life that bound them together, even as did their singing in this darkness on the earth they trod. So it was that late that night, when the beloved old venerable man had passed across the veil to his Heavenly Reward, I lay back upon my hard pallet and considered the world whose sounds still rang in my ears, and where I must, perforce, so soon return, the world he had voluntarily shut out so long before, the world of vanity and selfishness, of lies and deceit, of wars and rumors of wars, of men devoting themselves to the service of both God and Mammon . . .”

He stopped, to gaze at the wall showing blank between the machine and the reproving sign hung above the table. The light dimmed almost to a mere color, and rose again, at which the bird outside struck the glass, and fluttered against the pane; but he saw nothing and heard nothing, preparing himself for the leap:

“And then of a sudden, my heart started sprang up in my breast, as I understood found the true meaning in of in the message brought held forth for to all mankind, of all faiths, and creeds, and color, in this symbol of life eternal. My bones no longer seemed to cut through the flesh into the hard pallet where I lay, the night air engulfed me but it was a night in spring, and it raised me up. For as the lights of their tapers shown so small against the gigantic darkness of the night, still they shown from afar off, as they lives they led lead shine in atonement before Him wh Who created all, in atone,ent for the dark deeds of the world they today. No, I thought, such lives as these cannot be in vain. And as the fresh life of in the air rose everywhere about me, the symbol which these good men bore to one of their number soon to be taken from them among them amongst them became a part of it the it. The deep thrill of the Spring, and of all life reviving, paralyzed me for that instant as, w even now, Easter week approached, and with it, the message of life beyond the grave, and to all mankind humanity, that hope which springs eternal in the human breast every human breast that opens its portals to its fellow the service of its fellow man., and in this expression of His the divine will, no longer fears death no longer, but procures acquires secures insures obtains nears draws nearer to Resurrection.”

He sat back, and drew his fingertips across his forehead. Then he stood abruptly, and turned away from his achievement. His chest, which had caved during this exercise, filled with a deep breath, and the bold strokes of the Honourable Artillery Company stood forth, as he strode across the room to the windows. He had had faith, but he realized, looking down now on the drift of roofs below, broken in genuflection, from the facade pitted by five centuries, it had simply been a question of time. At that moment the bird fluttered against the glass. Its wings beat the panes, and it clung with its delicate talons to the leading which separated them. It struck at the glass, at the same time turned its head from one side to the other so that its beak did not strike, its tail spread in balance. If it was the light that attracted it, that was soon turned off; for the bird was gone when he took the blanket over near the windows, and lay down to sleep on the floor. He felt he owed it to them.

•

Nor was it difficult, waking next morning in the sensual shelter of the bed, to believe he’d slept on the hard bricks. He had spent a numb quarter-hour there and now, hurrying over to stand before the windows, the inspiring hardness of the uneven floor beneath his feet erased the night in bed (for if he’d dreamt there, he

could not remember), and he looked out at the dawn with eyes as clear as the early sky itself, and features as reasonably detailed and separate as the illuminated composure of the landscape before him, where the world had emerged from that dangerously throbbing undelineated mass of the unconscious, to where everything was satisfactorily separated, out where it could all be treated reasonably.

He looked relieved, and got the windows open. The voices he heard came from directly below, where he saw Stephen and the old man arguing on the porch of the church. What it was he could not make out, since it was all going on in Spanish. They would come nearer the doors of the church and then the old man would back him away, waving the keys he had there on the end of the stick. Once or twice it looked as though Stephen were going to seize them, but the old man got them up out of his reach, and then, the third or fourth time that happened, the old man closed with him. From above, they looked about to grapple, but the porter had an arm round the younger man's shoulders, and as he talked led him over to the steps, where he went on talking to Stephen in lower tones, gesturing now and then with the rod away toward the mountains.

In the window, the distinguished novelist turned away once or twice himself, as though caught, or fearful of being caught, eavesdropping, but he kept looking back down at them. Finally he did go over to the writing table, and turned papers up there for a minute distractedly. And when he got back to the open windows, he saw the old man standing down there alone. He looked where that one appeared to be staring, saw nothing but an empty street ascending out of sight behind the walls of houses, where, a few minutes later, he was climbing himself.

He'd looked over the seat of the Irish thorn-proof trousers, found it in need of no more than a brushing for the gray matter dried there, put on the suit and come out for what he'd have called a meditative walk, by which he seemed to mean aimless wandering amid unfamiliar scenery, qualified now by the consciously exerted realization that he was now, after his period of enclosure, outside the walls.

Like everything else, the road was flat stones turned up on edge for footing, and he was soon up behind the town. The only sound to reach him where he'd stopped was the regular tinkle of a bell, resting up against the jaw of a burro chewing somewhere near. He stood there as though this betrayal of rural tranquillity had engaged his whole attention, as though some innocent line from the *Eclogues* had turned up for the first time since he'd left Vergil behind in a dusty schoolroom and never read Latin again anywhere but on public buildings. It was an expression of rapt, almost beatified innocence, one seldom seen but on the faces of men carrying on some vile commission underhand, or something which they, for childhood's shame, consider vile. Then he realized that he was being watched.

An encounter with a lunatic in the wilds of Portugal is described somewhere by George Borrow, the figure discovered sitting alone, on a stone, and staring, as the most vivid interview with desolation that that intrepid spreader of the Gospel ever suffered: something like this froze the distinguished novelist now, looking up from the small cloud of steam he'd raised before him, to the figure seated motionless up the hill, outside the arch of a four-door square gothic ruin. It might once have been a tower, or a chapel, at this remove from the monastery below, or nothing at all to do with it. And sitting there staring down was Stephen. He hastened to button up the Irish thorn-proof trousers and approach with a greeting to belie his embarrassment.

—Look!

Startled, Ludy turned to look. Seeing nothing, he asked, —What?

—The sky. If no one ever painted it until El Greco did? Look at it, the Spanish sky.

And glad of an opportunity to escape the strained face and the eyes, Ludy stared out at the sky. He stared; and found himself trying to find something to fix his eyes upon, but every line led him to another, every shape gave way to some even more transient possibility. And he stood there trapped, between the vast spaces before him and the intricate response behind to which he almost turned, seeking some detail for refuge, when the voice in strained calm over his shoulder stopped him, gave him, at any rate, separate fragments to hang one sense upon while he suspended the torment of loss through the other.

—The Pleiades are rising, now, now is the time. The Greeks put to sea now, in their system of navigation this was the time they put to sea, with the Pleiades rising, and I have to go on. It wasn't so simple,

—I see, you're . . . going away somewhere?

—My father was a king. Did you know?

—Oh? ahm, yes and . . . Ludy fumbled. —Ahm, and where is he?

—Yes, where is he? "Kings should disdain to die, but only disappear" somebody said. He took me up like this once, and he showed me the world like this. Yes once, remember "I was that king, and all these things were mine! See, Ananda, how all these things are past, are ended, have vanished away . . ."

And with this, Ludy was suspended, doubly bereft: the silence, untroubling a minute before, became as empty as the sky; and as he'd sought the sky with his eyes for something to fix them on, now he did that

and listened too, for something to break through the fearful vacancy which was tolling his senses one by one until, in this absurd anxiety mounted in him from the consciousness at his back, he abruptly saw himself darting his eyes' attention everywhere, sniffing, clutching at anything, even grass, to taste, speaking to hear. —And where was that? he brought out listening. —Yes, where did you live? he waited, for any answer and getting none twisted about, ready to repeat the question with no reason but to rescue them both from silence, as a sound broke in his throat, to be swallowed, and he listened.

—I? in a world of shapes and smells. The things that were real to other people weren't real to me, but the things that were real to me, they . . . yes they still are.

And listening, the strain in the voice was there but it was different, an extreme concern but without anxiety, intent, but without those shocks of frenzy which had backed him against the stones yesterday, in that cold cell where the eyes turned up from the canvas struck him back into the arms of the old man in the door. —I saw you this morning, looking out my window, what happened down there?

—I woke up and I thought it was evening, Stephen answered immediately, but then he paused, as though still uncertain and trying to remember. —And there was a sound of clanking and scraping, it sounded like the port of a ship swinging open and closed. It was strange, a strange feeling, I could almost feel the room roll and go. Then I reached out my right arm to straighten the shade on the floorlamp, it was crooked, but half the arm was asleep. Right along its length, and the tingling made me drop it, but I got it up again and I straightened the shade. But the shade kept quivering. When I let it go it kept quivering and that made me nervous, so I reached out to stop it again. But it kept quivering. I watched it, and I began to realize that it was quivering with a regular rhythm, a regular beat, and beat, and beat running through it, and I felt my heart pounding in the back of my head with that same beat. And then the whole table began to throb. When I looked at it it stopped, and when I looked away it began again. I closed my eyes. The only thing I knew was my heart beating as though it would break through my collarbones. And then I came out. I came out and the sky wasn't getting darker, it was getting light. I'd slept the night through there.

—Yes, you . . . look rested. Ludy said that looking up at him intending, with the look confirming the word, to escape both; but the word —Rested! repeated, closed on him and he stared lost darting among the contrivances of the face before him, until it turned away, and released him on a hoarse whispered, —Rested?

—Yes, you were going into the church this morning? and then, the old man . . .

—He wouldn't let me in.

—Yes but. I shouldn't think he could tell you . . .

—Standing out there on the porch with his keys, he was looking at the dawn himself, and he wouldn't let me in. Rested? when I thought I'd found a place to stop. But he wouldn't let me in. What did you think we were doing, arguing, if he wouldn't let me in.

—Well to tell the truth . . .

—All right, that's a way of putting it. "To tell the truth." All right but, finally if the things that were real to other people, weren't real to me? and if . . . never mind. But it almost ended that way. If he'd let me in it might have, ended that way.

—Why wouldn't he let you in?

—No, you don't understand? being real just like that? It wasn't so simple. "To tell the truth," I like that though. "To tell the truth . . ." Listen, here's part of it: He sent me on. Go where you're wanted, he said.

—Yes, if you've . . . killed a man . . . Ludy withdrew slightly, —to give yourself up . . .

—Killed a man! that? That, that, there's no fruit of that. Killing a man, no that's got nothing to do, it ends right there. Stephen was looking down into the palms of his hands, trembling opened before him, the thumbs crooked in and the skin drawn tight bringing color to the lines: he looked, as though searching evidence for acquittal in hands which like the heart, knew their own reasons.

—I didn't mean . . .

—What?

—But there was something else I meant to ask you, I . . .

—In a killing like that, you don't get permission, you don't seduce, you don't agree. You don't even touch. So there's no breaking faith there. In a killing like that, they don't consent, he finished in a harsh decisive whisper, dropping his hands slowly, and then taking up again, his voice became clearer, the words more rapid working out their own logic. —Go where you've sinned, and give yourself up, do you think I mean the police? Why do you think he sent me away then, just like the old man sent me on. Do you think it's that simple? I did. And it wasn't. They wouldn't let it be, they weren't . . . children. And now, to start it again. I've been a voyage, I'll tell you . . . "To tell the truth . . . ?" yes, but not yet. I've been a voyage starting at the bottom of the sea. I willingly fastened the tail to my back, "I'll scratch your eyes till you see awry, and all you see will seem fine and brave . . ." Good God, what a luxury he was! A journey like him

sailing off the Cape forever, the Germans dressed that up, though, with a woman, but it's not that simple. Come into Toledo at night, it's monstrous, with only the stars, the heaps of broken buildings, all weight and shadow, and you'll never see it that way again, after you've waked the next morning and walked through the town all laid out under foot in the daylight, and where were you wandering the night before? It's all different by daylight. Find Valencia, with the sky brocaded with fire, in the heat of the summer, there's a telephone exchange there *Sangre*, I liked that. The women fanning themselves in the trains, fanning down into their crowded bosoms, that old woman's face like La Mancha after the July harvest. There are pieces spread everywhere. "A souvenir of New York," he'd ask me for, or "Give me some money for medicine," always medicine, and he'd show me a swollen leg before he'd play the guitar, and say it was his heart gone bad, that old gypsy looking at my frayed cuff, and he said he could have it fixed nicely, he'd a friend a tailor. It fit him, too. Hiding money in another pocket at the last conscious minute, and then the next morning searching everywhere for it, the shame of it! . . . and then finding it, so carefully put away, and out to celebrate the husbandry of the night before. Commuting between disasters, and always the land and the sky, and now, starting it again? I'll tell you how cold it is in the desert at night, and they think Africa's only the heat of the sun! I was only there because I wasn't anywhere else. You'd see a town with two walls overlapping, and a man disappear into the wall, everything regulated to the gait of a camel, an ass hobbled on a brown rock hillside and palms at the bottom. Do you wonder why I'm telling you all this? Do you believe me? Here . . .

He got up and rummaged in his clothes, and came out with a fragment of clay pottery; some other things dropped but he didn't look down after them. —That's from Leptis Magna, it's not pretty is it, you can still see the thumbprints on it, from molding the edge here. What do you keep a thing like that for, from Leptis, and Arabs crouching making tea over sheep-dung fires on the marble floor, the temple of Hera, and the lilies sprung from her milk, and the Roman's ruins run right down into the sea.

Ludy stooped to pick up what had dropped, some crumpled one-peseta notes, and a raggedly cut out picture on canvas stiff with the cracked paint, a sharply detailed figure of an old man drawn out, being flayed by detached hands. —This, he said, holding up the likeness, —it's the old man, the porter here, is it? The face . . .

—Old men, he's like all the . . . old men, Stephen said, starting to reach for it, then he waved it away. —He told me . . . look at their difference in ages, he's sixty and more, and she's still a child, and they're still in love. It's . . . that, now do you understand? It's here he can be closest to her now, while he's waiting. But for me? That's when he said no, and sent me on again. He's here, a penitent? . . . but it's different, for she comes to him here, and . . . all this time he's carrying on this love affair, being loved. But for me, that's why he sent me on, to find what . . . what he has here.

—But . . . after what he did . . .

—After what he did, and he learned only through her suffering, Stephen brought out more loudly, —Now . . . If she comes to him carrying lilies that turn to fire? And the fire, what do you think it is? If that was the only way he could learn? So now do you see why he sends me on? If somewhere I've . . . done the same thing? And something's come out of it, something . . . like . . . he has. While I've been crowding the work alone. To end there, or almost end running up to the doors there, to pound on the doors of the church, do you see why he sent me on? Look back, if once you're started in living, you're born into sin, then? And how do you atone? By locking yourself up in remorse for what you might have done? Or by living it through. By locking yourself up in remorse with what you know you have done? Or by going back and living it through. By locking yourself up with your work, until it becomes a gessoed surface, all prepared, clean and smooth as ivory? Or by living it through. By drawing lines in your mind? Or by living it through. If it was sin from the start, and possible all the time, to know it's possible and avoid it? Or by living it through. I used to wonder, how Christ could really have been tempted, if He was sinless, and rejected the first, and the second, and the third temptation, how was He tempted? . . . how did He know what it was, the way we do, to be tempted? No, He was Christ. But for us, with it there from the start, and possible all the time, to go on knowing it's possible and pretend to avoid it? Or . . . or to have lived it through, and live it through, and deliberately go on living it through.

He took a few steps down the hill, and stood looking over the valley, where smoke was rising from the drift of roofs of the town, and further on the mountainsides.

He looked fragile enough there, blocking the path before the figure in Irish thorn-proof, which loomed larger for being slightly uphill. Still Ludy saw no way to get round him, but stood unsteadily awkward waiting, trapped once more, seeking some detail of sight or sound, threatened again with the torment of loss tolling his senses one by one, while somewhere unseen the bell against the ruminating jaw jogged the silence. —You can't go on this way, he broke out at the back turned to him, —this wandering . . . and he amended, —I mean, I travel a good deal myself, but . . .

—Listen! there's a moment, traveling . . .

—But I . . .

—Offered shelter, there they were, all the family at dinner . . .

—Usually working on something . . .

—But she didn't wear her breasts around to be chewed by strangers, when she said . . .

—Without . . . reproach . . .

—her daughter . . .

—What? Ludy came down upon him, —You said, you have a daughter somewhere? . . .

At that he came round so quickly in the path that Ludy startled off it and the instant his foot went into the deep grass a commotion burst there. Another step back, Ludy stumbled and fell, and the bird which had fluttered up was caught in Stephen's hand above him, where it beat its wings frantically.

—A daughter, yes.

—I've cut myself, Ludy said from the ground.

—Yes, Stephen laughed suddenly over him, holding the bird, looking down, where a streak formed on Ludy's hand.

—But I'm bleeding . . . don't, why are you laughing?

—Yes, who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him . . . ? Stephen stood there looking down, and he covered the bird in his hand with the hand mounting the diamonds. —But you can't quiet it, you can't comfort it, it would die of fright.

—It frightened me, so close . . .

—See, how it's made . . .

—No, no . . . from far off, flying, yes, they're beautiful . . . Ludy struggled up on his elbows. —But no, not this close, like that, they make my blood run cold . . . He looked at the faint streak on his hand and repeated, —I'm bleeding . . .

Stephen burst into laughter again, more loudly, standing there with the bird. —Yes, yes, who would have thought, the old man . . . he laughed more loudly, at the slight and so faintly colored streak, —to have had so much blood in him! . . .

—But what is it . . . no, Ludy shuddered on the ground and unable to rise while the bird was held over him there.

—A daughter, yes! and born out of, not love but borne out of love, when it happened, the bearing, the present reshaped the past. And the suitor? Oh Christ! not slaying the suitors, no never, but to supersede where they failed, lie down where they left. Where they lost their best moments, and went on, to confess them in repetition somewhere else without living them through where they happened, trying to reshape the future without daring to reshape the past. Oh the lives! that are lost in confession . . .

—I'm bleeding . . .

—To run back looking for every one of them? every one of them, no, it's too easy, Penelope spinning a web somewhere, and tearing it out at night, and waiting? or to marry someone else's mistake, to atone for one of your own somewhere else, dull and dead the day it begins. You'd see, listen, listen, listen here if the prospect of sin, draws us on but the sin is only boring and dead the moment it happens, it's only the living it through that redeems it.

—Where are you going?

—I've an early start, I've come this far. Hear the bells! the old man, ringing me on.

—But the bird . . . ?

—There are stories, I could tell you about Saint Dominic plucking alive the sparrow that interrupted his preaching . . .

—Just take it away, just, and let me get up, I'm bleeding.

—I told you, there was, a moment in travel when love and necessity become the same thing. And now, if the gods themselves cannot recall their gifts, we must live them through, and redeem them.

Stephen had knelt slowly beside the older man down on his back in the path who had retreated as best he could, shifting his weight away elbow to elbow, still prone with the bird's brittle torment so close, bursting out, —But why are you doing this to me?

—Doing? what. You asked me, where am I going?

—But I'm bleeding.

—Listen, whoever started a journey, without the return in the front of his mind? The bird fluttered there in the austere hand almost closed on it. Stephen watched it with calm, as he spoke only instants of intensity in his voice showed hardening lines stand out on the hand, which the man on the ground watched, the hand's shape broken only by the darting beaked head of the bird while from above Stephen watched its soft fluttering mantle, and his hand only a shape to contain it. —If it leads back into the wind blowing in off the

desert, there's Biskra. Or Nalut, and the crescent moon hung in the sky there, it's all mine, I remember. When something you hadn't planned happens, where you hadn't planned it to happen . . . from north the Atlas stands up out of the earth, at sundown all of it looks like the world after the Deluge, then the darkness comes in. There's no horizon to separate fires on the mountainside from the low stars in the sky. The only way you know, a man passes between you if it's fires there, you've that moment's witness of goat hair passing between you it wasn't a star.

—Please . . . said the man on the ground, making movement to rise, but his own eyes pinioned him on that bird, —don't . . . you'll kill it holding it, that tight? And as he watched, Stephen's hand closed, only enough to stand out its tendons, and a whisper as tense,

—Yes yes yet should I kill thee? with, much cherishing?

And as the bird stilled in his hand, Stephen looked down, before him, at the old man on the ground. —What was it? he asked.

—But what, was what . . .

—Yes, something you wanted to ask me? Oh, remember? varé tava soskei me puchelas . . . much I wondered . . . but no. Stephen smiled down at him.

—Nothing, but . . . nothing, you see I I've been writing something here but I it's it concerns an experience of a an a religious nature and the prayers, I wanted something from the service but the Latin . . . of course I studied Latin, I went through Vergil but hearing it, since I'm not Catholic, the Latin, I wanted something to, sort of round things off? And that old man, the prior? at the end of the service? whatever . . .

—From the service?

—But Latin . . .

—That ex-Manichee bishop of Hippo . . .

—Oh? is that the old man? the prior?

—Do you have a pencil? Then write this. Dilige et quod vis fac.

Stephen rose slowly above him, standing, watching the pencil move.

—e . t . . qu . o . d . . v . i . s . . fac, and what does it mean? I studied Vergil but I've forgotten . . .

—Love, and do what you want to.

—What . . . ?

Stephen stood, looking down at him.

—What? is that part of the service?

The bird was still warm in his hand. He opened it, and the bird moved against his fingers, as he stood looking down.

—I can look it up later. Dilige . . . The man on the ground moved up on his elbows.

—Yes, much I pondered, why you came here to ask me those questions, Stephen laughed above him, stepping away. He opened his hand. The bird struck it and went free. —Hear . . . ? Bells sounded, far down the hill there. —Goodbye.

—You're going? The man on the ground raised himself from his elbows, staring at the slight streak of his blood.

—Yes, they're waiting, Stephen said to him. —They're waiting for me now, they . . . With his own eye, in the dawn, he caught the sparkle of the diamonds. —Her earrings, he said, —that's where these are for. Did I tell you?

Stephen's throat caught, looking down at the figure on the ground struggling to get up. —Yes . . . His eyes blurred on the figure older each instant of looking down at that struggle, and the hand where the blood lost all saturation. —Goodbye, hear? the bells, the old man ringing me on. Now at last, to live deliberately.

—But . . .

—What!

—You and I . . .

—No, there's no more you and I, Stephen said withdrawing uphill slowly, empty-handed.

—But we . . . all the things you've said, we . . . the work, the work you were, working on . . . ?

—The work will know its own reason, Stephen said farther away, and farther, —Hear . . . ? Yes, we'll simplify. Hear? . . .

—But . . .

—The old man, ringing me on.

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The man in Irish thorn-proof did look a good deal older, by the time he'd picked himself up and got back to his room behind the walls. He meant to wash immediately he returned, but came in fumbling in a pocket

with a wad of paper, which he brought out, saw there in his own hand, *Dilige et quod vis fac*, which he took out only long enough to annotate, “What mean?” and would, before his stay was out, find, as an unheartening curiosity, and drop on the floor (since there was no wastebasket).

He had left his windows opened, and the bird was sitting on one of the framed pictures when he came in, and closed the door behind him.

But he had already paused to make his notation, “What mean?” before he saw it, when it fluttered across the room to the other picture, and though he tried frantically to chase it toward the front, toward the windows and out, it fluttered the more frantically from one picture to the other, and back across the room and back, as he passed the mirror himself in both directions, where he might have glimpsed the face of a man having, or about to have, or at the very least valiantly fighting off, a religious experience.

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—Notices posted in brothels, Rue de l’Aqueduct, Oran

Stanley was sprayed with green paint and had a finger broken on his first day in Rome. It happened when the band of Pilgrims he accompanied visiting the Basilica of Saint John Lateran was mistaken by alert police for a demonstration by a notorious political group, and set upon with as much ardor as the Saracens showed mauling those early Pilgrims to the Holy Land. Lonely, already tired before he started, unnerved by that violence, nettled to the extreme even by such small things as his constant re-encounters with the trundling, enamel-nailed, clicking (keeping tabs on Mystery!) fat woman, when he overheard mention of the Via Flaminia he remembered overhearing it named once before, lurking lonely in hospital corridors as he lurked now in Rome. He sought Mrs. Deigh, and reached her with less trouble than he might have expected. She sent the Automobile for him immediately.

Like other monuments of antiquity in the Eternal City, the Daimler stood at an impressive height, and moved, when it did so, with all of the dignity possible under such vulgar circumstances as locomotion. Stanley sat up front with the chauffeur; and though they rolled imperiously past streets and buildings which he’d crossed the ocean to see, he spent most of the ride gazing over his shoulder into the empty interior behind him, and the single seat there. Eventually, Mrs. Deigh might well insist that she’d got the car straight from the Vatican garage after the ascent of Benedict XV to a landscape where he would have no use for it (for, as an eminent Spaniard supplies, mortal man must triumph over distance and delay because his vital time is limited: among the immortals, motorcars are meaningless). But she was generally the first to admit responsibility for installing the stained glass windows herself.

Once arrived, the silent chauffeur let Stanley in, rang a bell, and left him standing quite forlorn beside a piece of bronze statuary. But only for a moment. A blond figure in organdy and white fox swept up, extended a muscular arm which, on a man, might have been called brawny, froze Stanley with what, man or woman, was most certainly a wink, and was gone. Stanley wilted against the bronze, and dropped the hand he had held out in greeting. Then he straightened up and pretended to be inspecting the voluptuous nineteenth-century triumph of Judith over Holofernes, as he heard footsteps in the hall behind him.

—So this is Stanley! . . . and he’s already admiring our Donatello . . . he heard, and turned. —It’s his Salome . . . but then you knew that, of course. Are you all right, dear boy?

Mrs. Deigh was a stout woman. She wore a knee-length fur cape, a green summer cocktail dress with a scalloped hem, what appeared to be gold paper stars pasted on it, and décolletage which exposed a neckline of woolen underwear. She advanced with a distinct rattling sound, held Stanley’s hand in hers, and led him inside where, amidst deep red hangings, marble surfaces, heavily ornate gold frames enclosing obscure squares and rectangles, and more Victorian bronze, she sat him down to tell his story.

Encouraged by such exclamations as, —We are so grateful that He sent you straight to Us! . . . Stanley told haltingly of the circumstances of his voyage, though he did not get round to mentioning that he had accomplished it any other wise than alone.

—But you did land all right. At Genoa?

—Well yes except . . .

—What, dear boy?

—Nothing. A man got off at Genoa, and they found a . . . in one of his suitcases they found a body all chopped up.

Mrs. Deigh gasped, and drew back with more rattling and a distinct clank.

—He said it was only . . . only some Holy Innocents.

—And was it? she demanded, sitting forward noisily, with interest.

—No, it was . . . he confessed it was only his best friend.

—Oh! said Mrs. Deigh, with relief and a slight sigh of disappointment. Then there was a distant sound of breakage. Mrs. Deigh looked pained.

—Oh, dear Dom Sucio! . . . she murmured, as Stanley went on, in answer to her questions about his work, to tell of his interest in music, and mention his ambitions for Fenestrula.

—But did . . . then has your daughter written to you? . . . about me?

—Oh no, dear boy! No! She never writes to me, we don't correspond.

—But she . . . you know she . . .

—She's all right, we know the Lord is watching over her in His own way. Mrs. Deigh smiled a smile which seemed to settle her into the chair, and the brow of a lavish mother-of-pearl crucifix climbed from her bosom. It was finally evident that most of the rattling about her came from the long chain, supporting something like a large egg pendulant when she walked, and nestling somewhere in her lap, as it did now, when she sat. Like a Russian Easter Egg, this Thing had a tiny window in one end fitted with a magnifying pane but, viewing, instead of a crêche or a landscape, one saw only a highly enlarged shred of Something: last year, it had been a splinter of the True Cross (which, as Paulinus attested, gave off fragments without itself ever diminishing); more recently, a splinter of Saint Anthony's femur. There was a faint oriental look about her eyes, as though the skin might have been drawn back and tightened, which heightened her quelled expression with its sense that some enthusiasm might burst forth there, but for fear of cracking the extraordinary likeness to the face beneath, which she had managed to create with make-up. She always appeared cheerful, excepting devout moments when a soulful vacancy spread over her face, or moments of concern, when other features mounted anxiously toward the prominent nose, as they did now at a sound of moaning from somewhere. She excused herself saying, —Poor Hadrian, he needs Us . . . and got off in a clatter, leaving Stanley to clutch the tooth he'd found in his pocket and look about the room.

The paintings in the gilded frames were hallowed by numbers of coats of varnish, each darker than the last for the dirt collected on the one before. Thus it was difficult to tell what they depicted, but obligingly so since, for Mrs. Deigh, each one was a religious episode to which she assigned both the subject and the master's hand it had come from. Even now, Stanley stood impertinently close to inspect a small *Annunciation* by Tintoretto, with the notion that he saw a dog carrying a game bird in one corner. Then the sound of busy footsteps turned him round. —That is . . . he commenced, looking up at eye-level, and it seemed a full minute before he could bring his eyes down to meet the sharp glance of the figure scuttling through the room behind him. At that instant an arm shot out and Stanley recoiled from what, he realized afterward, must have been a sign of benediction, as the cassock came up and the little figure disappeared in the swirl of a black mantle.

—Dom Sucio! . . . Mrs. Deigh called, hard on his heels. —Did Dom Sucio pass this way? she asked when she appeared.

—Something did, Stanley brought out.

—Oh dear, he's gone again. He is so busy, she said, sagging slightly until she sat down. —He is such a dear.

—Is he a . . . a . . .

—A Dominican, and he is so kind to Us. So protective . . . and she subsided into the chair with, —Now you must tell Us more about you.

And so Stanley told her once more of his interest in music, dwelling modestly on the organ work he had composed (which, as he said, might have been a Requiem Mass had he done it three centuries ago), and reiterating his wish to visit the church at Fenestrula, and possibly . . .

—Play the organ there? But dear boy, nothing could be more simple. It was the gift of an American, and so of course they will let you play on it, an American whom We knew quite well, quite well indeed . . .

After that, Stanley could hardly keep his mind on their conversation. Everything else seemed unreal, as this one vision soared before him. His eye fixed on a gold telephone across the room, and the tooth clutched in his pocket so that it almost bit his palm, the pain disappeared from his bandaged hand, and he scarcely heard Mrs. Deigh describe how, as a girl in school studying French conversation, lunching, and the mandolin, she had known all that while that greater things lay ahead, though what they might be she'd no

idea until one day, floating naked on her back in the blue waters off Portugal, she was discovered by some peasant children who took her for an apparition of the Virgin, and since then, of course, her path had been clear. In fact, it was not until he was about to leave that he even noticed her wrist watch: its four gold hands mounted a delicately contrived figure, and those pointing to III and IX were apparently stationary. The other two told the minute and the hour, and since it was just ten minutes after four when he left, he had no thought for what it might be until he came for lunch next day, and was greeted by his hostess promptly at twelve-thirty.

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Stanley had hung his own crucifix, broken though it remained, on the wall over his bed in the room he had found in the Via del Babuino. It is true, every time he looked at it his own knees went weak, and when he addressed it, a sense of emptiness quivered and then surged through him, until he dropped his face on his clasped hands and with all the concentration that makes images from the past the more vivid, tried not to remember. But if he stayed so for long, on his knees beside his bed, the floor itself seemed to rise, and fall away driven on by his pounding heart where the ship's engines echoed, his own gasps of nausea as he staggered up echoing the gasping moans of the beast he had fought all his life. He closed his eyes against the Christmas card he had seen in that uptown bedroom, and the image stood out the more vivid on this dark tapestry of memory; he opened them on the yellowed rigid thing itself, its drawn legs hard-muscled straight through the broken knees, and turning away unsteadily he resolved to get it repaired next day.

But there was always something else. First, of course, he must procure his identification booklet, guide to Rome, prayer book, and the pin to wear and identify him as a Pilgrim. He wore it on the lapel of his second-best suit (it had been his third and last, fortunately, that suffered the green-paint episode, and his best blue suit hung unfolded, unworn since his mother's funeral). It was in this same second-best suit, pressed between mattresses during the voyage, and donned with self-conscious anticipation under a porthole suddenly filled with a static landscape instead of the sea and the sky, that he had emerged from the boat, with that shiny flattened look of sailors ashore.

Still, making the round from Saint John Lateran to the tomb of Saint Peter, the Basilica of Saint Paul, and Santa Maria Maggiore, required for indulgences, he looked lonely. Crossing the Ponte San Angelo, where Pilgrims had already been suffocated and died in the crush, he looked lonely. Passing through the Gate of the Bells, entering the piazza before Saint Peter's and gazing up at the Egyptian obelisk and beyond it to the Apostles on the roof, and Michelangelo's dome, he looked lonely. His hair still stood out thickly on the back of his head, and had begun to curl near the neck. He had trimmed his mustache, but it was uneven, and he kept catching ends of it with his teeth anxiously. If anyone had stopped him and asked him what he thought of it all, he would have answered with his surprise at finding Rome so yellow . . . but no one did. One after another he visited the places he felt bound to visit, and, it is true, he often found upon returning to the Via del Babuino that he could not remember which was which, that he was not sure whether he had seen the *Laocoön*, though here was a familiar picture of it before him, that he even, at one point, confused the Sistine and Pauline chapels, and finally both of them with the Vatican library, where he was quite sure he had not been at all. As for the statue of Saint Peter, with its foot worn smooth by kisses, he did not mention to Mrs. Deigh that he had wiped his lips after kissing it himself. He usually reported his excursions to her, as he did one day entering to interrupt her petulant murmurs over the newspaper, —He is wearing that heavy fisherman's ring back on his right hand again, which must mean his arthritis is better. Of course We have requested the Blessed Virgin Mary . . . She thrust the paper away, showing a new book titled *Le cinque fonti sanguinose* nesting in her ample lap.

—San Clemente! she repeated fervently. —But it was the *upper* church you visited? Yes, with its lovely ceiling. We knew Prior Mullooly so well, you know. It's comforting to know it's all owned by Dominicans. Poor man, martyred by being thrown into the sea with an anchor tied around his neck. But we hope you did not descend *all* the way? because someone (and she often spelled out words which she considered unsuitable when Hadrian was anywhere near), —someone has built a p-a-g-a-n temple right square underneath it. A smelly damp dark little stone room where they went to worship the sun. Wasn't that stupid of them? But of course, they were all repressed, weren't they . . .

Here and there he saw the fat woman from the boat, clutching her three-penny pamphlet on the Modern Virgin Martyr, that or some other, clicking her Machine, and though he was relieved enough when she fled at the sight of him, he wished it might be with something less than the look of terror she wore when she did so. Once he saw Father Martin, coming out through the Bronze Door, and almost hailed him. But Father Martin was at that moment joined by another priest and the two went off with their heads nodding and bowed in convocation, leaving Stanley to stare at a pale girl carrying a copy of Forster's *Where Angels Fear to Tread*.

He might have got down to work. He should have, since the day he hoped and now could plan on for playing his composition for the first time, in the church he had dreamt of unnumbered times, lay not far off. He even tried, once or twice, to sit down at the practice keyboard and go through the copying he had done on the trip over: but a minute after Stanley had sat down to the printed keys, staring at an empty wall in the room in Via del Babuino, the whole place seemed to sway, the flat keyboard to rise under his fingers, the wall itself to be studded with rows of rivets binding its overlapping plates. The fingers of both hands drew up in frail fists, and a rash of irrelevancies crowded his mind to obscure the idea that possessed it. Sensing mistakes in the work before him, he did not find them. He did not really seek them out in fact, but might suddenly look up with some memory in his mind like that of oriental carpets made with a conscious flaw, in order not to offend the creator of Perfection by emulating his grand design.

Thus the one hollow face his memory tried to force upon him was always promptly transfigured, quickly weighed with flesh to come up the fat woman, or something enough like her, refusing him, and leaving him with his anathema on his own lips, —et eum a societate omnium Christianorum separamus . . . Or Father Martin, turning away, —et a liminibus sanctae Matris Ecclesiae in coelo, et in terra excludimus, et excommunicatum . . .

—But dear boy, you can't want to go *that* Sunday, why that is the day of the canonization, this little Spanish martyr, and We have tickets . . . you can't want to go to Fenestrula *that* Sunday.

—But I do, I . . . that . . . that's the day I want to . . . to celebrate my . . . the canonization in my . . . in this way with my work, I . . . you understand, he finished abruptly with the appeal which never failed to her, for in a last resort of charity, Mrs. Deigh always "understood." He found himself spending more time at her place in the Via Flaminia; for though with her prominent nose she did not really resemble the fat woman from the boat, whose mean features clung desperately together as though in fear of being lost in the expanse of that face, there was a fullness in Mrs. Deigh's acceptance which counterbalanced and finally outweighed altogether the distant rejection of the fat woman.

Stanley shifted on the edge of a Queen Anne chair, and hitched his shoulders up. The scapular which Mrs. Deigh had made herself, and given him, itched under his shirt. He caught the glare of Mrs. Deigh's wrist watch, and looked down at his own.

—Of course, dear boy, if it's what you want, she said, and sighed. —We know how important your work is, and that is as it should be, but We had hoped . . . The chain rattled.

—Yes, I . . .

—Well then, perhaps this afternoon We shall drive together to see Cardinal Spermelli, he was acquainted at Fenestrula. If We dare leave Our Hadrian for that long a time . . . she added, and shook her head.

Hadrian was not, as Stanley vaguely suggested one day (thinking about something else) her son, but an aging bull terrier, once white, and now suffering a severe skin infection he'd got from a dye she used when she tried to make him match a yellow velours gown she often wore in public. Stanley had learned to watch his step around the place, after almost trampling the poor old fellow one day he was up and around, for though Hadrian wore a hearing aid and so certainly heard Stanley coming, he moved with that perilous assurance of old age everywhere, taking for granted that way would be made for him. Not that Stanley did not watch his step anyhow: he'd also come near enough to trampling Dom Sucio, and the look he got for that was tempered by anything but senile infirmity. It was in fact quite venomous. Now whether Dom Sucio had seen him, when he saw the little figure cavorting in a window display in the Corso Umberto costumed as one of the Nibelungs, in some sort of Wagnerian panorama got up for German and Scandinavian tourists, Stanley did not know, any better than he knew if he dared report it to Mrs. Deigh; for the little man certainly guarded his interest in her with as much jealousy as the Nibelungs showed for their treasure hoard, and he never failed to fix Stanley with a look which sent shivers down that un-Siegfriedian spine, as he did now, entering.

—Dear Dom! she cried, —We are off to see Cardinal Spermelli, We think Stanley will like him and We know he will like Stanley, he always likes young boys, especially musical young boys. Stanley simply cannot wait to see his arca musarithmica. Is he well?

—His what? Stanley got in.

Dom Sucio sat down on a needlepoint footstool and shook his head gravely. —White ants, he said.

—What?

—White ants, dear lady.

—But Dom Sucio . . . you told me that white ants had invaded the Vatican, the very Papal archives, but . . .

—They have eaten through the six-foot thick wall of the Cortile del Pappagallo, they have eaten a number of books and a cardinal's ceremonial cape, and the Swiss guards have reported the spearhead of a new attack swarming across the very piazza of Saint Peter's.

—But Cardinal Spermelli?

—He complains of a feeling of burrowing in his right leg. He has worked for so long you know, dear lady, always seated in the same chair. The chair collapsed yesterday.

—Oh! Mrs. Deigh moaned, rising, —We hope it will not be as bad as the time he had the bee in his stomach. Come, come dear boy, she said to Stanley, and he followed her out.

—We do wish that you would get your hair cut, dear boy, said Mrs. Deigh as they set off.

It seemed advisable, under the circumstances, that Stanley wait for her in the Automobile. She was gone for a good half-hour inside the yellow portico where they stopped, and he sat patiently licking the ragged edge of his mustache in the Automobile's kaleidoscopic interior. At the foot of the large single seat, facing the peep-hole and oncoming traffic over the chauffeur's shoulder, was placed what appeared to be a prie-dieu. Its petit-point seat was even worked with the initials I H S, but this, Mrs. Deigh told him, was Hadrian's "little chair," and it was here that Stanley sat now, as the chauffeur helped her back into the car, and they set off again for the Via Flaminia.

After she had got settled, Mrs. Deigh handed him a letter, —for Fenestrula, dear boy . . . And he could hardly thank her. But she sat staring up at the damask ceiling, clicking her teeth, so he tried to look out through one of the lighter portions of stained glass. Finally settled, with his knees drawn up under his chin, and staring as best he could through the Saint's breechclout in the martyrdom of Saint Stephen depicted on his right, as the car slowed, and halted in traffic, he suddenly cried out and almost went through the damask roof.

—There she is! There she is! . . .

—There who is? . . . dear boy . . .

—There she is! . . . sitting at that . . . at that table at that café . . .

—Dear boy . . .

The Automobile swept on, and Stanley recovered himself somewhat.

—Nothing, I . . . someone I . . . someone I knew . . . once.

—But dear boy, you're so pale . . . She reached forth for his hand, quivering with the letter to Fenestrula, and brought her wrist watch directly under his gaze. Vividly recalling the topsy-turvy contortion there afterward, he would also remember the time: it was just six.

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—Well we got used to poverty in Spain, so we don't really mind it here, said the tall woman sitting on the café terrace next evening. She drew away from the figure standing over her and gazing at the tables beyond. It was Stanley, and he was scratching himself up under his coat. When he moved on, she leaned across and whispered to her husband, —Do you itch? Maybe it's just my imagination but ever since we left . . . none of those monks looked like they'd really bathed in literally years.

—So if you didn't want to go to bed with me I just naturally took it for granted you didn't go to bed with girls, so I just naturally took it for granted you were queer. What are you doing here, are you Catholic? The girl at the next table looked up at Stanley as though he were intruding, but he stood gazing searchingly beyond them.

At the table to his left, an American Protestant minister in rimless glasses tasted Cinzano for the first time, made a wry face, and said, —It's just part of this big job we're all pulling together in. Do you know this new word, *Caprew* . . . ? It's made up of the first two letters of Catholic, Protestant, and . . .

—Me Catholic? Christ no, I just came over to see the art here.

—Well you sure picked a lousy time, the girl said, watching Stanley recede among the tables. It was just six.

—Why do they get excited about the ruins in Rome here, Berlin is just as good now.

—You can always see an ancient city better when it's been bombed.

Stanley looked on. He saw the pale girl he had seen before, outside the Bronze Door when he sought Father Martin; and as her face had taken the place of his then, Father Martin's face rose before Stanley now, and turned away, as Stanley turned away from her. She was sitting alone, and reading *A Room with a View*.

—I've really practically finished this novel, all I have to do now is put in the motivation, said a young man at the next table he stopped near. —I've been reading Dante trying to get some ideas.

Then Stanley thought he saw her, at a table with a number of faintly familiar figures, halfway across the crowded terrace. He tried to hurry in that direction, his mind again filled with the rash of irrelevancies flooding in as Father Martin's face bowed and was banished by that of the fat woman, pursing the small lips silently, losing flesh, the eyes widening, hollows deepening, to become the face he sought now and believed he had just seen, except, he considered, bumping tables and chair backs in his haste, weak-kneed, except for what she appeared to be wearing: a white turban knotted with a flair over the forehead, white cuffs and a

broad white collar over her shoulders, her lips brightly colored and the glimpse of a narrow long black skirt.

—Stanley!

—Wha . . . haa? . . .

Don Bildow had his wrist in greeting. —I wondered what happened to you when you didn't get off at Naples . . .

—Yes, I . . . I'm in a hurry, I . . .

—So am I, wait, listen . . . Don Bildow looked appealingly through his plastic rims. His hair looked thinner, and his brown suit more threadbare. The brown and yellow tie was getting soiled about the knot. —Just one thing, if you've got any . . .

—I . . . I have to go! Stanley broke from his grasp saying, —And I don't even know what that stuff was that you asked . . .

—No, that's all right, said Bildow catching his arm again, —the Methyltestosterone, I got that, the nurse on the boat was fine about it when I . . . but listen, now I need . . . Do you know the Italian word for contraceptive? There's a girl waiting for me and I . . . Wait! . . .

When Stanley reached the table across the terrace, there was no one there he knew. A blond boy had just finished saying, —I don't care if Saint Joseph of Copertino *did* fly around and perch in trees, that hasn't a thing to do with it!

—I saw you! said a voice from a vaguely familiar face, and a large red forefinger was rested on Stanley's hand.

—But . . . where? he asked, taken aback, for in spite of the dark blue suit and short blond hair, the heavy face was familiar.

—Chez that perfectly obvious woman, you came in as I went out.

—But it was . . .

—Me. I called to ask about a shop where I could buy undies. But what was a boy like you doing there? I won't think. Then the finger slid away as he turned and introduced Stanley to the rest of the table with, —I'm afraid, my dears, it's one of those odious Pilgrims, and he's already been stoned in the streets, see his hand. But it's only a finger? What naughty game were you playing? . . .

—But I . . .

—And as I was telling you, this morning I'd gone to this brazenly recherché little church, since they're supposed to have an honest-to-God Titian hidden there somewhere. Of course there was a line, so I waited my turn, and do you know, I found myself on line for benediction as a pregnant mother?

—Was there a girl here? Stanley broke in.

—My dear boy stop being indecent or you'll have to go away. What *is* the matter, do you have lice? You're scratching like Thomas à Becket.

—Look!

—Why it *is*, it's Herschel. Now do you see what he's married to? His studio paid her ten thousand dollars. Something named Adeline.

—But does he have to take her everywhere?

—That's why they paid her ten thousand dollars. Of course he doesn't have to take her to *bed*. Have you heard he's not to play Saint Sebastian in this film after all? In the martyrdom scene you know, he has to be practically naked when they shoot all those horrid arrows at him, but one look at the divine tattoo on his . . .

—Please, Stanley interrupted again, —don't any of you . . .

—And think, they won't let me have little Giono until Wednesday, when I'm *received*. Why I'm in a state of Grace this very moment.

In a moment of silence, as Stanley got his breath, a feeble falsetto across the table rose with, —Blessed Mary went a-walking . . .

—That's her! you . . . that's a song she sings, she . . .

—Baby, do you know her?

—Yes, you . . . where is she? She was here, she . . . wasn't she? Wasn't that her wearing that funny . . .

—Careful, baby. Rudy designed that specially for her. It's her brwidal gown.

—Her . . . what?

—I should say, her trwousseau.

—But you . . . she . . . she's . . . getting married?

—Baby, didn't you know?

—But to . . . who? Who's she going to marry?

—Maybe it wouldn't be descrweet to tell.

—But you must, she . . . I . . .

—All rwight, we won't *name* the grwoom. You can guess. We'll just tell you she's going to become a nun. Now, can you guess, Who?

—But you . . . huuu . . . Stanley could only breathe in gasps.

—Baby, don't take on so, we don't want any jealous suitors.

—Huuuu . . .

—Isn't Rudy's habit sweet on her? I mean the habit he designed. She has a very trim body anyway, you know. Not all round and plumpy like women.

—An . . . nnn . . . nun?

—Rwudy said he trwied to make it look as Do-*min*ican as possible. And imagine Rwudy marrwied!

—She's . . . marrying . . . Rudy? Stanley brought out.

—It's no one you know, silly. It's no one anyone knows, no one can see what he sees in *that* one, who shall be nameless. A piece of trade. Ordinary, common, vulgar . . .

—But wait, I . . . she . . . where did she go? Stanley demanded looking round helplessly.

—Rudy designed another with the most divinely inspired halo hat, and the longest swishiest magenta sash with oodles of gold, why I could have taken vows myself when I saw *her* in it. But did you hear her talk? about stigmata, and a lance tipped with golden fire piercing her heart, and pus-filled holes in her forehead smelling like lilies and all sorts of the *most* gory details. Oh no! "Lilies without, roses within." But not that. Oh no! On her face . . .

—Pure Caravaggio. I told her I knew I'd seen her before, but I refused to ask her who she knew in New York, I never want to think of that rude vulgar nightmare again, ever. I said, I'll just pretend I've met you in a painting. Pure Caravaggio. But did you see *my* Raphaels this afternoon? Benito is only seven! and you should hear him chatter with that exquisite little pink tongue . . .

—Please, tell me . . . Stanley said now, getting his voice down where he could almost control it, —where did she go?

—*Do* stop scratching! Simply all she talked about was going to Assisi, to run in and out the door of the Portiuncula church there and get just oodles of indulgences for someone she knows in Purgatory, someone who came down into the celestial sea on a rope, I don't know, she made it all sound just too camp.

—But she's . . . gone there now?

—She wants to go just more than anything, but she has no way to get there. I told her to simply go barefoot. Put your faith in God, baby, I told her. She'll protect you.

—But she . . . then where did she go?

—She went off with a vulgar person in a green silk necktie, who said he was going to enter her in a movie contest. That's simply all I know. There. There, do you see that rather clumsily collegiate person over there? with a green silk necktie? sitting with that odd little . . .

—Thank you, Stanley said, turning away, and he hurried off.

—Is it trwue that the Cardinals can roller skate between the sala ducale and the cappella Sistina?

—I don't care if Moses is accused of witchcraft in the Koran, who reads the Koran?

Stanley caught up with the man in the green silk necktie at the terrace edge, as he was leaving, and immediately got across a pertinent description.

—Do you know her too? She's terrific, isn't she. I didn't even know she was a-merican, except for whatever the hell she was wearing, she looked like a regular eye-tye madonna, do you know what I mean?

—Yes but I . . . where is she?

—Well I'm here doing publicity for this movie on the life of the B.V.M., and we're running a competition for the lead. She's a natural for it. You know, I came up to her and I said, Spikka ing-glish? like that. I never learned Eye-talian, they didn't teach it at Yale.

—But she . . .

—Not that I ever knew anyway. So I ask her if she was ever in the movies, and you know what she said? She said once she went and saw a picture about a funny man in a round black hat and a little mustache . . .

—But . . .

—Another time she saw *Uncle Tom's Cabin* where Little Eva gets pulled up on ropes to heaven, so I said, Not going to the movies, I mean ever acted in one. We've got a six-language sound track on this life of the B.V.M., we've rented a whole town for it.

—But . . .

—We rented all the people in the town too. It's color. She's a natural for the B.V.M. What'd you do to your hand?

—Well that, I . . . there was a sort of a riot . . . Stanley faltered.

—You in that too? Look. My checkbook, see? See that? A bullet. It stopped a bullet for me. I have to go.

It's nice meeting you. See that little jerk who's with me? I have to have dinner with him, he's an ex-king. He wants a good publicity man to help him get his throne back. So long. It's nice meeting you, if you know her too. She's terrific. A natural . . . the B.V.M. incarnate . . .

—But where *is* she? Stanley asked desperately, clinging to the hand which had seized his in an automatic gesture.

—Now? You got me. I tell you, all she talked about was she wanted to go up to some town into some rose garden, and see some guy up there who came down to the bottom of the ocean on a rope. I didn't get it, to tell you the truth. We barely had time to get a few stills of her. She's terrific, even in 3-D she'd be terrific, so I told her I'd send a studio car around to take her wherever the hell it is, this rose garden. She's going to call me. So long.

—Yes, I . . . so . . . so long.

Stanley stood scratching under one arm, and watched the lime-green convertible car roar away. Behind him, someone said,

—Of course the Vatican is abject poverty, after Delphi.

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—Dear boy, thank Heaven you are all right. I've been praying.

—But . . . what?

—A young man jumped from the inner dome of Saint Peter's, and I thought it might . . . Oh! His body landed right in front of the high altar, right in front of all those tourists, and I felt . . . though the paper does say he was a well-dressed young man.

Stanley followed her into the crowded room, where she sat down looking distracted. The chain rattled as she cocked her head to a distant sound of breakage, which reached them somewhat muffled by the red hangings. —It's been such a day, and poor Dom Sucio, he's being plagued by a gross German woman who wants her daughter canonized. She actually came *here* today looking for him, and We had to hide him in the harmonium. A Frau Fahrtmesser, Mrs. Deigh pronounced forcefully, —and she says she has her daughter with her, in the baggage room at the Stazione Termini. Then Mrs. Deigh gazed for a minute at Stanley, who shifted apologetically in his jacket. She shook her head, made the familiar chucking sound with her lips, and repeated, —Thank Heaven you are all right, as she picked up the newspaper. —Our scapular protected you, thank Heaven. She lowered her eyes to the paper, and shook her head over that. —We do hope they find them, she murmured.

—What?

—Saint Peter's bones. They've been after them for so long, she murmured, and continued to shake her head. The room was very warm, and Stanley sat forward on the edge of the Queen Anne chair with his hands clasped between his knees, staring at the floor. Once or twice he looked up about to speak, and finally he leaned back and rubbed his shoulders against the chair.

—I wanted to . . .

—The newspaper never tells Us nice things. Sometimes it just pipes in more blood than We think We can endure. And when you mentioned Our daughter, didn't you. We knew there was something, and now We remember. I was sure I'd read in the newspaper that she'd been hung for murder. Murdering her husband! And that is a little too much to endure, even for one's own flesh and blood. And in Mississippi.

—Yes, she . . . but you should know, she . . .

—She was always a willful girl. We did all We could, but We saw signs of her drifting away quite early. And when she confessed to Us that she chewed the wafer . . . Mrs. Deigh looked up sharply, down again, and shook her head. —How sad We are that you will not be here for the canonization ceremonies of the little Spanish martyr. There will probably be fifty thousand people, and it will be the very first one to be held out of doors. We have tickets in the colonnade, you know. Why, there will probably be at least a hundred bishops, and His Holiness will wear the red mantle of martyrdom.

Stanley sat scraping the rug with the edge of his shoe, looking more apologetic, until the next thing she said, when he straightened up and almost brightened.

—And We have taken a vow to remain indoors until that glorious day.

—Oh, I . . . I wanted to ask you if I could . . . if I wanted to go somewhere if the Automobile could take me?

—You would have to tell Us where, she answered, and the chain rattled a slight reproach. —If only so We could give instructions to Orlando, since he cannot understand you.

—Well, to . . . to Assisi, I thought I . . . want to go to Assisi.

—The birthplace of Saint Francis! Of course, dear boy. That gentle, heavenly figure, so many stories have come down to us. To visit the Portiuncula, where he threw himself into the thorny rosebush in dead of

winter, to overcome his passion . . . or We should say, the temptation to lessen his austerities, for it is his passion that we worship, is it not. It is almost time for the roses to come into bloom now, and you will see their little leaves spotted with his blood. Tell Us, dear Stanley . . . She inclined toward him. The egglike object slipped from her lap, and swung on the chain to the floor between them. Stanley got it and handed it to her. She accepted it without a glance, looking into his face. —Do you consider taking Orders? For We have read in your sweet unselfish nature . . .

—Well I . . . I . . . he commenced, when she left her words unfinished.

—And that is why you want to visit the shrine of the most selfless of the saints, the most humble? And see the very spot where he fought off the temptations of the Evil One? . . .

—Well I . . . it isn't exactly for myself, I . . . Is Orlando really mute?

—Why yes, dear boy, but why do you ask that? And what do you mean . . .

—Well I mean, I mean not for myself, I mean, what I mean is not just for myself, I mean . . .

—You mean not just for your physical self, your senses, she said helping him forth from his confusion. —You mean for your spiritual self too, of course We understand, dear boy. Of course.

—Yes, I . . . yes, Stanley said feebly, and sat back. Mrs. Deigh was silent. He looked up guardedly, ready for her eye on him, but she was gazing at the newspaper and shaking her head.

—And here is a poor unfrocked Jesuit priest, she commented regretfully, as though continuing the conversation, —who is trying to start a world crusade against the Pope. She made the chucking sound once more. —And he is already excommunicated, not just toleratus, but vitandus. If he enters a church, service must stop instantly. But what is toleratus? she asked Stanley, looking up abruptly.

—Well that . . . that . . . he faltered, —toleratus is when someone has not yet been . . . been publicly denounced, when . . . and they can't . . . put him out unless he tries to . . . to take part in the Mass.

—And where did you go to morning Mass today? she asked, as though now changing the subject.

—I . . . I didn't go.

—You . . . but my dear boy! You mean you didn't go to *ear*ly Mass. We understand, she said, settling in the chair so that the mother-of-pearl crucifix rose above the wool border of her bosom. Stanley stared at it. He stood up, and his knees were weak.

—I should . . . go home, he said. His hand caught the tooth in his pocket. —Tomorrow . . .

—Yes, dear boy, until tomorrow. She smiled up at him, and then pursed her lips silently, almost like the fat woman. Stanley tried to smile but turned away, rubbing his eye with one hand, and murmured a good night. Then he heard her voice, and turned to look back. She was gazing at the paper once more.

—Find what? he asked, as the glitter of her wrist watch, and the soft gleam of the pearl-white crucifix caught him again, weak-kneed with the words running through him, —et anathematizatum esse decernimus, et damnatum cum diabolo, et angelis eius, et omnibus reprobis in ignem aeternum indicamus . . .

—Some Americans on Mount Ararat. They're looking for Noah's Ark.

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Next day an American picture magazine, whose insidious pretense to simplicity earned it a large circulation, gave a full page to a picture published earlier in *Osservatore Romano* in substantiation of the sun's antics over Portugal at the time of the Virgin's apparition there. The Pope himself (who had spent part of today blessing drivers at a motor-scooter festival, whom he praised for their "courage and agility") had, on another inspired occasion, received "silent and eloquent" messages from the "agitated sun," and witnessed "the life of the sun under the hand of Mary." And here, as proof, was the picture (of "rigorously authentic origin") of the sun near the horizon at 12:30 P.M., where it might well have been photographed if the horizon were Portugal, and the hour, Barbados, for even now it was near noon in the Caribbean as an evening Angelus bell sounded somewhere over Stanley's head and he entered the Piazza di Spagna looking weary and disquieted.

—Oh no! he found energy to say, as Don Bildow caught his arm and, at the same moment, he saw the tall figure he had not seen since the dock at Naples, the black homburg hat drawn over the forehead, the arm no longer in a sling but resting in a pocket of the Chesterfield coat.

—I just came for my mail at American Express, Bildow said, not letting him go. —What's the matter? Aren't you all right?

—I . . . I have to . . .

—I guess I look pretty seedy myself, Bildow said looking him over, —but I've just been to this tailor, he's making me a beautiful suit, forty thousand lire, I'm going to throw this one away when I get it. Everything else I have got shipped right to Paris, I'm going on up there in a few days. I'm going to throw this suit away and wear the new one so I don't have to pay duty on it. Have you seen this? He held out the book he was

carrying. —I just saw it at Piale's. It's Anselm.

Stanley, who had been looking anxiously after the figure he knew only as the Cold Man, startled and looked down at the book. —Anselm?

—His confession. I'm in here. You're in here too. We're all in here.

—I . . . really? Stanley said, staring at it. —But I thought he was in a monastery?

—He is. This is his confession of what drove him there. I'd like to . . . get my hands on him, Bildow added, clutching the book in a soft fist.

—Could I borrow it? Stanley asked suddenly.

—Why . . . why sure, if you want to. I haven't read it yet, I just looked in it. We're all in it. I don't want to read it yet, he added, handing the book over, and Stanley took it in both hands, his broken bandaged finger across the title. —And do you know what happened to me last night? Bildow went on, sounding slightly incensed. —I can't wait till I get to France. That girl I had, waiting for me, you remember?

—I have to go, Stanley said quickly, holding the book up against his chest as though to shield himself.

—I took her up to the room, and at first she wouldn't take off her brassière. She had everything else off but . . .

—I have to go, goodbye, thank you for the book . . . Stanley had caught another glimpse of the Cold Man.

—And you know? You know the kind of a trick she was pulling on me? One of her breasts was wooden.

—I . . . I don't want to hear, let me go, goodbye . . .

—Are you still in a hurry? What do you think of that, though, one of them was wooden, it was made of wood, just like . . . hey, when will I see you again? . . .

But Stanley was out of earshot. He hurried along the pavement with the book under both forearms against his chest, darting looks ahead, unsure where he had seen that same strong profile and narrow chin, and the watery blue eyes, but certain now he had seen it long before the *Conte di Brescia*. But with some question far more important, more immediate, burning in his face, Stanley followed him to a café where he entered, looked round quickly, and sat down alone, putting his hat beside him, smoothing the ends of his hair with his fingertips, then resting his chin on his hand, turned in so that he appeared to be biting the gold seal ring there. Stanley stood uncertainly near a pillar behind him, catching the ragged ends of his mustache as though to find the words of address he sought in that way.

—The whole cabin was filled with the most God-awful stench, said the tall woman sitting over an apéritif nearby, —simply all his vitamin B pills had melted. He takes them for hangovers.

A girl to his right said, —All the drawers were full of empty Bromo bottles when she left. Have you read this? It's Firbank.

Then just as Stanley was about to step forward, a man with a smooth unpliant oriental face, tight but not tense, and moving only faintly at the corners of the mouth as he approached, came forward from another table. He was quite short, and wore a trenchcoat. They greeted one another with apparent surprise, and the man in the trenchcoat started to speak as he sat down.

—Fenn és . . .

—Speak English, you idiot . . .

At the sound of that voice, even muffled as it was behind the clasped hands, Stanley remembered, and his lip trembled. The whole night came back to him, and he lowered his face and sat down half behind the column, opened Anselm's book and stared at a page: "If we had stopped for even a minute then, a minute of silence . . ." He closed his eyes tightly, and his head was filled with the roar of the subway train. Now he almost drew his hands up to find if his shirt was unbuttoned, to button it as he had been doing then; instead he only shivered, as he had been shivering then, and as a woman's voice near him came out with, —There are little electric lights on the graves, and you pay by the hour, just like they were candles burning down . . . Stanley heard echo the voice of the woman on the subway embracing him and the man who stood with the handkerchief before his mouth, as he sat with hands clasped there now. —Up where Keats is buried, or is it Shelley? . . . Her voice, and the tangled mass from under her skirt embracing them both in the intimacy of horror, out onto the platform where the liquid blue eyes froze above the white handkerchief: —Those, my dear young man, are the creatures that were once burned in witch hunts . . .

—The stench, everywhere . . .

Stanley wiped his face with his hand, as he had done that morning, waking suddenly, looking at the palm, dropped it, and listened.

—It could not have been more simple, more inviting, the man in the trenchcoat was saying in a low tone. —He invited me there, in fact, to see the mummy. He had made one himself for me! Oh, but with such ingenuity, it was really a masterpiece . . .

—Really, my dear fellow . . .

—I confess I did not have heart to finish our business so immediately, I spent a few minutes

congratulating him. He became very angry when I appeared to question the . . . authenticity? of this thing, but he was very proud. I saw in his eyes, he was very proud, when we finished our business together.

They sat silent for a moment, and the man in the trenchcoat twitched a little at the corners of his lips, gazing at the ceiling, as though he were fondly recalling some pleasant encounter with the past. Then he shrugged, and added, —The Spaniards, however, they are not . . . sane, of course.

The man with him had hardly moved, except to shift an elbow to make way for a glass on the table before him. He sat staring past the door of the café from vacant light blue eyes.

—You don't look well, said the other. —You are more haggard than when I saw you, over there.

—I don't sleep well.

—You did not sleep well then.

—Even as well as . . . then.

—Cigarette?

—No.

—You no longer smoke.

—No.

After a minute of solicitous silence the man in the trenchcoat said, —And you do plan to go back? He got no answer but a faint nod. A waiter appeared with more wine, and some Gorgonzola cheese. —Yes, you are then? certain you want to go back? For there is still time . . .

—What . . . business is it of yours! Certainly I'm going back. Still he barely turned his face from the hands clasped before it, for this outburst of impatience, and quickly muffled them there again.

—Your lip is badly scarred? The man in the trenchcoat twisted again round the ends of his mouth. —You know it can be fixed, of course, he murmured, listening, watching with glittering eyes.

—What did you mean by that? Going back, why not. What did you mean?

The shoulderstraps on the trenchcoat shrugged slightly. —Nothing. Of course, rumors?

—Yes, yes, yes, the other whispered with sharp impatience behind his hands. —And after your reports, eh? Watching over me . . . yes, little things like, the moment I show some dismay over our paintings being dumped for dollars, did you tell them that too?

—Please, of course . . .

—Yes, which proved conclusively that I must be working for the restoration of the crown . . . aphhh . . . this kind of logic . . . Certainly I'm going back, why not? where . . . what else? he whispered staring straight ahead. Then he lowered his eyes slowly, and sat studying the cheese on the plate at his elbow.

—Of course, I meant to say, I understand you . . .

—Of course, you explained that once. No . . .

—I meant only to say, things there are not going well, nothing is going well there. Everything there, the corruption has spread . . . His voice tailed off, he sat silent with his small glittering eyes, startled when the cheese was suddenly pushed toward him with an elbow.

—There, try some of that, taste it, corruption put to good use . . .

And they were silent again, the man in the trenchcoat did not touch the Gorgonzola, finally he said, —Tomorrow? There is one more? they told me, a priest?

—Dressed like one.

—And you, you will indicate him to me, you will not mistake him?

—Yes I, I'll point him out to you. I won't mistake him, his companion muttered behind his hands, drew them aside and appeared to spit something from the end of his tongue. —If you think you can take care of it then, on the street, in daylight?

—Of course . . . the man in the trenchcoat murmured, then, —*A Véres költö* . . . you remember that . . . ?

—You? The clasped hands fell away for a moment, with a sparkle of gold, and the scar on the lip drew it into what appeared to be a sneer. —The poet stained with blood! . . . He drew his hands up again.

—Or . . . you?

—Enough . . .

—You will be on the train tomorrow night?

—Yes.

—I should like a last good dinner, before we go back. Eh? The Piccolo Budapest? Eh?

—Yes. Early. About seven.

—You are . . . going back, then? the man in the trenchcoat said, and studied the profile beside him.

—Yes, yes, and now good night. Good night.

—The personal affairs no longer take precedence, eh? Good night. Until tomorrow? Under Saint Peter's Umbrella . . . eh?

Stanley looked down at his book quickly.

—And have you ever seen anything so frankly hideous as this, the tall woman's voice took up. —A piece of dirt enshrined forever in clear lifetime plastic. My God! . . . with a certificate of Miraculous Origin and the Seal of the Church. A piece of dirt from the church of Cana in Galilee, where they turned wine into water, my God. My husband's picking up all sorts of things, you can see the state he must be in after what happened to Huki-lau . . .

A distant voice said, —I don't care if Joan of Arc was a witch, that hasn't a thing to do with it . . .

And another, —Of course everyone knows that the Franciscans were canonized for the very things the Waldensians were burned alive for . . .

And then Stanley looked up as though he had been struck. A waiter stood before him, and he whispered, —Café, hoarsely, trying to look round the dirty apron to where the voice had come from he had so certainly heard. When he saw her, she was already seated, and although so close, in the chair which the man in the trenchcoat had left, she had not seen him, and she did not look round, but down at her hands on the table. At that instant Stanley might have leaped up, or cried out, or simply spoken beginning with some overladen conjunction, as though to continue a conversation of minutes or hours before: and it was not her company that stopped him but the absolute, absolved quiet on her face, in spite of the small sore which disparaged the delicate line of her lip.

—Something bit her, perhaps, she said at that moment, answering a question from the man half turned from Stanley, and a reproachful smile touched her face, still looking down. Then they were both silent. He only appeared to have glanced at her, and he went on, staring straight ahead.

—Of course Huki-lau isn't dead, she's . . . The tall woman whispered something. —Which is just as bad. *I* don't see how it happened, she's had her belt on every minute she's been over here. There was a goat, in Spain, though, with designs on her. You could see in his eyes.

—How tired you look, like he looked sometimes, like an old man, with nothing left before you to regret. And are you old? or are the scars still unhealed down your front. Raise your left hand . . . you can't, it sits there relishing another scar. She laughed, a sharp sound, and left it between them, looking at her own hands on the table. She was wearing a simple dark gray suit, with a long unbroken skirt and a short cape. She had nothing on her hair.

He muttered something.

—What? You're joking. And she laughed again. His right hand had come down on the table, and she took it in hers, and laid her left hand over both. Still, he appeared to bite the gold seal ring on the other, staring ahead.

—Still . . .

—Today? In Assisi, she went through and through and through the gate. No one appeared in person, granting indulgences. No one, in a "heavenly brightness shining," no one, do you remember? When no one was at the door? Now granting indulgences, O friars minors, is he in Purgatory if he drowned? Down, on a rope, did he tell you that story? Drowned, in the celestial sea come down the rope to undo the anchor caught there on a stone with no one's name on, and a date, inclined against the bottom by the darkness, and so no wonder that the anchor caught, and he came down the rope. If there were time . . .

—Listen. Just tell me . . .

—More you know? His blood on the leaves, I saw it. But no thorns? that's someone else then, for I saw him delivered, down. Yes, streaked with no one's oil and delivered, down, that damned black androgyne who held him back and lost him, down . . .

—I may not see you again.

She did not raise her eyes.

Stanley swallowed with self-conscious effort and pretended, to himself, to find his place in the book before him. At another table, a group had settled to worry the most recent dogma, that of the Assumption. One of them said, —There's a perfectly good scientific explanation . . .

—And then when we drove back, a monk drove with us. She had her belt on then, but I didn't *watch* . . .

—She would have died of asphyxia at fifty thousand feet.

—You hear things, about life in monasteries.

—Or if she'd gone fast, burned up like a meteor.

—Will you marry her?

Stanley looked up at that, eyes wide but the lids drawn upon them in disbelief, as though trying to hide what he heard from himself; and hide what he saw, for her eyes were wide, and no lids discernible.

—Marry you! the man said, and he withdrew his right hand from under hers.

—All right, Mary was a Jew, wasn't she? A Jewish woman, if she went bodily to heaven, how does she eat?

—This little piece of dirt, enclosed in lifetime plastic forever. Does a plastic lifetime last forever?

—Is there a kosher kitchen in heaven?

—You see, he put it there, and he did not take it away. Stanley stared at her. His own expression, and even the movement of his hands, commenced to follow hers, then those of the man when he answered, then his face hers and his hands those of the man, except intricate muscles tried round the edges and round the eyes, and the corners of his mouth, to rescue his own face from that unguarded openness, and his hands quivered.

—Marry you! Me!

—For he put it there, and did not take it away as he promised, as he always had done before, as he promised.

—Me!

—Take the dogma of the Immaculate Conception. You try to preserve Mary from the taint of Original Sin, then what about Elizabeth? You can go all the way back.

—Of course we met the people who make these things. Religious novelties, and mostly plastic. And she even admitted openly she was a convert. But my husband can tell a Jew a mile away.

—So Mary Herself told Saint Anthony of Padua her body remains incorruptible in Heaven.

—Saint John of the Cross said . . .

—Listen! Listen . . .

—Where there is no love . . .

—This is the last time I will see you.

—But why do you do the things you do? Why do you live the life you live?

Stanley watched his shoulders hunch forward, watched one hand grip the other, and though he could not see the watery blue eyes, his own by now lay open with the same implications of desire as those wide dark eyes he sought.

—Because . . . do you understand? the Cold Man said, speaking with quiet clarity for the first time, —because any sanctuary of power . . . protects beautiful things. To keep people . . . to control people, to give them something . . . anything cheap that will satisfy them at the moment, to keep them away from beautiful things, to keep them where their hands can't touch beautiful things, their hands that . . . touch and defile and . . . and break beautiful things, hands that hate beautiful things, and fear beautiful things, and touch and defile and fear and break beautiful things . . .

—Oh no, she said to him.

—Because there are so few . . . there is so little beauty, there are so few beautiful things, that to preserve them, to keep them . . .

—But to make more . . . beautiful things?

As they looked at each other, Stanley looked at them both, helplessly suspended between their eyes, waiting for what each sought in the other.

—Now . . . if there were time . . . she said softly.

—And you are going into a convent, you are going into that . . . that life, he insisted suddenly, and she shrugged her shoulders, looking down once more.

—Or what other? For there she will become a bride.

—Tomorrow, yes it's arranged, an audience, it's the best thing, tomorrow.

—So soon!

—Tomorrow, yes. It's all arranged.

—Tomorrow she will . . . kiss the Fisherman Ring? If there were time, to ask him questions about Purgatory.

—I had a book of his once, by mistake . . .

—To kiss Saint Peter in the Boat, tomorrow?

—Here you are! Listen, listen to this, this letter from my wife, Don Bildow burst out, dropping square in front of Stanley at the table.

—No, no, no . . .

—Listen. My daughter was all swollen up when I left, remember? And we thought it was . . . we didn't know what it was, remember? Well do you know what it was? . . . what it is? She's pregnant! That's what this letter from my wife says, and she's only six. Do you hear me? What am I going to do? What are you looking at me like that for?

Stanley was silent, he was staring at Bildow's face, but vacantly, as though far beyond it.

—It's the *Eccentricities of Cardinal Pirelli*.

—But have you read *Justine?* In that he desecrates the wafer right inside her.

—Give me that! Give me that thing! Don Bildow snatched the book from Stanley's lap.

—My husband's sitting up in the hotel room now, with a book by some laousy Chinaman, and a bottle of

Scotch.

An Italian boy entered and joined the next table, where he offered a group of American tourists for sale.

Further on, two American senators were drinking whisky and arguing whether or not Sweden had a king.

—He says he's practicing the gentle art of sitting and forgetting. My God, I'm tired.

Don Bildow was trying to tear the book up. First he tried to break the spine, but he could not. Then he got half the pages in one hand, but he could not tear them. Finally he held the book against him, and started to rip out about ten pages at a time. The table behind his narrow back was empty, and then Victoria and Albert Hall, and Rudy, and Sonny, and Buster, and Big Anna, the Swede, and two others descended on it, and set to discussing the problems of the train trip to Paris, if Rudy and Frank were both in states of Grace they could not share the same compartment. The pages continued to rip. A faint male voice protested, —Caprew . . . A woman's voice said, —Kike. Don Bildow sat at the table ripping the pages out of the book, about five at a time.

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From behind, when she stood still in that yellow velours gown, Mrs. Deigh rather resembled an uneven stack of sofa cushions. At the moment only Dom Sucio had this coign of vantage, and he did not stop to enjoy it, but turned and hurried down a dark hallway hastily adjusting his mantle, as she opened the door to Stanley. He paused, upon entering, to support himself on Judith's sword-arm: Holofernes' head swung toward him, and the whole thing almost came over.

—My dear boy be . . . be careful of our . . . Donatello, Mrs. Deigh gasped as the bronze righted itself. —It's his . . . David, his famous David, she murmured nervously, addressing the still gently swaying head, as though apologizing to it. She continued to murmur nervously, wringing one hand in the other, as she led him into the crowded room. —We do wish you would have your hair cut. Stanley sat down on the edge of the Queen Anne chair, and she stood over him for a minute. —What is it? What is troubling you, dear boy?

—Nothing, nothing, nothing, he said quickly, and pulled his shoulder from under her hand, and the glitter of the wrist watch at his cheek. She withdrew looking injured, and sat down almost silently in the big chair. There she commenced the familiar chucking noise.

—I . . . I'm sorry, I . . . I'm tired.

—It has been a trying day for everyone, she said, somewhat distantly, and went on looking at the ceiling. When he continued silent, hands gripped between his knees, she said in the same tone, —We had a very trying visit from some British Israelites. And poor Cardinal Spermelli, the white ants have completely destroyed his chess-playing machine. All he talks of now is going to Venice, where he can be conducted to his last resting place in the dignity of a pompa funebre, though those little Coca-Cola motorboats . . .

—Is he real? Stanley brought out suddenly.

—Is he what? my dear boy?

—No, no, but if he's a Cardinal he should be . . . nothing. Nothing.

—You are upset, are you not, she said looking sharply at him as he lowered his eyes once more, and she looked back to the ceiling. —We knew you would like him, he likes young boys so much, especially musical young boys. But his arca musarithmica, alas . . .

—What is that?

—Don't you remember it, dear boy? The seventeenth-century machine he showed you, that composes music automatically. Alas, you will never see it again. The white ants . . . what is it? What's the matter? Are you having a chill? . . . She stared where he was staring. —Ahhhh . . . she sighed with sad affection, but she did not get up. —It's one of his days up and around, she murmured.

The lean figure had emerged unsteadily from one of the dark doorways, and stood resting at a precarious angle against the leg of a figure in a bathing suit, a bronze (labeled *Hercules*, by della Robbia). The dim light cast a faintly yellow sheen over the velutinous patches left on his back. A twist of insulated wire led from one ear to the object hung at his collar. Mrs. Deigh made the chucking noise again, but nothing moved. —He has not looked so discouraged since he fell into the baths of the Emperor Tiberius at Capri, and we had to hire an Alpinist to rescue him. She looked slowly round at Stanley. —Do you recall asking me about the initials on his little chair in the Automobile? the little chair where you sit? I asked Dom Sucio, and he told me, of course. Impubis Hadrianus Semper. Then she cleared her throat. The chain rattled as she leaned forward and spoke more gently. —Dear boy, your teeth are chattering. Perhaps . . .

—No, no, I . . . I'm all right, I don't . . .

—We understand. Perhaps you caught a chill at Assisi? . . . We won't ask what is burdening your soul. We understand. Perhaps it will take your mind off it to tell us about Assisi? It is so long since we have walked among those roses, and touched the very spot where . . .

—She asked me to marry her, Stanley blurted out.

—What? to what? Who?

—She asked me to marry her, yes, and . . .

—But . . . my dear boy, you . . . you never told me there was a . . . a girl?

—Yes . . .

—And you . . . you didn't take her up there with you? To that . . . that holy spot . . . ? The chain rattled, the objects strung to it went to the floor. Neither of them retrieved it.

—She . . . she kept going through the gate of the Portiuncula, she . . . to gain indulgences for . . . she . . .

—Dear boy! dear boy! Mrs. Deigh had come forward, half unseated, half to her feet.

—No, she . . . If only there were time, she said, over and over. She's pregnant.

Mrs. Deigh went back in the chair, got firm hold on the arms as the mother-of-pearl crucifix climbed out of her bosom, and it dropped back in as she stood. The chain came up with her.

—You . . . you don't understand, she isn't just a . . . a who . . . a wh . . .

—Dear boy, don't weep, We . . .

—If she . . . she wanted to share her beauty with anyone . . . with everyone, she . . . if she . . .

—We understand, dear boy, We understand, Mrs. Deigh said with a warm hand on his neck, patting him there gently, as she did for a minute broken only by his sobs, until finally she said to him, —And of course you said, No. No? We hope you said No, when she asked you . . . that. We hope you said No, and told her that you are going to Fenestrula, for your work, your work is what matters, your work is all that matters isn't it, isn't it dear boy. And you did say No, did you not.

—Ye . . . hes. No.

—There. Of course you said No.

—Yes, it . . . everything is in pieces. I . . . Stanley got to his feet, and drew both hands down over his face. Then he turned to her and burst out, —And your . . . Dom Sucio, he . . . did you know he . . . he isn't real?

—But dear boy, Mrs. Deigh said gently, —he is as real as we are.

—No, what I mean is, I mean a monk, a real monk, I saw him . . . I . . . did you know that?

—Of course, dear boy.

—But you . . . you knew all along, there's no . . . no special Order for . . . for little people? And he . . . the contributions you give him, he . . . yes, you told me, people turned to look at him in the street and he . . . he was sensitive, but I . . . that they mistook him for a wandering child, but I . . . I . . .

—Dear Stanley, Mrs. Deigh said, and came close to put an arm round his trembling shoulders. —You are such a . . . dear boy.

For a moment, it looked as though Hadrian were going to improve his position against the bronze leg. With great caution he commenced to raise one foot from the floor. The instant he started to sag in that direction he planted the foot where he'd got it, but too late to do more than save himself from going down altogether, and so he stayed that way, the moment of daring, and all memory of it, gone.

—Will you join Us in prayers, in our little private chapel, Stanley? she asked as they separated, slowly, each with a look of wary interest, close enough to smell one another for the first time.

—Ye . . . yes . . .

Then she moved quite briskly, first to Hadrian, making the chucking sound. Hadrian did not raise his head. —We must confess, Hadrian and Dom Sucio are not the best of friends, she said with some asperity, setting Hadrian square and working at the box on his collar. —Dom Sucio turns his hearing aid off, and sometimes he doesn't hear a thing for days. As she straightened up murmuring, —Now there was something else . . . Hadrian sagged back against the bronze calf. —Oh, from Our daughter, something she sent, I meant to show you.

—A letter? . . .

—Not precisely a letter. Here. Here it is. She took a folded paper from behind a picture frame and handed it to him. —We shall return in a moment, dear boy. For prayers. And she left him with this:

PLEASE HELP IMMEDIATELY
This lady knows that you need this Ritual
The Ritual

Jehovah God
Before me Saint Raphael
Behind me Saint Gabriel
To my right Saint Michael
To my left Saint Auriel
Behind me shines the gold star
And above me shines the Glory of God.

Pray for this sick lady, for her hair to be thick and black, for her eyes strong, and clear eyesight, for her nose to grow one inch longer, big, thick and healthy, her teeth and gums to be strong and healthy, also pray for her eyelashes and eyebrows to be thick

and black, and skin healthy and white, and for all her Health, all her Reconstruction, and her husband.

Please help this lady; pray hard and strong for her. This Ritual comes from India to help this lady and to save and uplift humanity.

Please pray hard for her to get to India to help humanity. Please spread this Ritual for her and her husband. Please use this Ritual or you will be sick and poor. Please get this lady a lot of helpers and help her to live in India.

After you say this Ritual, pray in your own way all you can. Help this lady or you will be sorry. If you do this Ritual you shall have everything you need in this world. Send this Ritual to all your friends and to the children and to the relatives. You must do this work or everyone will get sick and poor and the world will shake to pieces.

TRANSMUTING

You need to know this added higher law of the transmuting of power within mankind, within your own system.

You already know that all of our mental power must be used to help. Also all of your creative power must be used to help.

Instead of wasting this creative power of the genetalia, it must be used with the Ritual, praying out the power to help this sick lady for her health and her reconstruction, out of suffering.

Also you should get the men to transmute power to their sick wives so that their wives can be strong and healthy and so that their wives can pray for this sick lady.

Also you should get all the men and all the women and the older adolescent children to send out their power both ways to help this sick lady. This has to be done quickly to save this lady and her husband and to save and uplift humanity, to the next teachings, which you all will receive thru some sort of world publicity.

Please send copies of this Ritual and letter to all Doctors and Dentists and Lawyers and everybody that you can all over the world.

Stanley twisted his shoulders against the hot nettling sensation under his shirt. The rattling chain sounded distantly, muffled by the red hangings, and his bandaged hand sought the tooth in his pocket. Then the heat became more sensible. It was drenched with the scent of roses, and a soft glow illuminated the paper he held before him. —We always say our prayers this way . . . since Portugal . . . He looked up slowly, past the figure of Hadrian, sagged forward again silently, petrified there about to spring upon something long since gone to earth, the light from behind bringing a soft sheen to the yellow patches of pubescence. —It makes Us feel, somehow, closer to Him. She had two lighted tapers and held one of them forth, in the hand springing from the gold circlet of the wrist watch, and that, with the ellipsoid still swinging gently on the end of the chain, was all she was wearing, though the attar of roses clung to him as he passed the tendered head of Nebuchadnezzar's general, slipping, near being pinioned on Judith's sword, and made the street where a car swerved to a stop, so near running him down that he found himself standing stricken in the dark gap between its headlamps, his empty hand against its grill, where he read the word FIAT.

—Of course I said . . . No, he whispered. Bells sounded somewhere.

•

It was sundown in Barbados.

Doctor Fell stood on his veranda with one hand down the front of his pants, scratching. In the other he held a letter which commenced, —Dear Doctor, In cases of gastric hyperacidity, the commonest symptom is the sensation of a bonfire in the stomach . . . He was not reading the letter, however, but looking down the path which led to the rest of the Pilot Project and the native bungalows. Shadows were already gathering, and Doctor Fell appeared concerned, for he knew what difficulty his assistant had keeping his balance in the dark.

—Gordon! . . . he called after a moment. He saw nothing but the palm trees one way and the rim of the sea the other way. He heard the sound of the surf. —Gordon! he called again, and then sheltering his eyes from the lack of brilliance above with the letter, he peered down the path. Scarcely more steady than the shadows themselves, a figure took form, and emerged. Doctor Fell stepped down and came to help him with his load of little white boxes. Gordon could only carry one armload, stacked up to his chin, since the other arm was in a sling.

—Tsk tsk, said Doctor Fell, —how heavy they are getting . . . Gordon followed him in. When the little white boxes were all locked in the freezing unit, Doctor Fell turned and said, —How do you like the work by now, Gordon? You don't mind it so much, do you Gordon?

—No. But they . . .

—Who?

—The men down in the field, Ed and Max, and Anselm and Chaby . . .

—You mean the natives?

—Yes, they . . .

—What do you call them Ed and Max and . . . what do you call them names like that for, Gordon?

—They . . . they just . . . look like them, by now.

—You'd better have some Dramamine, right now, Gordon. Doctor Fell opened a tremendous cabinet. All the shelves were filled with bottles. —It's also good for fenestration procedures, labyrinthitis, and vestibular dysfunction associated with antibiotic therapy. I read up on it today. It's even good for pregnancy. Do you ever feel like jumping out of windows, Gordon? Tsk tsk . . . you can here, of course, but it wouldn't be any fun. It wouldn't be any more fun than falling out of bed. Do you still fall out of bed?

—I . . .

—Here we are, Gordon. Ahmm, tsk tsk, this is the last of the Dramamine. How do you want it administered, orally or rectally?

—I . . .

—But don't worry, Gordon, we have lots of things here, said Doctor Fell, rummaging among the bottles for the jug of saline solution. —Tomorrow we'll start on Roniacol, and when we run out of that there's Lesofac, Gustamate, Diasal, Amchlor . . . Oh they've sent us everything. The Nicotinic acid was the best, wasn't it, in spite of its evanescent reactions, the tingling, itching, burning of the skin, dizziness, faintness, sensations of warmth . . . bend over now, Gordon . . . gastric distress, cutaneous flushing, the increased gastro-intestinal motility . . . ah . . . mmmp, there we are, Gordon. You'll feel better in no time. It's due to a vasodilating action.

—Do you think there will be a scar . . . ?

—What do you suppose vasodilating means? . . . a what? a scar? where?

—When you take these bandages off my arm?

—Oh certainly, certainly Gordon.

—But . . . like this one on my face?

—Oh, bigger. That one you could cover with a mustache. You'd be cute in a mustache, Gordon. Wait, don't go yet. Doctor Fell had fitted an ophthalmoscope to his head, and swung the mirror down over his eye. —Have a look at the bloody labyrinth, he went on talking as he worked. —Oh, I'm not being profane now you understand, tsk tsk, I'm referring to the hemorrhaging in the labyrinth of the ear, your ear of course . . . Can you hear me? can you hear me in this ear? Yes, you're getting better, I think it's all over now. Why, I'll lose you before too long, won't I . . . with all that money you can be off, you can fly to the moon if you want to, can't you. I've worried about you, you know, you seemed like a very sensitive young man, and I've wondered how this sickness had done this to you, just left you with your eyes glazed and no interest in anything but your work. Tsk tsk, maybe something better will come along? You can't really enjoy going out with the vitamin samples in the morning and bringing in the . . . the specimens in the evening. But that's what life is, isn't it, yes, tsk tsk . . . Ooop . . . be careful, Gordon, watch where you're going. Keep your eyes open. Do you want me to walk back with you? No? All right, just be careful, keep your eyes open. Yes . . . and now where do you suppose that tattooed idiot is? He's useless, worthless, all he does is drink and talk about shark fishing and trim his little mustache, I don't trust him at all. I'd think he'd followed us here, but I can't imagine why anyone would follow anyone here.

•

—No . . . N O. Tresp . . . Oh Chrahst give it to me, I'll do it, I mean Chrahst I'll do it, I have to do everything here myself anyway sooner or later, and it's too late to put it up anyway. But I mean Chrahst give me the paint, will you just let go of it, Otto? I mean just let go of the handle. Now give me the brush, I mean Chrahst just hand it to me, don't throw it on the floor. I mean look at Hannah over there, the way she's working waxing it, you know? I mean Chrahst, she's going to go through to the cellar in a minute. Now go away, will you? I mean after a day like this I want to relax a minute, you know? I mean Chrahst, before I fix supper for all of you. Up in the ballroom, you know? The green room with the three chandeliers, go up there and wait for your supper while I bring the rest of them in. And look, I mean when you pass give Hannah a shove with your foot, will you? She's going to wax my old man right into the floor, and . . . Oh Chrahst, I have to do everything myself. I mean look at him sitting there staring at the clock with the sun on his face, like he was going somewhere, and Chrahst I mean the best he can do is pick up the telephone and dial and by the time I get there he's just sitting holding the telephone and he wonders who's calling him. Chrahst. I mean he'll never hang his hat on that buffalo horn in the Harvard Club again, and sit down and eat an omelette with a spoon. Now Chrahst, where are they all. Max is still mowing the lawn, even if there isn't any grass there yet, when the grass comes up I'll have to keep moving him along or he'll mow the same strip until he gets right down to rock. And Chrahst look at Stanley painting that pillar on the porte-cochère, I mean he must have about fifty coats on one side of it by now. And where the hell is Anselm, or did I leave him washing the clothes. He's scrubbed holes in everything we've got by now, he can

go through a shirt in half an hour if you don't take it away from him and put something else in his hands. But Chrahst I mean how many clothes can you wash at once in a couple of lousy cut-glass punch bowls. And Chrahst I might as well have another drink and another cigar, because that's all there is in the house, and they can't expect me to eat the kibbled dog food I feed them when I know the state inspector isn't coming around, I mean Chrahst he can't expect me to feed them anything else and pay the taxes too, at forty dollars a month a feeb. And I have to tie up another package for my mother to open before dinner, she's been waiting for it all day again. And what a letter to get, Dear Classmate, We realize this letter, our second appeal to you this year, comes at a time when you have recently been solicited for reunion funds, I mean Chrahst. Many classmates have wondered how much money has been raised toward the 1975 goal of $100,000. Chrahst, listen to that record, you can hardly hear the tune any more it's so scratched, I mean it's just as good as having an automatic record-player to have a feeb sitting there starting it over again every time it ends. *The Sunny Side of the Street*. But Chrahst. I mean, 1975. I mean, Chrahst.

•

Dear Mr. Pivner . . . Eddie Zefnic wrote.

Gee you would really be interested in the work we are doing here now, and I guess I won't ever really be able to thank you for all you have done giving me a start, and treating me practically like a son and all, I mean by helping me go on with my education to where it really comes to grips with humanity and learning all about things in science like in the work we are doing here. I'm sure glad you had your operation, and believe me I sure did everything I could so you would even after I talked to you and I guess finally convinced you that it was a good idea, because now modern science knows what these things are and how to fix them, not like the Dark Ages. So maybe by convincing you to go ahead with it and have the operation, and while all along I'm working here right in the forefront of all that kind of things, maybe in that way I'm repaying you.

Let me tell you about the work we are doing here now, first we are studying anxiety neurosises by giving some animals a nervous breakdown. Like we have a whole bunch of kids (ha ha I mean little goats) which are hooked up so that when the light dims it gets a shock, so after a while then the minute the light dims the kid backs into the corner and gets tense so after a while of that he gets anxiety neurosis, because at first he's only tense but then when we change the signals around on him then he gets the real anxiety neurosis. Then you do that about a thousand times on him, you should see them kicking out their both hind legs so they won't get the shock except waiting for it when they don't know it's going to happen at what moment then they get the anxiety neurosis which is a breakdown, while all the while we measure everything so that we know. So after about a thousand times then we try to get them out of it, and everything is recorded real close by the lab and then we go over all that and try to get them out of it, you can see it's real interesting and how much good it will do.

You must have a real nice nurse up there, to write me your letter like she did and all. I have been in the laboratory here where they took a sheep's brain apart so I could see what it must be like having those nerve tissues between the frontal lobes of the brain severed off of the mid-brain which is where you have the emotions, so I can see where the prison psychiatric doctor said how it might be a good thing because things like counterfeiting and forging arent crimes of violence but more something emotional maybe that gets mixed up so if you sever it off then it can't get mixed up any more and you don't want to do things like forging and counterfeiting any more. Which even though they aren't crimes of violence they sort of mean something's wrong somewhere.

Like I already wrote to you the last time mostly what I do here still is things like cleaning the pens of these kids and feed them if their being fed if we're not testing something on them or something, and all things like that, which keeps me pretty busy because the rest of the time mostly I spend reading these books so I even haven't been to church for a while now, and even the radio I don't turn on listening just to music but only the news broadcasts, because there is all this I want to learn and the scientists here are real nice about if you want to ask them questions how they'll explain everything to you, so I keep studying so I can too some day, I mean explain everything.

That's too bad about like you're having this child to play with and like being trained all over again about things like going to the bathroom but gee we took care of the main thing didn't we, and gee if I have repaid you by convincing you to have that operation when we talked in the prison, gee you know how much I appreciate how much I owe you and all, and I guess you sure must know I didn't ever think anything bad about you when that happened, I mean that you were a criminal or like that, but just something was wrong somewhere which wasn't your fault but a good scientific explanation for it, so If I have repaid you that way and by studying hard like I am and all, then I guess that's the best I can do to show you how much I appreciate all you've done for me and all, and I sure study every minute, like last night this friend came by he had tickets for some concert when I was studying and he tried to keep asking me to go and I said no.

Yours very truly,
EDDIE

P S I'm enclosing something I saw in the newspaper about this man who was a counterfeiter which they were trying to catch for a long time, I guess he was pretty good at it too which just goes to show you there was something wrong somewhere, like they found him in this hotel sort of in Spain it looked like he took his own life there, so I guess we took care of the main thing didn't we, I mean if a counterfeiter has to take his own life like that, and thats one thing, I mean restoring life after death that science hasn't figured out yet, but we're working on it.

Dear Friend . . . Mrs. Sinisterra read on a postcard,

We have not yet heard from you regarding the plastic newspaper clipping which we sent you recently. If you would like to keep this "permanized" clipping just send one dollar in the self-addressed stamped envelope which was enclosed for your convenience, or mail your payment with this card enclosed for proper identification and credit.

We can obtain additional copies of this item or items from other newspapers and permanize them in plastic at $1.00 each. If you can furnish the clippings, the charge is only 75¢ each. Thank you for your courtesy and patronage.

MEMENTO ASSOCIATES

She tore the card in half and went up the stairs alone. When she got inside, she clung to the edge of the sloped sink for a minute, her body hunched as though in pain and her head up, listening; she turned the plastic knob on the box pinned to the collapsed folds of her bosom, her head still up, as though listening. Then she went to a medicine cabinet at the end of the sink, opened it, and took the same attitude. —You! . . . she called out. There was a disagreeable sound of response from somewhere. —You took my . . . Then she stopped, and held her forehead in a hand.

•

"Deft, moving, genuine, at once tough and compassionate . . . one does not often get from autobiography so satisfying an experience." "Told with sensitivity which is fresh, combined with masterful insights, moving at a swift yet leisurely pace . . ." "A tingling narrative style, which touches deeply in its moments of swiftly known pathos, and breathes into memories of worldly experience insights into great truths almost worthy of the author of the *Confessions* . . ." —You're trying to tell me these are reviews of your book?

—Yes, yes, said Mr. Feddle eagerly, snatching the ribbons of paper back, and returning them to the book under his arm. He'd met the hunched critic in the green wool shirt plodding up Sixth Avenue as though in deep snow, a heavy book under his own arm, about to enter a tailor shop to have two buttons sewn on the front of his pants. —How come I haven't seen it then?

—It's out. It's out, it just came out, said Mr. Feddle retreating.

—I thought it was poetry, how come these say . . .

—Poetical autobiography, Mr. Feddle said quickly.

—How come all these reviews have the name of it torn off the top?

—Oh, oh that's my . . . being modest . . .

—You being modest? Don't try to give me . . . is that it? Under your arm there, is that it? Lemme see it.

—Yes, but . . . an advance copy, Mr. Feddle said retiring further out of reach, moving the book under his arm only enough to show his name on the jacket.

—Here, lemme see it, you . . . all right, you stupid old bastard, don't, I don't want to see it.

—But you . . . aren't you even going to buy me a glass of beer?

—Go on, you crazy old bastard. Do you think I don't know what those reviews are? You think I don't know the book those reviews are written about?

—Oh did you . . . read it? Mr. Feddle asked helplessly.

—No, but I knew the son of a bitch who wrote it, said the critic, turning away, into the tailor shop where he found his friend the stubby poet sitting debagged in a waist-high booth.

—What are you doing here?

—Having the zipper on my fly fixed.

The critic undid his waist and sat down in the next booth. —That crazy old bastard out there, showing me reviews of Anselm's book he's trying to say are his. Anselm . . .

—Anselm, the Church really had him. I laugh every time I think of him, retiring from the world and they make him publicity agent for a monastery. And the importance he tries to give himself by talking about what a sinner he was, he has to bring in every saint from Saint Augustine to Saint . . . some other saint to back him up, for Christ sake, publicity agent for a spiritual powerhouse. How'd you come out in court today?

—That snotty kid swore he'd never met me, so how could he have used me in his novel. But we're proving he took incidents right out of my own life . . .

—So what good are they to you . . . ? The tailor came out with a pair of pants over his arm. The poet put on his pants and the critic took off his pants. —Tell him to hurry up, we have to get uptown to meet this guy who's going to put up money for a new magazine.

—I can't go without my pants, for Christ sake. Give him a couple of minutes to sew the buttons on.

And then they silenced, each bending forth, closer and closer, to fix the book the other was carrying with a look of myopic recognition.

—You reading that? both asked at once, withdrawing in surprise.

—No. I'm just reviewing it, said the taller one, hunching back in his green wool shirt. —A lousy twenty-five bucks. It'll take me the whole evening tonight. You didn't buy it, did you? Christ, at that price? Who the hell do they think's going to pay that much just for a novel. Christ, I could have given it to you, all I need is the jacket blurb to write the review.

It was in fact quite a thick book. A pattern of bold elegance, the lettering on the dust wrapper stood forth in stark configurations of red and black to intimate the origin of design. (For some crotchety reason there was no picture of the author looking pensive sucking a pipe, sans gêne with a cigarette, sang-froid with no necktie, plastered across the back.)

—Reading it? Christ no, what do you think I am? I just been having trouble sleeping, so my analyst told me to get a book and count the letters, so I just went in and asked them for the thickest book in the place and they sold me this damned thing, he muttered looking at the book with intimate dislike. —I'm up to a hundred and thirty-six thousand three hundred and something and I haven't even made fifty pages yet. Where's your pants?

—Wait a second, he'll be right out with them. I got a card from Max.

—Did he hear about Charles Dickens yet?

—I wrote a note to him about it on a review of his book I sent him.

—Your review? He'll thank you for that.

—They cut it on me, for Christ sake, you know that. The hell with them, anyway, they're all of them fucked and far from home, sitting over there right now pretending they're in New York pretending they're in Paris . . . hey wait, wait . . .

—I can't, I can't miss this guy, I'll see you later, the Viareggio.

—That place, for Christ sake, it's taken over by fairies. Wait . . .

Out on the sidewalk, Mr. Feddle hurried up fluttering the ribbons of newspaper. —Beat it, screw, go on you crazy old bastard, I heard all about your book . . .

—You did? you did? You've heard about it already? Yes, a beer? a beer to celebrate . . . ? And in his enthusiasm Mr. Feddle came too close. The book was snatched from under his arm and he fluttered here helplessly, listening to the laughter, and an instant's more hope that it might not be opened, that the dust wrapper he had made so carefully, lettering his name with such meticulous clarity on the front, pasting a picture of himself taken forty years before on the back, might yet sustain it. Then pages flashed, the laughter broke. —*The Idiot*? That's the title of your book? *The Idiot* . . . the laughter came on, —by Feodor Feddle . . . ?

"'Did you imagine that I did not foresee all this hatred!' Ippolit whispered again . . ." Mr. Feddle wiped his eye, sitting at an empty cafeteria table a few minutes later, over a tomato cocktail he had made with catsup and water, trying to hold together the torn dust wrapper so that his picture and his name might be seen whole by anyone coming near, the book balanced upright as pages slipped under his thumb, and a smile as of satisfaction fixed to his lips, weary satisfaction for a work completed, as the last page turned and the last paragraph swam before his eyes. "They can't make decent bread anywhere; in winter they are frozen like mice in a cellar . . ." He touched at his watering eye with the crook of a finger. "'We've had enough of following our whims; it's time to be reasonable. And all this, all this life abroad, and this Europe of yours is all a fantasy, and all of us abroad are only a fantasy . . . remember my words, you'll see it for yourself!' she concluded almost wrathfully . . ." Someone approached his table. He swallowed hard, preparing to speak. It was a Puerto Rican busboy, with a hair-line mustache. Pages retreated under his thumb.

"'Pass by us, and forgive us our happiness,' said Myshkin in a low voice.

"'Ha, ha, ha! Just as I thought! I knew it was sure to be something like that! Though you are . . . you are . . . Well, well! You are eloquent people! Goodbye! Goodbye!'"

•

On the terrace of the Flore sat a person who resembled the aging George Washington without his wig (at about the time he said farewell to his troops). She was drinking a bilious cloudy liquid and read, with silent moving lips, from a small stiff-covered magazine. Anyone could have seen it was *Partisan Review* she was reading, if anyone had looked.

Paris lay by, accomplished. Other cities might cloy the appetites they fed, but this serpent of old Seine, pinched gray and wrinkled deep in time, continued to make hungry where she most satisfied, even to that hill where by night, round corners, she fed on most delicious poison, where, with, —Hey Joe, you see ciné cochon? deux femmes fooky-fooky? the vilest things became her still; where by day picturesque painters infested picturesque alleys painting the same picturesque painting painted so many times before: the spectral bulbiferous pyramids crowning the ascent where the first bishop of the city had approached carrying his head under his arm in a two-league march which centuries later would provoke a comment worthy any thinker before him, in a woman's pen whose shrewd instant would, ever after him, define and redeem the people whose patron saint he became.

Now, her whole mien no more changed after another great war than those of her daughters parading the

Grands Boulevards, quickly restored with cosmetics after their own brief battles, murmuring, like them, —Vous m'emmenez? . . . Paris prepared to celebrate an anniversary. It was her two thousandth anniversary, and that not one of birth, but of the first time, under another name, when she was raped: a morsel for a monarch, Lutetia succumbed after a struggle, and later on, like her daughters parading now between the Madeleine and the Café de la Paix, took a more gaudy name for her professional purposes, shrining the innocence of the maiden name in history.

Thus brilliant in flowered robes, like those Greek law decreed for courtesans, Paris soon gained the ascendancy, soon stood out like those prostitutes of Rome who, it was said, "could be distinguished from virtuous matrons only by the superior elegance of their dress and the swarm of admirers who surrounded them." As fashions have originated with courtesans throughout the ages, she soon became their arbiter. And since she was, like the better class of whores in ancient Greece, a trained entertainer, no more opprobrium attached to distinguished men visiting her than fell to Socrates visiting Aspasia: statesmen and generals came too, as Pericles came to Aspasia, and even after she had ruined him, and found herself accused of impiety, the great man appeared at her trial as her advocate, only to find his eloquence to fail him in court: "he could only clasp Aspasia to his breast and weep."

Other lands were not slow to credit her reputation as the author of all civilized innovations in the western world, and as much as five centuries ago the English, Italians, and even Turks, readily acknowledged that civilization had been enhanced with syphilis by the French. Paris exiled her overcivilized members across the river to Saint Germain des Prés, which had now once more become a haven for those crippled by novel and contagious disease. They behaved in this sanctuary very much as they had then, prohibited, as they were in the fifteenth century, "under pain of death, from conversing with the rest of the world."

On the terrace of the Flore, a passably dressed man who had compounded a new philosophy sat surrounded by some of the unshaven, unshorn, unwashed youth who espoused it. Four ruthlessly well-organized Hollanders, in the picturesque dress of their native land, sang *Red River Valley* from the sidewalk, and passed a cute wooden shoe among the captive audience. Someone whispered, —I'm actually going to join the church, the Roman Catholic. Someone else warned that the Pope and the whole works was going to Brazil. Someone else said that the Polar Icecap was growing, and would soon tip the earth over. Across the street on the terrace of the Brasserie Lipp, two pin-headed young men in gray flannel compared shiny green passports, thumbing forty-one blank pages. They were with two square-shouldered girls, whose small breasts were attached quite low to accommodate the fashion which the dresses imposed. One of the girls said, —I think my conçerage is returning all my mail marked ankonoo because I only gave her a thousand francs poorbwar. Behind them, another young man in gray flannels said he had known one of the girls, she was on the Daisy Chain at Vassar. On the terrace of the Reine Blanche next door, a golden-haired boy said, —I just want to say that being in Paris is a big fat wonderful thing . . . and beside him a youth whose plume of hair stood uncombed with painstaking care laid a hand on his and said, —Be-t tout nô ônelé etheur boïze frem dthe younaïtedd stétce in Paris is laïke kemming tout a bagnkouètt and bring yoûrze ône lennch.

On the terrace of the Royale Saint Germain, Hannah was told that a friend of hers was coming up from Italy, Don . . . what-was-it? And she responded, —Hey diddle diddle It bends in the middle, can you buy me a beer?

—I heard they hung one of Max's pictures upside down at his show.

—So what, Hannah said and she sounded morose. —Nobody noticed it until today, it's a real compliment to the coherence of the design. She was sitting at a table with an Australian sculptor who made leather sandals, a colored girl in the Stuart tartan, and a professional Mexican, who looked blank. Hannah was staring at a ribbon of newspaper, with a note scribbled in the margin.

—Who was that guy Charles that Max was talking about? He said he finally made it? under a subway? that he held up the IRT for twenty-five minutes . . .

—Will you shut up about it? Hannah responded, to amend her tone with, —and buy me a beer?

The Australian sculptor who made leather sandals said that Beethoven's duet for viola and cello sounded to him like two bulky women rummaging under a bed. Behind him a girl said, —Of course I like music, but not just to listen to.

—And you know how he paints them? He climbs up a ladder with a piece of string soaked in ink, and he drops it from the ceiling onto a canvas on the floor.

—We've just bought a lovely big Pissarro . . .

—My uncle had one, it was so big he couldn't park it anywhere.

—Max got good write-ups on his show. The critic in *La Macule* said . . .

—Why shouldn't he? Hannah interrupted. —They came around asking for a ten per cent cut on anything he sold if they gave him good reviews, sure he said yes, any good publicity agent charges ten per cent.

—Look, is it true what I heard about Max? that his mistress is the wife of . . . (and here the name of a well-known painter was whispered in Hannah's ear) — . . . who slips him her husband's unfinished canvases that he's discarded and forgotten about, and Max touches them up and sells them as originals?

—My uncle finally smashed it up one night, somebody on a motorcycle thought he was two motorcycles and tried to go between them.

—And then he told me he spent two days in bed with this real high-class whore he picked up in the Café de la Paix, after he told her he couldn't pay in francs, all he had was dollars, and he flashes this roll of tens and twenties and fifties, so she paid all the bills at the George Sank and gave him a terrific time for a couple of days and then rolled him, he said he'd like to see her trying to change Confederate States money in the Banque de France. What's this, a review of his book?

Hannah pushed the ribbon of paper forth saying, —The poor bastard who wrote it sends it over to him. Read it, you can see he misses the whole idea. Somebody in the *Trib* compared it to *Nightwood*.

—Here he comes now, isn't it?

Hannah looked up, to see Max approach, smiling; to ask, —Hey, can you buy me a beer?

At the next table a girl said, —Plagiary? What's that. Handel did it. They all did it. Even Mozart did it, he even plagiarized from himself, just look at the wind instruments in the dinner scene with Leporello. Someone said he'd been knocked down by a priest riding a bicycle with a red plush seat in the Rue Zheetliquer; someone said she had been knocked down by a nun on a bicycle in Rue Dauphine street: someone with a beard said he had never seen either a nun or a priest on the left bank, and added, —I just got a new holy man myself. —A what? —You know, an analyst. Have you been up to the exhibition of paintings by nuts up in the Saint Anne hospital? We got a nice section, the ones by American nuts. Some of them are dirty as hell.

And someone said, —Nothing queer about Carruthers . . . to conclude, once for all, the story of that subaltern and his mare.

—Maricones, muttered the man in the sharkskin suit.

—Wie Eulen nach Athen bringen . . .

—Maricones y nada mas.

There, on the terrace of the Reine Blanche Rudy and Frank held hands under the table, and talked about the wedding banquet: Caviar Volga, consommé Grands Viveurs, paillettes, homard au whisky, cœur de Charollais Edouard VII, perdreau rôti sur canapé . . . champagnes, Mumm 1928, Château Issan 1925 . . . —And in the ceremony we just told him to leave out that vulgar part about the bodies of man and woman clinging to each other. They said afterwards that I was quite dewy-eyed.

—Sonny's terribwy upset, so *jealous*! He trwied to do *away* with himself, did he tell you?

—How?

—By hitting himself *savagewy* in the temple with a fountain pen. But where was Big Anna? Is that one jealous too?

—No baby, Big Anna telephoned from some absurd place in Italy. They were going to drive up in some nameless person's new Renault, and they were somewhere in the Fremola valley when it didn't go right, so they opened the hood to look at the engine, and there was nothing in there but an old tire, they must just have dropped the engine right out. So they just left it there, it was the only thing they could do. In the Saint Gotthard Pass, it was the only thing they could do.

—Rudy has the sweetest flowered toilet bowl, but he lent it to someone before we found this place on the Quai d'Orsay, and they just won't give it back. They're growing something in it, and we want to *use* it.

Across the river, up Montmartre, that hill whose name had been so many times ransomed since Saint Denis showed up carrying his head, an immense lopsided Negro in epaulettes guarded a bar where a heaving hunchback played an accordion like a beast lovemaking, a girl heaved as though about to be sick, and her girl friend said enticingly to a lone stranger, —She dancing, wonderful dancer. You dance? —No. —You pay me drink? —No. —You ingliss? —No. —You swiss? —No. —You jermn? —No. —You hollandais? —No. —You dance? —No. —You pay me drink? The hunchback would go on heaving over his accordion, the girl over the bar, the huge doorman at the door, but they would not see Arny again, stumbling in from his hotel in Rochechouart with his shirt on inside out and the hem of his coat pinned up, for even Henry's Hotel was no longer standing: the day had been a sunny one, and Arny, finishing a bottle about breakfast time, put it empty in the windowsill and sat down to try to write a letter. —Dear Maude, I am just trying to figure things out . . . it commenced, and got no further, for he was soon asleep over it, his head down on his folded arms. The sunlight filled the room, and the wallpaper looked like it was going to descend and devour him. Still he slept. The sun caught the bottle, which drew its light and heat to a sharp point on the bedclothes. Arny woke to find himself engulfed in smoke. Before he could stand, it was flames. He got to the window, where there was a sign pasted, possibly by some jester: *On est prié de n'ouvrir pas ce*

fenêtre parce que le façade de l'hôtel lui compter pour se supporter . . . Arny did not read French, even when it was written by an American. With some effort he opened the window, smoke billowed out, and the façade of Henry's Hotel collapsed.

In the more fashionable part of town below, tourists continued to stroll the Grands Boulevards, marveling at French cooking, côte de veau, côte de porc, entrecôte, biftec, bistek, pommes frites, pommes frites. The two small-headed youths had brought their young ladies back to the right bank for supper, and they advanced up the Boulevard des Capucines like the horses in a chariot quadriga, stallions on the outside. —Why don't you go up ahead, Charley, see if one of *them* will approach you, pretend you're not with us, go ahead, I want to see how she does it . . . None did. They came on, spavined stiff with formality, spaved and gelded, to a small restaurant whose small sign said, *Son menu Touristique 400 francs, You Speack English*. —Hors d'oeuvres veryay pertoo, puis boeuf à la sale anglaise. —Comment, m'sr? —Boeuf à la sale anglaise. —Com*ment*? —Ici, damn it . . . He pointed to the menu and repeated. —Ahh oui, boeuf salé à l'anglaise, oui m'sr . . . —That's what I said, damn it, I mean Christ, he added when the waitress was gone, —they can't even understand their own language.

But on most hands the French were still being taken at their own evaluation. They were still regarded as the most sensitive connoisseurs of alcohol. Barbaric Americans, the barbaric English, drank to get drunk; but the French, with cultivated tastes and civilized sensibilities, drank down six billion bottles of wine that year merely to reward their refined palates: so refined, that a vast government subsidy, and a lobby capable of overthrowing cabinets, guaranteed one drink-shop for every ninety inhabitants; so cultivated, that ten per cent of the family budget went on it, the taste initiated before a child could walk, and death at nineteen months of D.T.s (cockeyed on pernod) incidental; so civilized, that one of every twenty-five dead Frenchmen had made the last leap through alcoholism.

They were still regarded as the arbiters of fine art, and Commissioner Clot of the Sureté Nationale could prove it by pointing to the walls of his office which were festooned with evidence: the best modern French painters brought such high prices, changed hands so freely, were so much easier to copy and, most ingratiatingly, had no histories, that no one need bother producing "old masters." Deluged as he was even now with the work of someone who was buying originals, making and selling (perfect) copies, and selling the originals later elsewhere, Commissioner Clot remained confident of his prey: "If forgers would content themselves with one single forgery, they would get away with it nearly every time . . ."

To the end, the world's most exemplary models of free men (as their vigorous succession of governments, and singular adroitness of tax evasion, witnessed); of thrift and provident husbandry (with three or four billion dollars' worth of the world's gold dead and interred in back yards); of sophisticated modernity (one had only to dial Odéon 8400 to get the time, the dissection of the latest minute scarcely understandable but, badly worn as it was, recorded by a famous French comedian); and still the favored child of the Church . . .

—Well *she* says she got athlete's foot in one of the baths at Lourdes, said someone entering the Louvre; as an Italian coming out observed, to no one, that the sculptures of Michelangelo he had just seen inside were placed —coll' arte ben conosciuta di tradimento francese.

Back on the left bank, the philosopher on the terrace of the Flore had been superseded by a blond woman with a fake concentration camp number tattooed on her left arm, who was supervising a discussion on Suffering. To one side, a chess game progressed with difficulty, for there was argument as to which tall piece was the king, which queen. An American who had been motoring in North Africa said, —Don't laugh, it isn't funny. We hit one. There are about thirty-five a day in Casablanca, they just don't understand machines. It cost me thirty-two thousand francs to get my car fixed, I should have hit him square. They even found his teeth in the muffler.

One end of the Deux Magots was honoring a painter who had been discovered by an American fashion magazine: until 1916, he had painted nothing but bottles. His artistic revolution came in 1930. He discovered white.

Max had left the Royale. —How does he make it, does he work somewhere? —He lives out in a suburb called Banlieu, Hannah said, —he paints pictures for a well-known painter who signs them and sells them as originals. —But they are originals . . . Twelve Arab children sold peanuts from the tops of baskets and hashish from the bottom. Someone said there was a town in France called Condom. Many of the young men wore beards. —I never did understand Italian money while I was there, it was like confetti, rarther expensive confetti . . . Hannah said she had to go to work. She read her poems aloud in a local cave, naked. —I'm studying art here on the GI bill, one of the beards said, —I've found a school where all you have to do is register. Someone recited the Malachi prophecy concerning the Papacy. —There are only seven more to go, counting this one. —Do you think Paris is worth a Mass? someone asked, clutching a book titled *Les cinq fontaines ensanglantées*. —Nostradamus predicts it will last until 3420. AD that is.

On the terrace of the Reine Blanche, the blond boy said, —Next week he's promised to take me to Paris . . . —But baby, this *is* Paris. Rudy and Frank had left, to return to their new flat overlooking the Pont d'Iéna with some of their gay party, all of whom stopped in the foyer to admire the large painting which had been a wedding present from a well-known artist. It portrayed a tall man standing, and a youth reclining at his feet, gazing up at what, upon close inspection, proved to be no more than a tear in the tall man's trousers. Then one of the guests started to open the drapes at the long windows, and was stayed immediately from it. —Because Rudy just looked and looked for months for a place just like this, overlooking the water, and the very first night we were here, standing right here in this very spot looking out at the lights and the Seine, a girl went out on the bridge and took her shoes off and jumped, right before our eyes, and that's just ruined the view ever since for both of us . . . Then Frank was excused to write a letter home to Ohio, while the rest sat down to friandises served on modern Finnish glassware, to light cigarettes from match books stamped *Rudy and Frank*, and talk of Copenhagen. —Dear Mummy, Frank wrote, in the bedroom, —I know you will understand why I want to be with him always, Mummy. I know you will understand when I tell you that I love him the way you loved Daddy . . .

—"Time is a limp . . ." Hannah read under the pavement, her words rising despumated on the smoke and desultory commingling of languages, —emmerdant . . . —les americains, alors . . . while the city might seem to try to sleep out this great gap of time, asking, —Hast thou affections? —Yes, gracious madam. —Indeed! —Not in deed, madam . . . yet have I fierce affections, and think what Venus did with Mars . . . The thirty-third person leaped from the Eiffel Tower (though unofficial figures had it nearer a hundred), this time from the 348-foot second platform, and after a twenty-year investigation the Friends of Cleopatra found that the remains in her grave, in the library garden of the Louvre, were not that queen at all, but the body of an Arab soldier killed in a Paris café brawl, and the mummy, looking like a tight bundle of rags, gone to a mass grave eighty years before, and all joy of the worm. —Et toute nue . . . quelle envahisseuse! —"Time is a limp . . ." she commenced again.

Behind the clattering bastion of saucers, the aging image of the wigless father of her country read on, and someone said she could sit like that all night, because she wore a Policeman's Friend. Someone on the terrace of the Deux Magots said a balloon race had begun that afternoon in the Bois. Someone read the message on a card from a friend touring the Holy Land, —I've just visited the Wailing Wall, and had a good cry. In the men's toilet downstairs, someone scrawled *Vive le Pape* over the urinal.

America
My contrey tears a dee
Sweat land a liberty
of D.I.C.
Landwert ar fater dye
Land of thy pildrem bride
From every mountain sides
Every dumb breed

wrote a student at the Essex County Boys Vocational and Technical High School in Newark, New Jersey.

The 00th person leaped from the Empire State Building in New York.

In San Francisco, seven strands of barbed wire were strung at the jumping-off place on the Golden Gate Bridge, which one hundred and fifty people had chosen as a point of departure from this world since the bridge was opened in 1937.

In Moscow, *Pravda* announced that Hawaiian guitar music had been banned in Russia.

Was the long winter really done? and "the fireside, the slippers and the waiting bed" no longer there to "protect the depressed person from himself . . . This line of retreat recedes as the day grows longer," the World Health Organization reported, finding, in these verdant expressions of springtime's acceleration, "the never-ending daylight difficult to bear, . . . and the glorious sun becomes a curse."

Any city that calls herself modern anticipates all her children's needs, even to erecting something high for them to jump from: the Eiffel Tower went up more than half a century ago; but everywhere the rural population must make shift to civilize itself with what it has. In southwestern France, within the neighborhood of Landes, forty-eight hours in the Easter holidays saw a woman hung in a farm barn, two men in a forest, one into a river, and another into the sea, while Deauville was already preparing to celebrate Pentecost, some seven weeks hence, by issuing five-hundred-thousand-franc chips in the casino, for the first time.

"Plage a allengas to are flag," wrote the New Jersey high-school student, hardpressed by his progressive education: "i plegance to are flag of the united states of American / An to the republican for region stands /

One machone in the viguable / witch libryt an justest for all" . . .

Libryt and justest, Los Angeles police confiscated a hydraulic press, dies, and the plastic rubber compound with which the three arrested men were counterfeiting poker chips, to be cashed in the gambling palaces across the line in Las Vegas.

In the viguable, the machone's customs agents were importuning a Hollywood movie producer for duties on a "Study by Candlelight" by Vincent van Gogh. The purchaser said it was an "original" and therefore should enter the machone duty-free, witch libryt an justest guaranteed to any genuine work of art no matter how valuable; but the guardians of the viguable demanded a healthy cut (10 per cent) of the purchase price ($50,000.00), enforcing the tariff this sweat land levels on an "imitation or copy" whose entrance threatens the livelihood of the inspiration even now ringing from every mountain sides.

Lovers of beautiful things were thick as thieves. Some of the six hundred seventy-five thousand dollars' worth of paintings stolen from a cathedral in Bardstown, Kentucky (including a *Descent of the Holy Ghost* by Jan van Eyck), were found in the trunk of a car in Chicago. Far across the sea, the axiom that aesthetic value is not enhanced by ownership was once more disproven: a caretaker of the Victoria and Albert Museum had in twenty-three years taken home nineteen hundred and sixty objets d'art hidden in his trouser-leg.

Spring came everywhere, as though for the first time.

And for the first time, civilized use was found for the Great Pyramid of Cheops in Egypt, where a native son hurled himself effectively down the slope of two-ton blocks. In South America, with seventeen dead and 4,990 in need of medical attention after Rio de Janeiro's pre-Lenten festivities, Holy Week itself moved toward a comparatively peaceful close. Three hundred lepers were reported marching on the capital city of Colombia from their colony at Rio Agua de Dios. Nine Pilgrims were trampled to death, and twenty-five injured, jamming the gates of the Shrine of Chalma in Mexico. A Baptist minister in Rocky Mount, North Carolina, burned two copies of a new revised version of the Bible because it substituted the words *young woman* for *virgin*, and a Lutheran minister said they were both wrong: the word should be *maiden*. In Chicago there was a crime every 12.5 minutes. Some chickens exploded in a town near Hanover, Germany (they had eaten carbide dropped by British troops on maneuver and drunk water). The Sheik of Kuwait asked that posters portraying the Venus de Milo not be shown in his domain, not prudish about her undraped bosom, but because Islamic law punishes the thief by chopping a hand off. The right arm of Saint Francis Xavier arrived in Japan by air. In Moscow, *Pravda* asked, Where has Noah's Ark disappeared?

In Hungary's capital, the newspaper *Esti Budapest* complained that children were not being taught to read and write in the state welfare schools: a painful confession, in the face of the strides being made in progressive education by her most redoubtable political antagonist, so far off, in the New World, where that intrepid young patriot at the Essex County Boys Vocational and Technical High School in Newark, New Jersey, soared to new heights of enthusiasm when asked to write his country's national anthem, . . . the Stears Sbangle baner.

> Oho see can you sing by the doon ter lee rise
> Who's so brightly prepaid as the twiylight least evening.
> Who saw stars and bright strip threw the merilla fite
> Where the ram what we watch where so ganley strening
> And the rock that red clar bom boosting in air
> Gave thru thur the nite that are flage was stild their
> Oo sake of that stear sparkle baner yet quake
> Over the home of the free and the land of the grave.

In a corridor outside a private room in the Z—— hospital in Budapest, two doctors talked.

—Napok óta nem aludt.

—Hetek óta.

—Seconal, Luminal, Somnadex, mindent megprobáltunk. Még amerikai szereket kényszerüsegükben.

—And you still do not sleep? said the man in the trenchcoat, inside.

—No.

—Your voice is clear, not strong perhaps but clear. He stood with his plump hands clasped behind him, looking out the window, his back to the figure on the bed. When he turned, the round flare of the trenchcoat's skirt broke unevenly in front with the weight of the pistol in the pocket. —And the eyes are clear, he went on, —not strong perhaps, but clear.

—Yes, the eyes, the voice . . . my mind is clear, everything is clear but if I, cannot sleep? Everything is clear, my mind has never been more clear, do you hear me? My mind has never worked faster or . . . or more clearly, but this . . . this . . . without sleep, thinking, thinking, but none of it . . . without sleep?

—They say it cannot last very much longer, the man in the trenchcoat said, and shrugged his shoulders slightly. The corners of his lips twitched, but otherwise his expression did not change at all.

There was no pillow on the bed, and the head lay back, the chin thrust upward and the whole profile sharp and hard in its features. The hands lay separate on the counterpane.

—Nincsen oka . . . the words of one of the doctors drifted in.

—Yes, there's no reason, it isn't reasonable that . . . there's no reason, no reason! he brought out gasping, the watery blue eyes still on the white ceiling, a vein at the temple showing itself in throbbing. —Someone laughed, he gasped after another moment, —the Hapsburg lip, yes! We did our work there, you did didn't you? You did meet Martin, in Rome?

—On the street "in broad daylight." It was the work of a moment, the man in the trenchcoat shrugged again, rounding out the circle of his skirt as he lifted the weight in the pocket, coming closer to the bed. —How loose the ring is on your finger, he said. —You will lose it.

—Don't . . . touch me, don't . . . don't be so close!

He looked down for a moment longer at the face almost full before him, the strength in the profile gone, drained out through the narrow chin. Then he returned to the window murmuring, —A pretty thing, the ring, the gold. And your family crest, in America?

—My family crest in America is . . . hahhgh, my family crest, eh? Eh, my dear fellow? Remember? remember saying "Thank God there was the gold to forge"?

—You should not try to laugh so, said the man at the window.

—Eh? eh? my family crest in America, eh? Aetas parentum pejor avis tulit nos nequiores . . . eh? We cannot insure against inherent vice. No, damn it, I'll have it through, this time. You see? You see how clear . . . how clear my mind is? But still with no reason . . . no reason, it can't . . . t . . . He had struggled to raise his head; and then he cried out rigid with terror, gripping the neatly folded counterpane at his chin. —There! there! take it . . . His voice abruptly regained peremptory control, but he spoke the three words as one, —Take-it-away . . . take-it-away . . .

The man in the trenchcoat stood over him. —But . . . what? All he saw was a delicate coil of hair on the white sheet drawn quivering up to the chin, and idly he reached to remove it.

—Yes yes that, take it away take it away . . .

With his other hand the man in the trenchcoat signaled the figures in the door, where a doctor spoke to the priest who had just entered, —Nincsen oka nem aludni . . .

—What is it, what is that smell, oil? oil? what is it, where is it?

—Of course it has not been easy, but we have arranged that a priest comes to see you.

—Yes, yes here, here he is, yes but no reason, it can't . . . no! no!

—Nézzen rá, nézzen a szemére . . .

— . . . indulgeat tibi Dominus . . .

—Do you remember? Aut castus . . . Martin? Martin? damn it, damn you, do you remember! Aut castus sit aut . . . aut . . . yes, sit aut pereat, you see? how clear my mind is? Aut castus . . . you see?

—Nincsen oka, nincsen oka, nincsen oka . . .

— . . . deliquisti per oculos . . .

—Martin! Martin! Damn it! Damn you! You see, how clear . . . do you remember? Be pure or perish, aut . . . aut pereat, do you see?

—Quidquid deliquisti per manus . . .

— . . . et pereat! do you see?

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On a caned veranda, Fuller blew a slow cloud of cigar smoke at the rising sun. From this bungalow, situated at an extreme end of what had recently become the Pilot Project, he could see the sun both rise and set, and greeted both occasions in this same manner.

But finally the sun was full in the sky, and still the usual figures did not appear, the pale young man with an arm in a sling who set his helpers a slow pace, approaching —with the vitameen pills and the littel wite boxes . . . in the morning; and at evening appearing once more, to accumulate from one after another of the bungalows, the specimens, —a peculiar thing to go about collectin, still he conduct it all very proper and decorous. Seem I recall the face of this young mahn so put upon with the littel wite boxes. Once I have a mahn in my eye, I do not forget him.

For a commotion had arisen, at daybreak, in the heart of the Pilot Project, where Doctor Fell rushed to the bungalow of his assistant.

—I knew it! I knew it! And I warned you, didn't I? Warn you not to trust that . . . that tattooed . . . I won't say it, but didn't I? Warn you? And now he's gone, he's stolen all your money and gone. He did

follow us here, he followed you here, just to steal your money. Yes, didn't I warn you? Thousands of dollars, wasn't it, didn't I warn you? What are you smiling about? Are you all right? Gordon? Gordon! Are you all right? Now you'll have to start all over again. I knew it. He knew you had trouble in the dark, didn't he, that tattooed . . . idiot, he knew it didn't he, that's how he took advantage of you, and now he's gone and stolen all your money. What are you going to do? There's nothing you can do. What are you going to do now? You'll have to start all over again. Gordon! . . . what is it? what are you smiling . . . Gordon! stop it, you can't tear off your bandages like that, you can't . . . you poor . . . Sit down! stop laughing! stop . . . tearing off your bandages, stop . . . think! You can . . . you must . . . start all over again.

There was a soft wind from the south, and the bells ringing a morning Angelus sounded all the way up the coast from Bridgetown.

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It was near noon in Rome, where peace had come, if nowhere else the night before, to the rooftops of the Vatican, with the death of the black tomcat belonging to the Cardinal librarian and archivist, and the gray mouser owned by a Monsignor Gentleman-in-waiting to the Pope. Newspapers reported that they had struggled for preeminence for some time, and their bodies were found "still locked in mortal combat" in the Belvedere Courtyard seventy feet below.

Rounding a corner into the Via Umiltà, Stanley looked a good deal more frail than he had in some years. He even glanced up nervously himself whenever he saw a reflection, for the haircut, his last concession to Mrs. Deigh, seemed to take pounds, and a year or two, from his appearance. Nonetheless, a new quality of intensity showed in his face; and if it was the despair and conquest which had raged through him in the events of the past few days, or simply the haircut, he himself might not have said immediately. But possibly the very possessed way in which he now spoke of his work, especially that part to be played so soon at Fenestrula, betrayed the depths made real to him for the first time by the experiences which had suddenly brought him into his new estate, experiences which had raised the childish masks of anxiety from the face of the resident dread, exposing conflicts he did not yet understand, posing questions he could not answer now, and he sensed, might never. The two tragedies had occurred so close that they might have been coupled; so they were, in him, and here was the unforeseen conflict in the demands of his new manhood, in that he had suffered directly from neither.

Ashamed at having run out of the place in the Via Flaminia that night, after all she had done for him, the weight of the letter to Fenestrula she'd procured for him heavy in his pocket with his show of ingratitude, he'd pulled himself together and gone back, though this time it was the woman who wept through his broken apologies. First thing, he'd got his hair cut, to please her.

It was that same day he learned of the first tragedy. With it, all of his anxieties returned redoubled, his uncertainties flared in every direction, his fears for every moment of the past and future worked upon each other, and his guilt reared through him more oppressively than it had ever. In one of the first moments of distraction, whether to confirm the one certain prospect he had left, or to confirm the apprehension he suddenly felt for even that, he opened the letter to Fenestrula himself, and found there nothing but a grocery list. At that point he tried to force himself to think of nothing, to try to understand and solve nothing, until he could find Father Martin, as he was fortunate enough to do, and he confessed everything which his evasion of just such an encounter had intensified in every detail of the past few weeks. The priest was obviously busy, and it was quickly apparent that his work concerned more than mere shepherding of Pilgrims from one shrine to another, that the questions which concerned him embraced broader problems than the confessional. Still an hour passed, possibly two, as Father Martin listened, his face losing its joviality, recovering it for a moment, returning to its lines of medieval sternness, while Stanley told him of every detail he knew since he had boarded the *Conte di Brescia*. Every detail, even to the broken crucifix, the beads rolling on the floor, the fat woman, Stanley's teeth chattered sometimes while he talked, and in the midst of narrative he might break off for some urgent incoherence like, —Sorcery, maléfice, is it from maleficiendo, is that from male de fide sentiendo, I mean does that mean is ill doing from ill thinking on matters of faith? . . . And now this last tragedy; and his work, and Fenestrula.

Father Martin listened to him, and talked to him, with an extraordinary gentleness and sternness at once, with a calmness which was never complacent, a strength of understanding (though he never said he understood), an interest which was not patent curiosity to excuse pat answers (for he gave none), and a patient sympathy with the figures Stanley spoke of, a quality which showed itself the deepest aspect of his nature, the most hard earned and rarely realized reality of maturity, which was compassion. He was an extraordinary man, as the later event might attest. The longer Stanley went on, the more frequently he returned to his work, and its importance to him. Father Martin did not come all out in encouragement, though finally he said, —We live in a world where first-hand experience is daily more difficult to reach, and

if you reach it through your work, perhaps you are not fortunate the way most people would be fortunate. But there are things I shall not try to tell you. You will learn them for yourself if you go on, and I may help you there. He arranged things for Fenestrula immediately, and Stanley left with that assurance to steady the bewilderment of his heart at everything else, a bewilderment exactly doubled, as Fenestrula became the only possible position left, when Father Martin was shot and killed in broad daylight, later in the day.

Even now, as he entered the Via Umiltà, a song danced through his bowed head and he could not shake it out. Every word brought with it the shades of anxiety in the sea washing up to him again, the shuddering decks, and even now, walking, he sought the tooth in his pocket and remembered it was gone: in an instant, the end of his tongue found the healing hole on his jaw, and someone leaped from a lime-green convertible at the curb and caught his arm.

—God damn it, I'm glad I found you. It was the man in the green silk necktie, though today, the silk was yellow. There were pictures of nuts and bolts on it. —I've got to find that girl, that kind of skinny girl you were looking for that night, I've got to find her. Where is she?

—She's dead, Stanley said clearly, and the two of them stood there for a moment looking at each other as though someone else had said it.

—Wait, she can't . . . What did you say?

—She died. Stanley spoke more faintly, and he looked down from the man's face to the nuts and bolts.

—She . . . she can't do that. I've got to find her, she won this contest for the B.V.M., just like I told her she would, she can't . . . just . . . skip out, she . . . she have an accident?

—An accident? Stanley repeated. The strain of calm in his voice, instead of breaking, had driven it down to a dumbness. He stared.

—This is serious, now listen, she . . .

—She was going to marry me.

—O.K., but a chance like this, she couldn't just . . . she would have been made.

—Made?

—I told you, I told her, she . . . we've rented a whole town for this thing. Even if they changed the story line around on us a little, they're going to make it the *Divine Comedy* by Dante now, instead of a straight life of the B.V.M., see? So maybe she'll only have a bit-part at the end, but that's all right. The whole thing builds up to that anyway, see? Where he meets her at the end. I haven't read the script yet, but they got a shooting script all ready for this thing, see? This *Divine Comedy* by Dante . . .

—She's dead, Stanley insisted suddenly, then was silent again.

—But . . . what happened? What happened?

—She died, she . . . she had a place on her lip, a sore, a . . . and it got infected, it was something like . . . staphylococcic infection, and it happened just like that almost, in a couple of days, she . . .

—How'd she pick up something like that just like that, she . . .

—She wasted away, so quickly as though she . . . she had no will to live, and she . . . she said, Stanley shuddered, —from kissing Saint-Peter-in-the-Boat, she said, For some fishes, the sea, the sea . . .

—Come on, get hold of yourself, you can't . . . The man took his shoulder, nodded and muttered, —Yeah, she . . . God damn it. He looked at Stanley, who stood staring dumbly at the pictures on the silk necktie. —And . . . God damn it, we've got it all tied in, this contest, we've got it all tied in with this canonization that's coming up, and this Assumption thing, all this God-damned publicity for this contest, God damn it, she was the B.V.M. incarnate, she had it in the bag. Now it's too late to do a God-damned thing. Then as Stanley's eyes remained fixed on a brown silk nut, he took Stanley's shoulder and said, —Christ. Come on. Come in and have a drink. We'll bounce back.

—No, I have to leave. I have to get a train.

—Come on in for one drink. Christ. Look, this little jerk in the car with me, he's this ex-king who wants his God-damned throne back, I've got to have lunch with him. But come on in for a drink with us. You can meet the little jerk. It's lousy luck. You'll bounce back . . . Then he looked down at the pavement between himself and Stanley. —God damn it, he said, —I had a friend, a guy who was in college with me, he just got killed in a plane accident, he used to say the whole thing is like this handkerchief and this cannon ball falling in this vacuum, they fall the same speed, you know? And every God damn place you go, and every God damn thing you do, it's still this same God damn handkerchief and this same God damn cannon ball falling in this same God damn vacuum.

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On the afternoon train, Stanley saw Don Bildow too late to avoid him. Don Bildow had a big box under his arm. He stayed Stanley for long enough to tell him he was on his way to Paris, and ask Stanley where he was going, but gave him no chance to answer. —That was lucky, he went on, —the boy from the tailor just

got to the train with this in time, this is my new suit and I almost missed the train. I'm going to put it on before we get to the Swiss border so I won't have to pay duty.

—Yes but, excuse me, Stanley said, possibly the first time he had ever spoken to Bildow with such sharp dismissal, —I'm tired. Excuse me.

—What's the matter? You, I'm surprised you're not staying in Rome, for that thing tomorrow? The canonization of that saint?

The train roared northward. Second Class was no dirtier than most trains, but Don Bildow kept on his spotted threadbare old suit, dirty shirt and tie, until the last bit of Lago Maggiore disappeared from the passing landscape. Then he went into the men's room, and got out of his clothes. He washed as best he could, though his plastic-rimmed glasses kept falling down into the basin. Then he put on a new Italian part-silk shirt from a small rolled package in his pocket. All his property: his money, passport, testosterone tablets and contraceptives, and a few letters, was folded into a copy of a stiff-covered magazine on the floor. He had got a new yellow and brown tie looped round his collar, when he realized he must dispose of the evidence of the old clothes somehow. The window would not open, so one by one with his new sleeve rolled up, he pushed them down through the hopper. By the time he reached his jacket, it went through quite easily, for by then the hopper was fairly clean. Then he opened the box from the tailor in Rome. All it contained was a sailor suit made for a boy of seven, with short pants. Nonetheless the hand stitching was fine, the double seams drawn with exquisite care. There was even a little round hat with ribbons, and the name of the first Italian dreadnought, *Dante Alighieri*, embroidered in gold round the band.

—Maybe . . . he gasped, looking at it. Then he put on his glasses and looked at it. —Stanley, maybe Stanley would . . . have something . . . But his friend had got off some time before, at Milan, to change for Fenestrula and he stood unsteadily on the shifting floor, holding the blouse at a rolled-sleeved arm's length, and staring at it through the plastic rimmed lenses. The whole outfit was made as carefully as any tailoring for a real grownup, he could see, even in that light, as his train roared toward the Simplon.

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In the next morning's light, the church looked much smaller than he had imagined it would be, and different than Stanley had pictured it the night before, when he arrived in the dark and walked up to look at it immediately after he'd got his few possessions settled in a pension room in the town. The whole town was different than he'd imagined in the darkness. The masses and shadows were gone, and he found nothing to suggest what they might have been. In one entirely different direction from where he thought he had walked, he came upon what he had taken for an enclosed, dimly lighted and possibly private chapel of some sort: it turned out to be a public convenience. And the church itself was a good deal smaller, its single spire a good deal more modest against the vast consciousness of the lighted sky, than undefined shadows had raised it at night, and as, once he'd seen it in daylight, he realized he would never see it again.

The walls of the church were heavy, and furrowed apart in places. At one end near the ground, he could see the rubble core.

Stanley was dressed, that morning, in his best suit, the blue one, and the second time worn. He walked with hands clasped low in front of him; for, putting on the trousers, he'd been dismayed to find moth holes round about the crotch. He wore a white shirt, and a red necktie, and there was nothing, absolutely nothing, the way he had thought it would be.

He came back to his room from early Mass, where he had also got a look at the gigantic organ (for it was the gift of an American), and confirmed his arrangement to play it later in the morning, and also, or rather first off, sought the intervention of that saint still to be rung in that morning on behalf of three souls equally dear, and equally beautiful.

And it was those he thought of, and not the work he thought of, as he stood alone in his room and looked at the work, which was all that was left. He looked at it with sudden malignity, as though in that moment it had come through at the expense of everything, and everyone else, and most terribly, of each of those three souls: but there was this about him, standing, running a hand through his short hair, pulling up his belt, and staring at that work, which since it was done, he could no longer call his own: even now, it was the expense of those three he thought of, and not of his own.

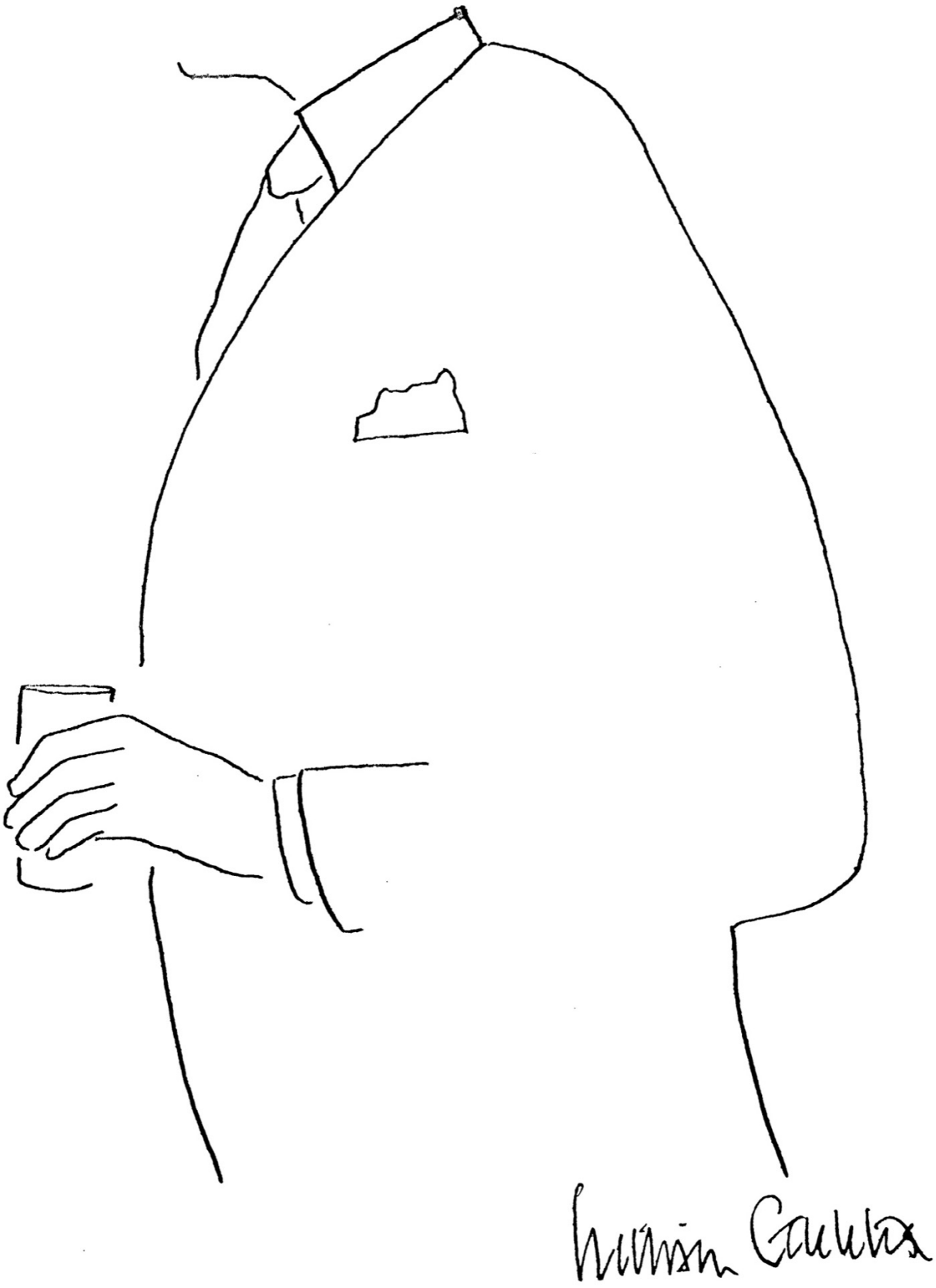
He was standing as though he expected something to move; and nothing did. Nothing moved in the room, until a chill shook his shoulders, and he turned to look behind him, his lips ready to speak, but no one was there. Nonetheless, he was still standing, poised, half turned, waiting, when the bells released him, and he quickly gathered up the pages he needed, and hurried down to the street.

He carried them clasped before him, and did not look up until he had reached the church itself. There he explained he had come early, to play through this one part he would play later, explained as best he could, that is, with his hands, the pages, pointing to the organ, to himself (the red necktie), for this priest

understood no English, and spoke to him in Italian, a continuous stream of it as he conducted Stanley to the keyboard, leading him with a hand on his arm, then on his shoulder, and Stanley came on head bowed, closely attending the words he did not understand, as he seated himself and touched the keys, pulling out one stop and another as he listened, and why the priest shook his head and pushed two of them back as he spoke, Stanley did not understand (and he pulled them back out when the priest was gone, apparently in a hurry to be off somewhere before the next service called him back). —Prego, faccia attenzione, non usi troppo i bassi, le note basse. La chiesa è così vecchia che le vibrazioni, capisce, potrebbero essere pericolose. Per favore non bassi . . . e non strane combinazioni di note, capisce . . .

When he was left alone, when he had pulled out one stop after another (for the work required it), Stanley straightened himself on the seat, tightened the knot of the red necktie, and struck. The music soared around him, from the corner of his eye he caught the glitter of his wrist watch, and even as he read the music before him, and saw his thumb and last finger come down time after time with three black keys between them, wringing out fourths, the work he had copied coming over on the *Conte di Brescia*, wringing that chord of the devil's interval from the full length of the thirty-foot bass pipes, he did not stop. The walls quivered, still he did not hesitate. Everything moved, and even falling, soared in atonement.

He was the only person caught in the collapse, and afterward, most of his work was recovered too, and it is still spoken of, when it is noted, with high regard, though seldom played.



AFTERWORD

He had been a floorwalker at Bloomingdale's. That was one rumor. He was presently writing under the *nom de plume* of Thomas Pynchon. That was another. He had had to pay Harcourt, Brace to publish *The*

Recognitions, and then, disappointed and peeved by its reception, he had the unsold stock destroyed. He died of dysentery or some similarly humiliating and touristy disease at forty-three and had been buried stoneless-in-Spain under a gnarled tree. Among the more absurd was the allegation that he had worked as a machinist's assistant on the Panama Canal and served as a soldier of fortune for a small war in Costa Rica. He had no visible means. What he did do was traipse. He became a character in books which bore a vagrant's name. No. He worked for the army and wrote the texts of field manuals. No. He scripted films. They told you/showed you how to take apart and clean your rifle. A rather unkind few suggested he had been a fact-checker at *The New Yorker*. Not at all, argued others, he was born a freelancer. And became a ghost who moved corporate mouths while gathering material for a novel he would write one day about America and money. When John Kuehl and Steven Moore edited a collection of essays about him, the honored author turned artist and, for the title page, self-drew himself suitably suited and bearing a highball glass. The figure has no head.

In 1976, when his second novel, *J R*, won the National Book Award, his admirers, confused by William Gaddis's previous anonymity (very like the chary pronouns above), by the too sensibly priced fumé blanc, and by the customary babble at celebrational parties, frequently miscaught his name, often congratulating a fatter man. Even *The New York Times*, at one low point, attributed his third novel, *Carpenter's Gothic*, to that self-same and similarly sounding person. Yes. Perhaps William Gaddis is not B. Traven after all, or J. D. Salinger, Ambrose Bierce, or Thomas Pynchon. Perhaps he is me.

When I was congratulated, I was always gracious. When I was falsely credited, I was honored by the error.

These mistaken identifications turned out to belong to William Gaddis's book where reality already had been arrested; for what can be true in a world made of fakes, misappropriations, fraud, and flummery? Only this: that, if we had two doorsteps, on one would stand a hypocritical holy man, on another a charlatan dressed as a statesman; that among our most revered relics, if we had some, we'd find out our local saint's pickled thumb belonged originally to a penniless neighborhood drunk, that our museum's most esteemed painting was a forgery, that the old coins we'd collected were inept counterfeits, and the fine car we'd just bought a real steal. What Rainer Maria Rilke wrote of Auguste Rodin is certainly true of the man in that headless sketch: "Rodin was a solitary before fame found him, and afterward perhaps he became still more solitary. For fame is finally only the sum of all those misunderstandings which gather round a new name." In our oddly clamorous yet silent times, to be a famous author is to be unknown all over the world. Similarly, *The Recognitions*, the work which wrapped William Gaddis in the cloud of its carefully adumbrated confusions, remains widely heard about, reverently spoken of, yet narrowly read. It seems to lead, like an entombed pharaoh, an underground life, presumably surrounded by other precious things and protected by a curse.

Like Malcolm Lowry's great dark work, *Under the Volcano*, *The Recognitions* needed devotees who would keep its existence known until such time as it could be accepted as a classic; but a cult following is not the finest one to have, suggesting something, at best, beloved only by special tastes—in this case, the worry was, a wacko book with wacko fans. In fact, a cult did form, a cult in the best old sense, for it was made of readers whose consciousness had been altered by their encounter with this book; who had experienced more than its obvious artistic excellence, and responded to its neglect not merely with the resigned outrage customarily felt by those who read well and widely and wish that justice be accorded good books; it was composed of those who had felt to the centers of themselves how much this novel was indeed a recognition and could produce that famous shock: how it revealed the inner workings of the social world as though that world were a nickel watch; how it combined the pessimisms of its perceptions with the affirmations of the art it, at the same time, altered and advanced; more, how its author, though new to the game, had cared enough about himself, his aims, his skill, to create greatness against the grain, and, of course, against the odds.

Begun in 1945 without really knowing what or why, and continued in bursts from 1947, *The Recognitions* was published in the middle of the fifties, a decade so flushed with success it could not feel the lines of morbidity which were its bones. A typesetter, it's said, refused to continue work on the text and sought advice from his priest, who told him he was right to desist. Naturally the novel, when it appeared, won an award for its design.

Its arrival was duly newsed in fifty-five papers and periodicals. Only fifty-three of these notices were stupid. But the reviewers' responses to the book confirmed its character and quality, for they not only declared it unreadable and wandering and tiresome and confused, they participated in the very chicaneries the text documented and dramatized. It was too much to expect: that they should read and understand and praise a fiction they were fictions in. You, too, can let your present copy rest unread on some prominent table. A few critics confessed they could not reach the novel's conclusion except by skipping. Well, how

many have actually arrived at the last page of Proust or completed *Finnegans Wake*? What does it mean to finish *Moby-Dick*, anyway? Do not begin this book with any hope of that. This is a book you are meant to befriend. It will be your lifelong companion. You will end only to begin again.

It was wrong in someone young to be so ambitious, the reviewers thought; the result was certain to be pretentious, full of the strain of standing on tiptoe. If the author works at his work, the reader may also have to, whereas when a writer whiles away both time and words, the reader may relax and gently peruse. Well, *The Recognitions* will lie heavily in any snoozer's lap. (What is the weight of the one you are holding? You can compare it to the 956 pages of the first edition, which comes into the ring at 2 lbs. 7 ozs., in order to discover how much of its substance has been leached out. Add an oz. for this intro.)

Well, it was ambitious certainly, dense, lengthy, complex. Its author is a romantic in that regard, clearly concerned to create a masterpiece; for how else, but by aiming, is excellence to be attained? It's not often one begins a sandcastle on a lazy summer morning—pattybaking by the blue lagoon—only to—by gosh!—achieve—thanks to a series of sandy serendipities—an Alhambra with all its pools by afternoon. The book was about bamboozlers, the slowest wits could see that, and therein saw themselves, and therewith withdrew. This was not to be a slow evening's soporific entertainment, it was to be their indecent exposure.

They cribbed from the dust jacket. They stole from any review appearing earlier. They got things (by the thousands!) wrong. They condemned the subject, although they didn't know what it was; they loathed its learning, which they said was show-off; they objected to its tone, though they failed to catch it; they rejected with fury its point of view, whose criminal intent they somehow suspected. They fell all over one another praising Joyce, a writer who, they said, was the real McCoy, whereas . . . yet had they been transported to that earlier time, they would have been first in line to shower Ireland's author with deaf Dublin's stones.

Many think that it is reviewing which needs to be reformed, but I believe the culprit is the species, which surrounds itself with lies, and calls the lies culture, the way squirrels build their nests of dead twigs and fallen leaves, then hide inside. In any case, as the German philosopher Lichtenberg observed, when reader's brow and book collide, it isn't always the book that is lacking brains.

Following the hubble-bubble of its initial reception, *The Recognitions* was left in a lurch of silence, except for those happy yet furious few who had found this fiction . . . about the nature, meaning, and value of "the real thing" . . . found *it* to be the real thing. The rumor was that William Gaddis himself had published a pamphlet excoriating the reviewers of his book and citing their malfeasances one by one. The truth, when it lies down among lies, such as those falsehoods, slanders, and distortions with which I salted the opening of this intro (for "yes" becomes "no" in oleo), takes on their odor, and is soon not distinguishable from them. Gaddis did check facts for a living once. He did banana-boat out of Central America. It would scarcely matter except that contexts corrupt. Bedfellows bite. Turncoats will steal from their own pockets and betray even linings. *Cozenage est une dangereux voisinage*. Actually a pseudonymous New Yorker named Jack Green published three articles on the qualities of the book hacks who had inflicted their skills upon *The Recognitions*. He called it, rather directly, "Fire the Bastards!" and the Dalkey Archive Press has recently reissued it in fine form. There, in addition to much of the data I have already used, I learned that one of these gentlemen attributed the book to William Gibson.

So a slender ring of fans kept the work afloat for the next twenty years, but its neglect, I think, was due to factors having little to do with its alleged difficulty or the dubious distinction of having a cult following. If you are to remain known while writing books (for the books themselves are likely to have a mayfly's life), you must either court the media and let publicity be your pimp, like Truman Capote, or cling like old ivy to the walls of the Academy, passing your person around from campus to campus like a canapé on a party tray. One way or another, you are thus able to appear in public often and collect the plaudits of hands which might as well clap since they are otherwise empty. You read your book with histrionic polish, or display a practiced wit, and your increasing ease, on talk shows. You review. Yes, you do, you descend to your opponents' depths, where you'll be seen as just another shark. You sympose. You give interviews. All of it adding to the stuff about and by you which a student, a critic, a scholar must consult. For you are as large as your library's catalog entries. Meanwhile you instruct beginners on how to be a genius, giving selected students a professional boost, and forming around your tutorial self, over the years, growing rings of gratitude: your career likewise enlarging as steadily as the trunk of a weedy tree.

William Gaddis, a.k.a. Gibson, a.k.a Green, a.k.a. Gass, did none of these customary career-enhancing things, remaining, as the politicians' escape-phrase always conveniently claims, "out of the loop." Out of the network. Not in the swim. Nor did he write a new book every fortnight just to prove how easy it is, for we all know how easy it is, and how desirable, for that way you can continue to feed your new friends what they are used to, and there are publisher's parties to go to, and more and more nice notices, even raves, since now aren't we all old friends? We must remember that the same hacks who condemn, for a price also

praise.

Silence became his mode, exile (in effect) his status, cunning in scraping by his strategy, while compiling data and constructing other people's niggling or nefarious plots, building another long book out of our business world's obsession with money, manipulation, and deception, composing a hymn to Horatio Alger, music made of inane, conniving, sly, deceitful speech. *J R* did OK at the store for a time, and gathered in the National Book Award, but I think it was less read than *The Recognitions*, less enjoyed, and could not produce, of course, the same surprise. Furthermore, although clearly created by a similar sensibility, and expressing a common point of view, *J R* was as different from the earlier novel as Joyce from James. But do not put down what you have to go to *J R* yet, even if it is almost as musical as *Finnegans Wake*, a torrent of talk and Tower of Babble, a slumgullion of broken phrases and incomplete—let's call them—thoughts; because there is plenty to listen to here; because we must always listen to the language; it is our first sign of the presence of a master's hand; and when we do that, when we listen, it is because we have first pronounced the words and performed the text, so when we listen we hear, hear ourselves singing the saying, and now we are real readers, we are participating in the making, we are moving the tune along the line, because no one who loves literature can follow these motions, these sentences, half sentences, of William Gaddis, very far without halting and holding up their arms and outcrying hallelujah there is something good in this gosh awful god empty world.

Which is almost the whole point of what we do.

And accounts for the purity of Gaddis's artistic intentions, and the reality of the work, for he actually makes grace abounding out of fakes astounding. Furthermore, the progression from the concerns of *The Recognitions* to those of *J R* is completely reasonable. *The Recognitions*, indeed, tackles the fundamental questions: What is real, and where can we find it in ourselves and the things we do? But a generation later there are no fundamental questions to be posed. *J R* creates a thoroughly descendental world. It is a world of mouth, machination, and money. A few reviewers of *J R*, more perceptive than most, longed for the spiritual struggle of the earlier book, but—reader—just look around: that struggle has been lost. The large has been smothered by the small. Be petty enough and the world may make you a Prince. The cheat, not the meek, has inherited the earth.

Yes, we must follow the instructions we are given at the conclusion of *J R*:

> . . . remember this here book that time where they wanted me to write about success and like free enterprise and all hey? And like remember where I read you on the train that time where there was this big groundswill about leading this here parade and entering public life and all? So I mean listen I got this neat idea hey, you listening? Hey? You listening . . . ?

Then, if we are properly obedient, we shall have scarcely reached the second page of *The Recognitions* before we have the hearing of a paragraph like this, which introduces us to Frank Sinisterra, at the moment masquerading as a ship's doctor, but a counterfeiter by trade:

> The ship's surgeon was a spotty unshaven little man whose clothes, arrayed with smudges, drippings, and cigarette burns, were held about him by an extensive network of knotted string. The buttons down the front of those duck trousers had originally been made, with all of false economy's ingenious drear deception, of coated cardboard. After many launderings they persisted as a row of gray stumps posted along the gaping portals of his fly. Though a boutonnière sometimes appeared through some vacancy in his shirt-front, its petals, too, proved to be of paper, and he looked like the kind of man who scrapes foam from the top of a glass of beer with the spine of a dirty pocket comb, and cleans his nails at table with the tines of his salad fork, which things, indeed, he did. He diagnosed Camilla's difficulty as indigestion, and locked himself in his cabin.

I particularly like the double *t*s with which our pleasure begins, but perhaps you will prefer the ingenious use of the vowel *i* in the sentence with which it ends ("which things, indeed, he did. He diagnosed Camilla's difficulty as indigestion, and locked himself in his cabin"), or the play with *d* and *c* in the same section. But these are rich streets and should be dawdled down, not simply to admire the opening alliteration, but to enjoy the fact that this paper money man is made of paper, or to visualize the gesture, as suitable as a finger's, and certainly as unclean, which sweeps his pint's excessive foam away, or above all to appreciate the hidden pun that runs from "foam" to "comb," contriving the de-combing of Frank's beer's head.

No great book is explicable, and I shall not attempt to explain this one. An explanation—indeed, any explanation—would defile it, for reduction is precisely what a work of art opposes. Easy answers,

convenient summaries, quiz questions, annotations, arrows, highlight lines, lists of its references, the numbers of its sources, echoes, and influences, an outline of its design—useful as sometimes such helps are—nevertheless very seriously mislead. Guidebooks are useful, but only to what is past. Interpretation replaces the original with the lamest sort of substitute. It tames, disarms. "Okay, I get it," we say, dusting our hands, "and that takes care of that." "At last I understand Kafka" is a foolish and conceited remark.

Too often we bring to literature the bias for "realism" we were normally brought up with, and consequently we find a work like *The Recognitions* too fanciful, obscure, and riddling; but is reality always clear and unambiguous? is reality simple and not complex? does it unfold like the pages of a newspaper, or is the unfolding more like that of a road map—difficult to get spread out, difficult to read, difficult to redo? and is everything remembered precisely, and nothing repeated, and are people we know inexplicably lost from sight for long periods, only to pop up when we least expect them? Of course; the traditional realist's well-scrubbed world where motives are known and actions are unambiguous, where you can believe what you are told and where the paths of good and evil are as clearly marked as highways, that world is as contrived as a can opener; for all their frequent brilliance, and all the fondness we have for these artificial figures, their clever conversations and fancy parties, the plots they circle in like carousel'd horses, to call them and the world they decorate "real" is to embrace a beloved illusion. The pages of *The Recognitions* are more nearly the real right thing than any of Zola's or Balzac's.

There's no need for haste, the pages which lie ahead of you will lie ahead of you for as long as you like them to; it is perfectly all right if some things are at first unclear, and if there are references you don't recognize; just go happily on; we don't stay in bed all day, do we? just because we've mislaid our appointment calendar. No, we need to understand this book—enjoy its charm, its wit, its irony, its erudition, its sensuous embodiment—the way we understand a spouse we have lived with and listened to and loved for many years through all their nights. Persons deserving such devotion and instinctual appreciation are rare; rarer still are the works which are worth it.

It may be helpful, however, to place *The Recognitions* in the center of all stories where it belongs, in order to get a grip on the novel's basic strategy. First, a model archetypal plot:

A baby boy is born. In former times, before equalization was achieved, the parents in our history would have been important—they were gods and goddesses, heroes and their consorts, kings and queens—because what happened to them had to be significant not just for themselves but for the whole of their society. So this child will be an heir, and, as Joseph Campbell has pointed out, he will have a thousand faces. Signs of several sorts—omens, portents, the prognostications of soothsayers—warn the father (the King) that the birth of this son endangers him, so the King has his child taken away and exposed to the harshness of the wilderness where he will surely perish, but perish at Nature's hand and not at the hand of his father (a sophistry our signers of death warrants still practice). However, if the father in question is as forthright as Chronos (or Saturn, if you like), he simply swallows his rival. The first recognition belongs to the parents, and it is that the new generation will one day assume the position and powers now possessed by their elders. Although passing away is as important as coming to be for the health of the species, it is rarely welcomed, and is usually postponed as long as possible.

At the time the infant is borne off, if it does not already possess a mark of identity it is inadvertently given one. Oedipus, you recall, had his feet pinned as though he were being trussed like a bird for the spit. Whether left on a doorstep, set adrift in a basket, or abandoned on a hillside, the child is found by a totem animal and raised as one (Romulus and Remus are brought up by wolves), or he is rescued by a shepherd or a fisherman who becomes his foster parent. It is in this period of exile, during which the boy grows up in a foreign land, that the second recognition occurs, either through a slowly increasing inner conviction that he is "other" and important and has a destiny, or because, at some point, his foster parents tell him something of his history. This is our "hero's" first recognition, and it is primarily negative; put crudely, he says: I am not a wolf; I am not a bear; I am not of peasant stock. "What am I doing in Akron, Ohio," Hart Crane wonders; "Utah," Ezra Pound insists, "is not my middle-name."

Soon he sets out in search of his true homeland and his real identity. This part of the tale is in the form of an odyssey: a lengthy journey during which the young man overcomes a series of obstacles which test his character, certify his skills, and establish his stardom, as do the labors of Hercules, or any *Wanderjahr*. His final trial, it turns out, is usually the solution to some sort of conundrum, and is a spiritual or intellectual trial rather than a physical one (Oedipus solves the riddle of the Sphinx).

Much later, after Oedipus has been rescued from his fate by his foster parents, and has wandered through the world in search of his true home (his Odyssey), he arrives in a place he has no memory of, and by chance (that is, by Fate) encounters the King, his father. His maimed feet determine his identity, the King is appropriately alarmed, and in a kind of contest (the agon) the son defeats him, and receives his reward, the hand of the Queen. This recognition could be mutual, and the contest, consequently, clear-eyed, but the

recognition is often put off, as in Sophocles's version of the Oedipus story, until many years have passed. The first arc of our narrative is now complete. It begins with a boy's birth and ends with his marriage, or comus; hence it is called a comedy.

The second part of the story repeats the first but from the father's point of view, for marriage means a new rival will soon appear upon the scene. If we stay with our original protagonist, there follows for him a period of peace during which time he establishes his rule and prospers along with his people. Meanwhile, in another country, his banished child grows restless and continues his searches. It is important to realize that from one point of view our "hero" is precisely that, from another point of view he is an unredeemable villain, and that the crimes of banishment and usurpation are repeated one generation after another without remission. The story's second arc ends, then, with the death of the hero at the hands of the son he has wronged, and it is called, of course, a tragedy.

However, a hero who is overthrown and dies is hardly a hero, especially when, as so often happens, he is torn to pieces or sacrificed or eaten. Clearly, he would not have lost the contest, the battle, the election, the war, the woman, unless he was betrayed, as Germany was by the Treaty of Versailles, as the South was in the Civil War, as every loser always is: by bad officiating, rotten luck, corporate scheming, political cabals, racial plots. We may have dropped the ball, but we did so because we were stabbed in the back. So there is usually a Judas or two hanging around, waiting to do some dirty deed, an Iago with a hankie up his sleeve. We can disloyally switch our allegiance to the new ruler: the king is dead, after all, so long live the king; but if we remain with our original character, what have we left but scattered bits of a disgraced corpse or a sealed tomb to pass a lifetime's vigil by? Well, the bits get put back together one way or another; the hero rolls away the stone which stoppers his grave; the followers of the betrayed and crucified king recognize him as restored and alive; whereupon, like Dionysius (his history now complete), he is pulled from the plot like the first gray hair, his name is given to a constellation, and he goes to dwell in the company of the gods.

And we—you and I—insofar as we are able to identify with the nature and life of this heroic figure, will overcome death and be redeemed as he was; for he, and the ups and downs of his career, merely embody the uncertain cycle of the seasons. "In the juvescence of the year came Christ the tiger."

There is another section of this tale which might be mentioned, although it tends to be heretical in its content, popular rather than ensconced in any canon. While the hero of one cycle is enjoying his Queen and ruling his kingdom, you remember, the son (the hero in another version) was in exile and on his odyssey. Similarly, when the King is slain, and a new King assumes command, the dead lord can be imagined as living in exile in the country of death—in the underworld—and there he will undertake another trip, and face other trials, while awaiting his resurrection. The Christian tradition describes a "harrowing of Hell": a struggle between the crucified Christ and the Lord of Hell—there, like two cocks, in the pit itself. And this phase will possess its own set of recognitions.

Poets, novelists, mythmakers, rarely try to narrate the entire tale but usually will decide to focus on one element of the story, and elaborate it (odysseys provide many such opportunities), or they will alter the ontology of the enterprise, as Sophocles does, making not action but understanding the central theme of the cycle. Because Oedipus's deeds have been so heedlessly performed, he blinds himself, once his eyes have been opened to what he's done, with a brooch taken from his lover-mother's garments. This physical blindness is, of course, a prerequisite to his now powerful inner sight.

Suppose, now, I reenact this tale, furnishing it with details which will suit my place and time and special interests, as if none of its features had ever been seen before, as if none of its acts had ever been performed, as if none of its aims had, in any previous place or period, been realized. My rituals would be make-believe; they would be counterfeits; and their effects would depend upon the suppression of the original "once upon a time," and its replacement by my later sly reenactment. My story would be a usurper unless it recognized its kinship with all earlier versions, and it would risk overthrow the moment acknowledgment of that kinship were forced upon it. The long and unique quotation from Sir James Frazer's seminal book *The Golden Bough*, which Gaddis inserts in *The Recognitions*, permits us to recognize (although we have now known it for some time) that the practice of scapegoating is ancient and happens often and has seasonal motives. If crucifying a monkey or a rat has an air of superstitious desperation, what quality are we to assign its Christian counterpart?

There are suppressions and recognitions, then, which are inherent in the traditional myths and tales which anthropologists turn up, and which constantly occur as a part of the mechanism of their unfolding (among the suitors surrounding Penelope, it is only Ulysses's dog who recognizes him in his beggar's rags); and there are recognitions which the characters in this novel experience, too; as well as those which we readers will have, as we pursue its complicated course, a course whose origins it constantly alludes to in the manner of "The Waste Land"—references which make for much of its richness. Among these "epiphanies" is

that special one of which I have already spoken, namely of what it is to be a genuine work of art, and what, being genuine, "touches the origins of design with recognition."

We shall live for no reason. Then die and be done with it. What a recognition! What shall save us? Only the knowledge that we have lived without illusion, not excluding the illusion that something will save us. For the temple of our pretenses shall come down at the end in a murderous fall of its stones (just as it does at the conclusion of this novel), not from the brute blind strength of a Samson shoving great pillars out of plumb, but from an art, a music, realized in the determined performance of an organ whose stops have been pulled out to play, at last, with a reckless disregard for the risks its reverberations run it, till every stone in the vicinity trembles.

The reviews which struck William Gaddis and his book were indeed stones from an old order, but, as *The Recognitions* concludes, such genuine work "is still spoken of, when it is noted, with high regard, though seldom played."

So turn the page . . . and change that unfortunate frequency.

—William H. Gass
1993
Washington University, St. Louis

Los reconocimientos

William Gaddis

Prólogo de William H. Gass Traducción de Juan Antonio Santos

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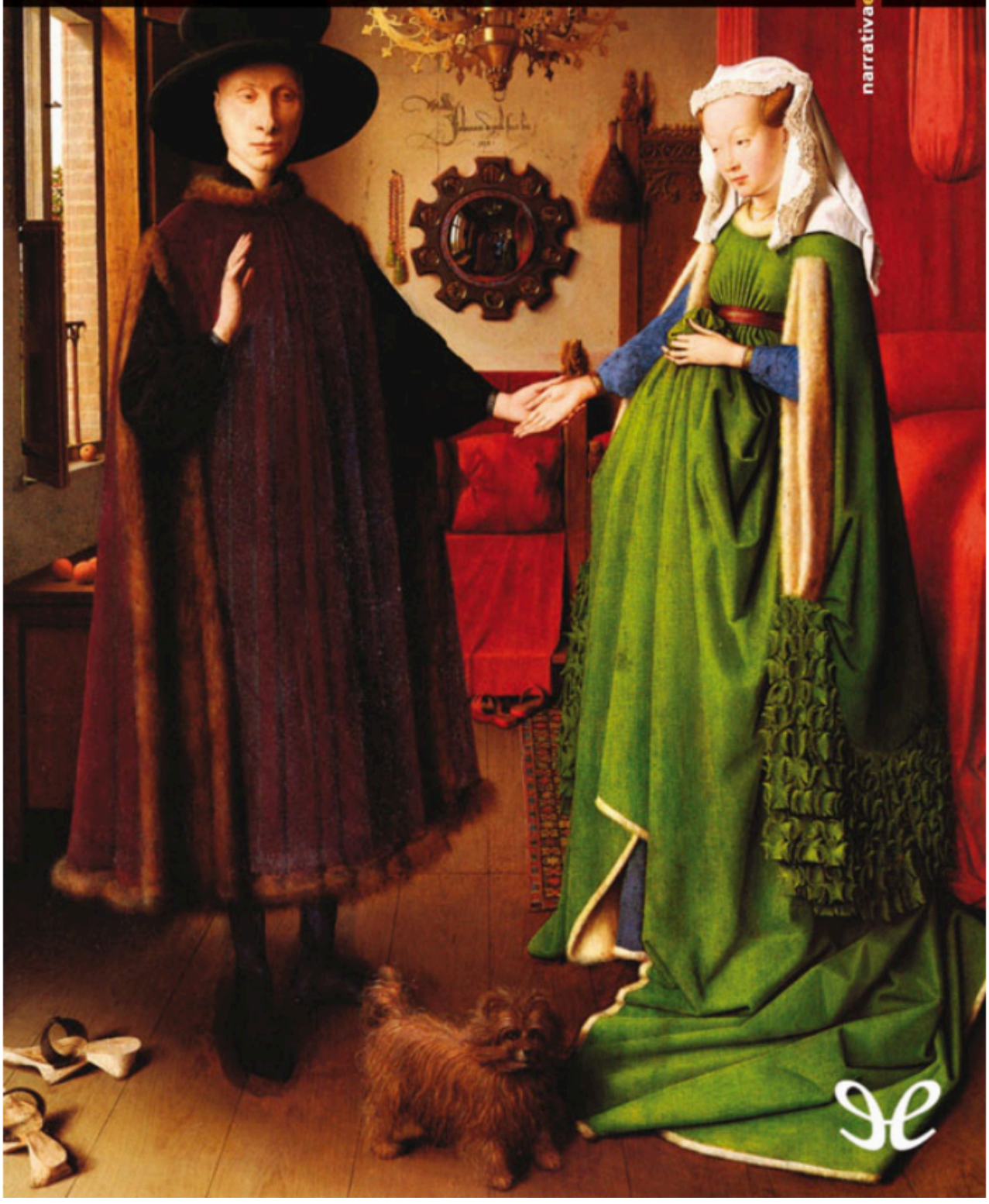

Muchos son los elementos que hacen de «Los reconocimientos» una obra capital de la literatura estadounidense del siglo XX. Todo resulta abrumador en esta novela descomunal —descomunal en todos los sentidos que puedan imaginarse—: tanto el alcance de la ambición que demostraba Gaddis en la que era su ópera prima, como, sobre todo, el hecho de poseer el talento necesario para consumarla. Las obsesiones propias del universo narrativo del autor ya aparecen aquí en todo su furibundo esplendor: la crisis del arte como dominio privilegiado para representar la vida, la tensión entre lo auténtico y lo reproducible, y el imperio omnímodo de los farsantes y lo mercantil. Wyatt Gwyon, protagonista de la novela, es un pintor que aún cree en el sentido del arte en un siglo en el que éste parece estar siendo desplazado, eclipsado, vaciado; pero paradójicamente Gwyon es incapaz de crear nada nuevo u original. Su habilidad reside en copiar minuciosamente a los maestros flamencos, y a ese gesto interminable y reiterado, el de construir una realidad desde el préstamo, entrega su existencia: la suya es la tragedia de quien no encuentra más salida que la restauración de un clasicismo que ya no cree posible.

«Los reconocimientos» es una de las obras maestras de Gaddis y, como han señalado escritores de la talla de William H. Gass o Jonathan Franzen, anticipó gran parte de la mejor ficción literaria que estaba por venir (Pynchon, Heller, DeLillo, Foster Wallace, etc.). Objeto del más justificado de los cultos, así como de enconadas polémicas —es célebre el caso de Jack Green y sus artículos incendiarios defendiendo el libro—, esta novela cimentó la grandeza y la leyenda de un escritor que nunca dejaría de entregar obras de altura, y que constituye una tradición en sí mismo.

William Gaddis

Los reconocimientos

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PENGUIN CLASSICS

WILLIAM GADDIS

The Recognitions

INTRODUCCIÓN

Había sido jefe de sección en
Bloomingdale's
. Ése era uno de los rumores. En la actualidad, escribía bajo el pseudónimo de Thomas Pynchon. Ese era otro. Había tenido que pagarle a la editorial Harcourt Brace para que publicara *Los reconocimientos* y después, decepcionado y molesto por la recepción del libro, había hecho que destruyeran los ejemplares que no se habían vendido. Había muerto de disentería o alguna otra enfermedad humillante y turística a los cuarenta y tres años y lo habían enterrado bajo un árbol retorcido, en España, sin ninguna lápida. Uno de los más absurdos era el que sostenía que había trabajado como asistente de maquinista en el canal de Panamá y que había participado como mercenario en una pequeña guerra en Costa Rica. No parecía tener ninguna fuente de ingresos. Lo que hacía era vagar de un sitio a otro. Se convirtió en un personaje de libros firmados por un vagabundo. No. Trabajó para el ejército y se dedicaba a escribir los textos de los manuales de campo. No. Hizo guiones para películas que contaban/mostraban cómo desmontar y limpiar una escopeta. Algunos, con muy poca amabilidad, sugerían que había estado empleado en *The New Yorker,* donde su labor era comprobar que lo que contaban los artículos era cierto. Para nada, decían otros, es un autónomo innato. Y se convirtió en un fantasma que se infiltró en varias corporaciones mientras reunía el material para una novela sobre América y el dinero que tenía la intención de escribir algún día. Cuando John Kuehl y Steven Moore editaron una recopilación de ensayos sobre él, el autor homenajeado se volvió artista y, para la portada, se dibujó con un elegante traje y un vaso alto en la mano, pero sin cabeza.

En 1976, cuando su segunda novela, *Jota Erre,* ganó el National Book Award, sus admiradores, confundidos por el anonimato anterior de William Gaddis (que encaja tan bien con los diversos rumores ya mencionados), por lo juicioso de la fumata blanca y por los balbuceos habituales en los cócteles celebratorios, con frecuencia felicitaban a otro hombre, más gordo. Incluso *The New Yorker,* tocando fondo, atribuyó su tercera novela, *Gótico carpintero,* a esa misma persona, cuyo nombre es tan parecido al suyo. Sí. Tal vez William Gaddis no sea B. Traven, después de todo, ni J.
D. Salinger
, ni Ambrose Bierce, ni Thomas Pynchon. Tal vez sea yo.

Cuando me felicitaban, siempre me mostraba muy amable. Cuando me atribuyeron su libro por error, me sentí honrado.

Todas estas identificaciones equivocadas parecen formar parte de la escritura de William Gaddis, en la que la realidad ya ha sido secuestrada, pues ¿qué puede ser cierto en un mundo hecho de farsantes, apropiaciones indebidas, fraudes y patrañas? Sólo esto: que si tuviéramos dos puertas, en una habría un santón hipócrita y en la otra un charlatán disfrazado de estadista; que entre las reliquias más valoradas de nuestra tierra, si las hubiera, descubriríamos que el pulgar conservado en formol del santo de la localidad perteneció, en origen, a un borracho que vivía en el barrio y no tenía ni un céntimo, que el cuadro más estimado del museo es una falsificación, que las monedas antiguas que hace tiempo que coleccionamos son falsas y que el magnífico coche que acabamos de comprar es robado. Lo que escribió Rainer Maria Rilke sobre Auguste Rodin puede aplicarse sin ninguna duda al hombre que aparece en ese boceto sin cabeza: «Rodin era un solitario antes de que lo alcanzara la fama, y después quizá se volviera más solitario todavía. Y es que la fama, al fin y al cabo, no es más que la suma de todas esas equivocaciones que se reúnen en torno a un nombre nuevo». En nuestro tiempo, extrañamente clamoroso a la vez que silente, ser un escritor famoso consiste en ser desconocido en todo el mundo. Del mismo modo, *Los reconocimientos,* la obra que envolvió a William Gaddis en una nube de confusiones cuidadosamente alumbradas, es un libro del que se oye hablar a menudo y con reverencia, pero que apenas se lee. Parece tener, como un faraón en su tumba, una vida subterránea, presumiblemente rodeado por otras cosas preciosas y protegido por una maldición.

Como *Bajo el volcán,* la excelente y oscura obra de Malcolm Lowry, *Los reconocimientos* necesitaba devotos que lograran que su existencia siguiera siendo conocida hasta que llegara el momento en que pudiese aceptarse como un clásico; pero convertirse en un libro de culto no es lo mejor que le puede pasar a una obra, pues en algunas ocasiones eso hace que se crea que sólo pueden admirarla quienes tienen un gusto especial. En este caso, se temía que se lo considerara una locura de libro con unos fans chiflados. De hecho, fue surgiendo un cierto culto, un culto en el mejor y más antiguo sentido del término, ya que lo formaban lectores a los que el encuentro con el libro les había alterado la conciencia, que habían percibido algo más que su evidente excelencia artística y que no reaccionaban ante la escasa atención que había suscitado meramente con la rabia resignada que suelen sentir quienes leen bien y mucho y desean que se trate a los buenos libros con justicia; se trataba de lectores que notaban desde lo más profundo de su ser que esta novela era un auténtico reconocimiento y podía producir esa célebre conmoción: que revelaba los mecanismos internos del mundo social como si éste fuera un reloj de níquel; que combinaba el pesimismo de sus percepciones con las afirmaciones del arte que, al mismo tiempo, él mismo modificaba y hacía progresar; y además, que su autor, aunque aquél fuera su primer libro, se preocupaba lo suficiente por sí mismo, sus objetivos y sus capacidades como para crear una obra maestra contracorriente y, por supuesto, contra todo pronóstico.

Comenzado en 1945 sin saber realmente para qué ni por qué, y escrito a rachas a partir de 1947, *Los reconocimientos* se publicó a mediados de los cincuenta, una década tan arrebatada por el éxito que no pudo percibir las señales de morbidez que el libro mostraba. Se dice que un compositor tipográfico se negó a continuar trabajando con ese texto y buscó el consejo de su sacerdote, quien le dijo que tenía razón en desistir. Como es natural, la novela ganó un premio por su diseño cuando fue publicada.

Su salida fue debidamente anunciada por cincuenta y cinco periódicos y revistas. Sólo cincuenta y tres de estas reseñas fueron estúpidas. En cualquier caso, las reacciones de los críticos ante el libro confirmaron su carácter y su calidad, ya que no sólo lo declararon ilegible y fluctuante y agotador y confuso, sino que participaron en las mismas artimañas que el texto documentaba y escenificaba. Habría sido pedir demasiado que leyeran, comprendieran y elogiaran una obra de ficción de la que formaban parte. También usted puede dejar su ejemplar, sin haberlo leído, sobre alguna mesa bien visible. Unos cuantos críticos confesaron que sólo pudieron llegar a la conclusión de la novela saltándose páginas. Bueno, ¿cuántos han llegado realmente a la última página de Proust, o han terminado *Finnegans Wake?* Y de todos modos, ¿qué significa terminar de *leer Moby Dick?* No empiece este libro con esa clase de esperanzas. Este es un libro del que debería hacerse amigo. Lo acompañará durante toda su vida. Cuando lo termine, sólo será para empezarlo de nuevo.

Era un error, para alguien joven, ser tan ambicioso, pensaron los críticos; el resultado, sin duda, tendría que ser pretencioso, y se notaría la tensión por el gran esfuerzo. Si el autor se esfuerza para escribir su obra, el lector quizá también tenga que hacerlo para leerla, mientras que si el primero se dedica a pasar el rato con las palabras, el segundo puede relajarse y leer tranquilamente. Bueno, *Los reconocimientos* pesa demasiado como para que alguien pueda echarse la siesta con él en el regazo. (¿Cuánto pesa el que tiene usted entre las manos? Puede compararlo con la primera edición que, con sus 956 páginas, sale al *ring* con un kilo y cien gramos de peso, para descubrir cuánta sustancia le han extraído. Súmele unos treinta gramos por esta introducción).

Bueno, desde luego, era ambicioso, denso, largo, complejo. Su autor es un romántico, en ese sentido, y es evidente que está preocupado por crear una obra maestra; ¿cómo lograr la excelencia, sino intentando lograrla? No es habitual que uno comience a hacer un castillo de arena, una apacible mañana de verano —relajado, junto a una laguna azul— para —¡por Dios!— concluir —gracias a una serie de arenosos azares— una Alhambra llena de estanques al atardecer. El libro hablaba de embaucadores, de eso se daban cuenta hasta los más lerdos, y por lo tanto se veían a sí mismos, y por ello lo dejaban. No se trataba de un pasatiempo soporífero de una tarde larga y perezosa, sino de una denuncia de su falta de decencia.

Copiaron lo que decía la contraportada. Plagiaron las reseñas que habían salido antes. Cometieron miles de errores. Condenaron el tema, aunque no entendieron cuál era; detestaron la erudición, que consideraron pedantería; rechazaron el tono, aunque no lograron captarlo; criticaron con furia su punto de vista, cuyos propósitos criminales sospechaban. Uno tras otro alabaron a Joyce, un escritor que, según decían, era el verdadero McCoy, mientras que… Y sin embargo, si se hubieran visto transportados al pasado, habrían sido los primeros en lapidar al autor dublinés.

Hay quien cree que hay que mejorar la crítica, pero yo opino que la culpa es de la especie, que se rodea de mentiras y llama a esas mentiras cultura, del mismo modo que las ardillas construyen sus nidos con ramitas cortadas y hojas secas y después se esconden dentro. En cualquier caso, como observó el filósofo

alemán Lichtenberg, cuando un lector se duerme sobre un libro y al chocar su cabeza con él suena a hueco, no siempre es el libro el que carece de cerebro.

Tras la confusión de su recepción inicial, *Los reconocimientos* fue dejado de lado salvo por unos pocos felices pero furiosos que habían descubierto que esa ficción sobre la naturaleza, el significado y el valor de «lo verdadero» era, en sí mismo, lo verdadero. Se rumoreaba que el propio William Gaddis había publicado un panfleto vituperando a los reseñistas de su libro y citando sus ilicitudes una por una. La verdad, cuando se encuentra rodeada de mentiras, como las falsedades, calumnias y tergiversaciones con las que he sazonado el comienzo de esta introducción (pues el «sí» se puede convertir en «no» pintándolo al óleo), va tomando su hedor y al cabo de poco tiempo no se puede distinguir de ellas. Gaddis se ganó la vida, en una época, comprobando la veracidad de lo que decían los artículos de una publicación. Trabajó en un barco bananero en América del Sur. No tendría ninguna importancia si no fuera porque los contextos corrompen. Los compañeros de cama muerden. Los chaqueteros son capaces de robar de sus propios bolsillos. El fraude es contagioso. Lo cierto es que un neoyorquino publicó, con el pseudónimo de Jack Green, tres artículos sobre los chapuceros reseñistas que dedicaron su talento a *Los reconocimientos.* Los llamó, sin andarse por las ramas, *Fire the Bastards!,* [1] y Dalkey Archive Press ha sacado una cuidada reedición hace poco. Ahí, además de obtener muchos de los datos que ya he mencionado, me enteré de que uno de aquellos caballeros atribuyó el libro a William Gibson.

Un reducido grupo de admiradores mantuvo la obra a flote durante los siguientes veinte años, pero su rechazo, en mi opinión, fue debido a una serie de factores que tienen poco que ver con su supuesta dificultad o con la dudosa distinción de ser un libro de culto. Si uno quiere ser conocido dedicándose a la escritura, como los libros en sí mismos suelen tener una vida efímera, debe o bien cortejar a los medios y dejar que la publicidad actúe como su chulo, como hacía Truman Capote, o bien aferrarse como la hiedra a los muros de la academia, yendo de campus en campus como un canapé en una fiesta. Así, de un modo o de otro, uno puede aparecer en público con frecuencia y cosechar el aplauso de aquellos a quienes aplaudir no les cuesta nada porque no tienen otra cosa que hacer. Uno debe también leer su libro histriónicamente, o dar muestras de su trabajado ingenio y de su creciente comodidad, en programas de entrevistas televisivas. Y hacer reseñas. Sí, exacto, descender hasta las profundidades de los rivales, donde uno será considerado un tiburón más. Y participar en simposios, y dar entrevistas. Todo eso se va sumando a los textos escritos por uno y sobre uno que cualquier estudiante, crítico o estudioso debe consultar. Porque uno vale en función del número de entradas en que aparece su nombre en el catálogo de la biblioteca. Mientras tanto, también hay que enseñarles a los principiantes cómo ser un genio, apoyar profesionalmente a los alumnos más destacados e ir creando en torno a uno mismo, a lo largo de los años, un círculo de personas agradecidas cada vez mayor. De este modo, el prestigio de uno va creciendo con tanta firmeza como el tronco de un frondoso árbol.

William Gaddis, también conocido como Gibson, también conocido como Green, también conocido como Gass, no hizo ninguna de estas cosas que suelen hacerse para potenciar la propia carrera literaria, quedando, como dicen convenientemente los políticos cuando no quieren que algo los salpique, «al margen». Fuera de foco. A un lado. Tampoco se dedicó a escribir un nuevo libro cada quince días sólo para demostrar lo fácil que es, ya que todos sabemos lo fácil que es, y lo deseable, puesto que de ese modo uno puede darle a sus nuevos amigos lo que están acostumbrados a recibir e ir a las fiestas, e incluso a las juergas, que organizan los editores, pues ¿acaso no somos todos viejos amigos?, y sus libros reciben cada vez más y mejores críticas. No hay que olvidar que los mismos chapuceros que condenan también están dispuestos a elogiar, por un precio.

El silencio se convirtió en su forma de estar y el exilio (como consecuencia) en su estatus. Consiguió salir adelante gracias a su astucia mientras iba recopilando material y construyendo otras tramas irritantes sobre la vileza de la gente, escribiendo otro largo libro sobre el mundo de los negocios y su obsesión por el dinero y su modo de funcionar basado en la manipulación y el engaño, componiendo un himno para Horatio Alger, una música hecha a partir de un discurso inane, confabulador, taimado, falso. *Jota Erre* funcionó más o menos bien en las librerías durante un tiempo y recibió el National Book Award, pero creo que fue menos leído que *Los reconocimientos,* menos disfrutado, y no causó, como es lógico, la misma sorpresa. Además, aunque resultaba evidente que era un producto de la misma sensibilidad y que expresaba un punto de vista similar, *Jota Erre* era tan distinta de la novela anterior como Joyce de James. Pero no deje lo que tiene entre las manos para ponerse a leer *Jota Erre,* aunque sea tan musical como *Finnegans Wake,* un torrente de palabras y una Torre de Papel, un potaje hecho de frases rotas y pensamientos —llamémoslos así— incompletos, porque aquí hay mucho que escuchar, porque siempre debemos escuchar al lenguaje, que es la primera señal que percibimos de encontrarnos con la escritura de un maestro; y cuando hacemos

eso, cuando escuchamos, es porque primero hemos pronunciado las palabras y actualizado el texto, de modo que cuando escuchamos, oímos, nos oímos a nosotros mismos cantando lo que ahí se dice, y entonces somos verdaderos lectores, estamos participando en la creación, estamos modificando nuestra escucha en función de lo que va ocurriendo, porque nadie que ame la literatura puede seguir esos movimientos, esas frases, esas frases entrecortadas de William Gaddis durante mucho tiempo sin detenerse y levantar los brazos y gritar aleluya hay algo bueno en este mundo horrible y falto de dios.

Es casi sólo por eso que hacemos lo que hacemos.

Y eso da cuenta de la pureza de las intenciones artísticas de Gaddis, y de la realidad de su obra, ya que logra elevarse partiendo de lo que es tan falso que produce asombro. Además, el paso de las preocupaciones de *Los reconocimientos* a las *de Jota Erre* es totalmente razonable. *Los reconocimientos,* desde luego, aborda las preguntas fundamentales: ¿Qué es lo real, y cómo podemos encontrarlo en nosotros mismos y en las cosas que hacemos? Pero una generación más tarde, no hay preguntas fundamentales que puedan plantearse. *Jota Erre* muestra un mundo absolutamente decadente. Se trata de un mundo de palabrería, maquinaciones y dinero. Unos pocos reseñistas de *Jota Erre*, más perceptivos que la mayoría, echaron de menos la lucha espiritual del libro anterior, pero mire a su alrededor, lector: esa lucha se ha perdido. Lo grande ha sido sofocado por lo pequeño. Si usted es lo bastante ruin, el mundo puede convertirlo en un príncipe. No son los mansos quienes heredarán la tierra, sino los falsos.

Sí, debemos seguir las instrucciones que nos dan al final de *Jota Erre*:

> ¿… se acuerda del libro ese de esa vez que querían que escriba sobre el éxito y o sea la libre empresa y todo eso eh? Y o sea ¿se acuerda de eso que le leí en el tren la vez esa que había una corriente de piñón para que lidere un desfile y me meta en una carrera política y todo eso? Pues o sea escuche tengo una idea buenísima eh, ¿me está escuchando? ¿Eh? ¿Me está escuchando…?

Entonces, si somos obedientes, apenas habremos llegado a la segunda página de *Los reconocimientos* antes de encontrarnos con un párrafo como éste, en el que se nos presenta a Frank Sinisterra, que en ese momento se está haciendo pasar por el médico de un barco pero que es falsificador de profesión:

> El médico del barco era un hombrecillo granujilla y sin afeitar cuya ropa, adornada con manchas, churretes y quemaduras de cigarrillo, se mantenía sujeta a su persona mediante una amplia redecilla de cuerda anudada. Los botones delanteros de aquellos pantalones de dril habían sido hechos originalmente, con todo el triste e ingenioso engaño de la falsa economía, de cartón estucado. Tras numerosos lavados persistían como una hilera de tocones grises alineados junto a los portones abiertos de su bragueta. Aunque a veces aparecía una *boutonnière* por algún agujero de la pechera de su camisa, sus pétalos resultaban ser también de papel, y parecía el tipo de hombre que acostumbra a quitar la espuma de la superficie de un vaso de cerveza con el forzal de un sucio peine de bolsillo, y a limpiarse las uñas en la mesa con los dientes de su tenedor de ensalada, cosas que efectivamente hacía. Diagnosticó el trastorno de Camilla como indigestión, y se encerró en su camarote. Eso fue por la mañana.

Me gustan particularmente las dobles *l* con que comienzan nuestros placeres, pero tal vez usted prefiera el ingenioso empleo de la vocal *i* en la frase con la que concluye *(which things, indeed, he did. He diagnosed difficulty as indigestion, and locked himself in his cabin),*
Camilla's
o el juego con la *d* y la *c* en esa misma sección. En cualquier caso, estamos transitando avenidas hermosas y deberíamos demorarnos en ellas no sólo para admirar estas aliteraciones iniciales, sino también para disfrutar del hecho de que este hombre que trabaja con papel moneda está hecho de papel, o para visualizar el gesto, tan apropiado como el de un dedo, y sin duda tan poco higiénico, con el que quita la excesiva espuma de su pinta o, por encima de todo, para apreciar el juego de palabras oculto que conecta la «espuma» con el «peine», mediante el cual se consigue despeinar la cabeza de la cerveza de Frank.

Los grandes libros no pueden explicarse, y yo no voy a tratar de explicar éste. Una explicación —en realidad, cualquier explicación— lo profanaría, ya que a lo que una obra de arte se opone es precisamente a la reducción. Las respuestas fáciles, los resúmenes prácticos, las preguntas de los exámenes, las anotaciones, las flechas, las frases subrayadas, las listas de referencias, los números de sus fuentes, los ecos y las influencias, los esquemas de la trama —por mucho que en ocasiones nos sirvan de ayuda— falsean gravemente las obras. Las guías son útiles, pero sólo para enfrentarse al pasado. La interpretación reemplaza al original de un modo pobre y soso. Lo domestica, lo desarma. «Muy bien, ya lo entiendo», decimos, lavándonos las manos, «y esto tiene que ver con eso». «Por fin comprendo a Kafka» es una afirmación estúpida y presuntuosa.

Con demasiada frecuencia, aplicamos a la literatura la preferencia por el «realismo» con la que, en general, nos hemos criado, y como consecuencia de eso consideramos que una obra como *Los reconocimientos* es demasiado imaginativa, oscura y enigmática; pero ¿acaso la realidad es siempre clara e inequívoca? ¿Es acaso simple y no compleja? ¿Se despliega como las páginas de un periódico, o su despliegue se parece más al de un mapa de carreteras, que es difícil de abrir, difícil de interpretar y difícil de volver a plegar? Y ¿acaso se recuerda todo con precisión y nada se repite, y la gente que conocemos desaparece inexplicablemente durante largos períodos de tiempo para surgir de repente cuando menos la esperamos? Por supuesto, el mundo bien presentado de los autores realistas tradicionales, en el que las motivaciones son conocidas y las acciones son inequívocas, en el que uno puede creer lo que le cuentan y en el que los caminos del bien y del mal están tan claramente señalizados como si fueran autopistas, es un mundo tan artificioso como un abrelatas. A pesar de que con frecuencia resultan brillantes y de lo mucho que nos gustan esos personajes artificiales, sus conversaciones inteligentes y sus elegantes fiestas y los argumentos sobre los que giran como los caballitos de un tiovivo, considerarlos, a ellos y al mundo que decoran, «reales» es como aferrarse a una ilusión muy querida. Las páginas de *Los reconocimientos* están más cerca de la realidad que nada de lo que escribieron Zola o Balzac.

No hay por qué darse prisa; las páginas que tiene usted por delante pueden estar ahí todo el tiempo que usted quiera. Es perfectamente aceptable que algunas cosas no se entiendan desde el principio, y que haya referencias a cosas que usted no reconoce. Siga leyendo alegremente. No nos quedamos todo el día en la cama sólo por haber extraviado la agenda, ¿verdad? No, necesitamos entender este libro —disfrutar de su encanto, de su ingenio, de su ironía, de su erudición, de su sensual materialización— como entendemos a una pareja con la que hemos vivido y a la que hemos escuchado y amado durante muchos años, noche tras noche. Las personas que merecen tal devoción, tal aprecio instintivo, son escasas; más escasos todavía son los libros con los que vale la pena establecer esa clase de relación.

Puede ser de utilidad, en cualquier caso, situar *Los reconocimientos* en el centro de todas las historias de las que forma parte, para poder captar la estrategia esencial de la novela. Primero, veamos una trama arquetípica.

Nace un bebé varón. En tiempos pasados, antes de que se lograra la igualdad, los padres del protagonista de nuestra historia habrían sido importantes —eran dioses y diosas, héroes y sus cónyuges, reyes y reinas—, porque lo que les sucedía a ellos tenía que ser significativo no sólo para ellos, sino para todo el conjunto de la sociedad. Este niño será un heredero y, como ha señalado Joseph Campbell, tendrá mil rostros. Todo tipo de señales —presagios, augurios, profecías de los adivinos— advierten al padre (el rey) de que el nacimiento de su hijo supone un peligro para él, de modo que el rey hace que se lleven al niño y lo abandonen en medio de la naturaleza donde sin duda habrá de perecer, pero a manos de la naturaleza y no a las de su padre (una sofistería que quienes firman sentencias de muerte hoy en día siguen practicando). Sin embargo, si el padre en cuestión es un tipo directo, como Cronos (o Saturno, si usted prefiere), se limita a engullir a su rival. El primer reconocimiento es de los padres, y consiste en que la nueva generación, algún día, detentará la posición y tendrá el poder que ahora disfrutan sus mayores. Aunque la muerte es tan importante como el nacimiento para la salud de la especie, pocas veces es bienvenida y por lo general se la trata de postergar todo lo posible.

Si el bebé no tiene ninguna marca que lo identifique, sin querer se le hace alguna cuando se lo llevan. A Edipo, como usted recordará, le ataron los pies como si fuera un ave preparada para ir al asador. A veces lo dejan delante de una puerta, o lo lanzan a la deriva en una cesta, o lo abandonan en la ladera de una colina; después, el niño es hallado por un animal totémico y criado como si él también lo fuera (Rómulo y Remo fueron amamantados por una loba), o lo rescata un pastor o un pescador que pasa a ser su padre adoptivo. Durante este período de exilio, cuando el niño crece en una tierra extranjera, es cuando tiene lugar el segundo reconocimiento, bien debido a una creciente convicción interior de que es «otro» y es importante y tiene un destino, bien porque, en determinado momento, sus padres adoptivos le cuentan algo sobre su historia. Este es el primer reconocimiento del «héroe», y es básicamente negativo. Más o menos, dice: yo no soy un lobo; yo no soy un oso; yo no soy de estirpe campesino. «¿Qué estoy haciendo en Akron, Ohio?», se pregunta Hart Grane; «Utah», insiste Ezra Pound, «no es mi segundo nombre».

Poco después, parte en busca de su verdadera patria y de su identidad real. Esta parte del relato tiene la forma de una odisea: un viaje largo durante el cual el joven supera una serie de obstáculos que ponen a prueba su carácter, certifican sus capacidades y establecen su fama, como los trabajos de Hércules o cualquier *Wanderjahr*. Su prueba final suele consistir en tener que hallar la solución a alguna clase de adivinanza, y es una prueba espiritual o intelectual más que física (Edipo resuelve el acertijo de la Esfinge).

Mucho más tarde, después de que su padre adoptivo lo haya salvado de su destino y él haya vagado por

el mundo en busca de su verdadero hogar (su odisea), Edipo llega a un lugar del que no recuerda nada y, por casualidad (es decir, por obra del Destino), se encuentra con el rey, su padre. Sus pies desfigurados señalan su identidad, le advierten al rey, y en una especie de disputa (el agón), el hijo lo derrota y obtiene una recompensa: la mano de la reina. Este reconocimiento podría ser mutuo y la disputa, por lo tanto, comprendida, pero el reconocimiento suele posponerse, como en la versión de Sófocles de la historia de Edipo, hasta que hayan pasado muchos años. La primera parte de la narración ya está completa. Comienza con el nacimiento de un niño y termina con su boda o *comus;* de ahí viene el nombre de «comedia».

La segunda parte de la historia repite la primera, pero desde el punto de vista del padre, ya que el matrimonio supone que un nuevo rival aparecerá en escena muy pronto. Si nos quedamos con nuestro protagonista original, para él sigue un período de paz durante el cual establece su gobierno y hace prosperar a su pueblo. Mientras tanto, su hijo desterrado está cada vez más inquieto y continúa su búsqueda. Es importante darse cuenta de que desde un punto de vista, el personaje del padre es un héroe, pero desde otro, es un villano incorregible, y que los delitos de destierro y usurpación se repiten, sin remedio, generación tras generación. La segunda parte de la historia concluye, por lo tanto, con la muerte del héroe a manos del hijo al que ha maltratado, y se llama, por supuesto, tragedia.

Sin embargo, un héroe que es derrocado y muere apenas puede considerarse un héroe, sobre todo cuando, como sucede con mucha frecuencia, es hecho pedazos o sacrificado o devorado. Es evidente que no habría perdido la disputa, la batalla, la elección, la guerra o a la mujer si no hubiera sido traicionado, como lo fue Alemania por el Tratado de Versalles, como lo fue el Sur en la Guerra de Secesión, como lo es siempre todo perdedor: por un mal arbitraje, una desgracia, una confabulación, camarillas políticas, conspiraciones raciales. Se nos ha escapado la pelota, pero ha sido porque nos apuñalaron por la espalda. De modo que siempre hay un Judas o dos por ahí, esperando la ocasión para hacer alguna maldad, o un Yago con un pañuelo metido en la manga. En un acto de deslealtad, podemos pasarnos al bando del nuevo gobernante: el rey ha muerto, al fin y al cabo, así que viva el rey; si permanecemos fieles a nuestro personaje original, ¿qué nos queda, además de trozos dispersos de un cuerpo deshonrado o una tumba sellada para velarla durante toda la vida? Bueno, los trozos, de un modo u otro, vuelven a juntarse; el héroe levanta la lápida que hay sobre su tumba; los seguidores del rey traicionado y crucificado lo reconocen como recuperado y vivo; con lo cual, como Dioniso (habiendo concluido ya su historia), sale de la trama de inmediato, se le pone su nombre a una constelación y se va a morar con los dioses.

Y nosotros —usted y yo—, en la medida en que seamos capaces de identificarnos con la personalidad y la vida de esta figura heroica, superaremos la muerte y lograremos la redención, como él, ya que él, y los altibajos de su peripecia, simplemente encarnan el incierto ciclo de las estaciones. «En la juventud del año llegó Cristo, el tigre».

Hay otra sección de este relato que podría mencionarse, aunque tiende a ser herético por su contenido y es popular, es decir, no está protegido por ningún canon. Mientras el héroe de uno de los ciclos está disfrutando de la reina y gobernando su reino, como usted recordará, el hijo (el héroe de la otra versión) está en el exilio y llevando a cabo su odisea. Del mismo modo, cuando el rey es asesinado y el nuevo rey asume el mando, podemos imaginarnos que el muerto está viviendo en el exilio, en el país de los muertos —en el inframundo— y que emprenderá otro viaje, y se enfrentará a otras pruebas, mientras espera que llegue el momento de su resurrección. La tradición cristiana describe un «descenso a los infiernos»: una lucha entre Cristo crucificado y el señor del infierno (ahí, como dos gallos, en el foso). Y esta fase también supondrá una serie de reconocimientos.

Los poetas, los novelistas, los creadores de mitos, casi nunca tratan de contar el relato completo; por lo general, deciden centrarse en algún elemento de la historia y desarrollarlo (las odiseas proporcionan muchas oportunidades de ese tipo), o modifican la ontología de la empresa, como hace Sófocles, haciendo que el tema principal del ciclo no sea la acción, sino la comprensión. Como Edipo ha actuado de un modo tan poco atento, se quita la vista, cuando ya ha abierto los ojos y tomado conciencia de lo que ha hecho, con un broche que saca de las vestimentas de su madre-amante. La ceguera física es, por supuesto, necesaria para lograr una visión interior tan potente como la suya.

Supongamos, ahora, que yo recreo este relato, adornándolo con detalles que encajen bien con mi época y mi lugar y mis intereses particulares, como si ninguno de sus elementos se hubiera visto antes, como si ninguno de sus actos se hubiera realizado, como si ninguno de sus objetivos, en ningún momento y en ningún sitio, se hubiera cumplido. Mis rituales serían fantasías, serían falsificaciones, y sus efectos dependerían de la supresión del «había una vez» original y su sustitución por mi taimada recreación posterior. Mi relato sería un usurpador si no reconociera su parentesco con todas las versiones anteriores, y correría el riesgo de ser destronado en el momento en que lo obligaran a admitir dicho parentesco. La larga

y única cita de *La rama dorada,* el libro seminal de sir James Frazer que Gaddis incluye en *Los reconocimientos,* nos permite reconocer (aunque ya lo sabíamos desde hacía algún tiempo) que la práctica de buscar víctimas propiciatorias es antigua y ocurre a menudo y tiene motivos estacionales. Si la crucifixión de un mono o una rata tiene un aire de supersticiosa desesperación, ¿qué podemos decir de la crucifixión cristiana?

Hay supresiones y reconocimientos, por lo tanto, que son inherentes a los mitos y relatos tradicionales que recogen los antropólogos y que aparecen constantemente como parte del mecanismo de despliegue de las historias (entre los pretendientes que rodean a Penélope, el perro de Ulises es el único que lo reconoce vestido con harapos); y hay reconocimientos que también los personajes de esta novela experimentan, además de los que tendremos nosotros, los lectores, a lo largo de su complejo curso, un curso a cuyos orígenes alude constantemente, como sucede en *La tierra baldía:* las referencias que aparecen contribuyen en buena medida a su riqueza. Entre estas «epifanías» se encuentra una especial, de la que ya he hablado: la de qué es una auténtica obra de arte, y qué es lo que, siendo auténtico, «toca con reconocimiento los orígenes del designio».

Vivimos para nada. Después, morimos y todo se termina. ¡Qué reconocimiento! ¿Qué nos puede salvar? Sólo saber que hemos vivido sin expectativas ilusorias, incluyendo la de que algo nos pueda salvar. Pues el templo de nuestras simulaciones se derrumbará al final, y caerán sus piedras provocando muerte (como ocurre al final de esta novela), pero esto no se deberá a la fuerza bruta y ciega de un Sansón que se pone a sacudir sus columnas, sino a un arte, a una música surgida de un órgano que alguien toca con determinación tras activar sus registros; que alguien toca, al fin, de un modo insensato y despreocupado por los riesgos que supone su reverberación hasta que todas las piedras del vecindario comienzan a temblar.

Las reseñas que cayeron sobre William Gaddis y su libro eran, sin duda, piedras de un orden antiguo, pero, al terminar *Los reconocimientos,* de la obra auténtica «todavía se habla, cuando se menciona, con alta estima, aunque casi nunca se interpreta».

Así que pase la página… y altere esa frecuencia lamentable.

WILLIAM H. GASS
Washington University, St. Louis.

«Nihil cavum neque sine signo apud Deum».
IRENEO, *Aversus haereses*

Para Sarah

Los despiertos, labios separados, la esperanza, los nuevos barcos

Primera Parte

I. LA PRIMERA VUELTA DE TUERCA

«MEPHISTOPHELES *(leiser):* Was gibt es denn?
WAGNER *(leiser):* Es wird ein Mensch gemacht».

GOETHE, *Faust, II*

Hasta Camilla había disfrutado de las mascaradas, del tipo seguro donde se puede dejar caer la máscara en ese momento crítico en que pretende ser realidad. Pero la procesión que ascendía la colina extranjera, flanqueada de cipreses, impelida por el canto monótono del sacerdote y retardada por vacilaciones ante las catorce estaciones del *via crucis* (por no hablar de la carroza fúnebre en la que iba, un vehículo blanco tirado por caballos que parecía un puesto de pasteles barroco), habría podido turbar el tímido semblante de su alma, si hubiera sido discernible.

El reverendo Gwyon se referiría después a ello como «El episodio español»: no con ligereza, sino con aire de reservada preocupación. A una edad más temprana había tenido gran afición a los viajes, y fue este impulso a ampliar sus fronteras lo que finalmente había dado ocasión al terreno necesario para ponerlo en práctica (en este caso, un barco rumbo a España) y costado la vida de la mujer con la que se había casado seis años antes.

—Enterrada allí lejos con un montón de católicos muertos —fue la imprecación de tía May.

Tía May era la hermana de su padre, una mujer estéril y tenaz, calvinistamente fiel al hombre que había sido el reverendo Gwyon antes que él. Consideró su deber aprovechar cualquier oportunidad para mostrar un auténtico resentimiento cristiano. Pues las dos familias se sentían ofendidas por algo más que la aceptación aparentemente frívola, por parte del viudo, de la muerte de su esposa. No le perdonaban que no hubiera traído a casa el cuerpo de Camilla, para depositarlo en el limpio suelo protestante de Nueva Inglaterra. Era su cruz, y cargaban con ella hacia un desolado calvario exclusivo con admirable indignación puritana.

Esto es lo que había ocurrido.

A comienzos del otoño, la pareja había partido en barco para España.

—Sólo el Cielo sabe qué querrán hacer allí, entre todos esos… esos extranjeros —fue uno de los comentarios.

—Y encima un país entero lleno de ellos.

—Y católico —rezongó tía May, negándose incluso a repetir el nombre del barco en que viajaban, como si pudiera adivinar el desastre inmediato que anunciaba, y la contienda que ensuciaría los mares por doquier con victorias rotas, a la que se adelantó veinte años.

Sin embargo, se embarcaron en el *Purdue Victory* y zarparon del puerto de Boston, precavidos contra todas las inclemencias menos estas que dejaban atrás, y esos desastres de tal envergadura y tan fortuita originalidad que los tribunales cristianos y las compañías de seguros, argumentando humildemente *ad hominem,* definen como actos de Dios.

El día de Todos los Santos, siete después de zarpar y con media travesía cumplida, Dios abordó el *Purdue Victory* y actuó: Camilla tuvo un ataque de apendicitis aguda.

El médico del barco era un hombrecillo granujilla y sin afeitar cuya ropa, adornada con manchas, churretes y quemaduras de cigarrillo, se mantenía sujeta a su persona mediante una amplia redecilla de cuerda anudada. Los botones delanteros de aquellos pantalones de dril habían sido hechos originalmente, con todo el triste e ingenioso engaño de la falsa economía, de cartón estucado. Tras numerosos lavados persistían como una hilera de tocones grises alineados junto a los portones abiertos de su bragueta. Aunque a veces aparecía una *boutonnière* por algún agujero de la pechera de su camisa, sus pétalos resultaban ser también de papel, y parecía el tipo de hombre que acostumbra a quitar la espuma de la superficie de un vaso de cerveza con el forzal de un sucio peine de bolsillo, y a limpiarse las uñas en la mesa con los dientes de su tenedor de ensalada, cosas que efectivamente hacía. Diagnosticó el trastorno de Camilla como indigestión, y se encerró en su camarote. Eso fue por la mañana.

Por la tarde acudió a buscarlo el capitán, y fue recibido con un grito tan cargado de terror que hasta su intrépida sangre se le heló en las venas. Dejando sumido al médico en lo que parecía un ataque epiléptico, el capitán decidió atender personalmente a Camilla; pero cuando se dirigía a grandes zancadas hacia el

salón de fumar con el equipo de operaciones del barco bajo el brazo, se asomó de nuevo por la portilla del camarote del médico. Dentro vio al médico santiguarse y alzar un vaso de licor con mano firme y serena.

Aquello decidió el asunto.

La víspera del día de difuntos descendió sobre aquel mar con desolada indiferencia hacia la puesta de sol, y el médico apareció empujado por detrás en la oscilante cubierta parcialmente iluminada. Recién afeitado, con un limpio mandil de mozo de comedor, se inclinó sobre la mujer inmóvil para trazar una fantasmagoría de cruces sobre su propio pecho, boca y frente; como por arte de magia sacó un crucifijo, lo besó, lo escamoteó entre las callosas puntas de sus dedos, y se puso a trabajar. Antes de que las súplicas de las misas por las almas del purgatorio acabaran de alzarse de las tierras ahora equidistantes a proa y a popa, se las arregló para poner fin a los sufrimientos de Camilla y a su vida.

La investigación posterior descubrió que aquel desgraciado (que había pasado el resto del viaje hecho un ovillo en una adujada de cuerda, leyendo por turnos el *Libro de Job* y la *Guía de Bangkok* de los Ferrocarriles Nacionales Siameses) no era en modo alguno médico. El señor Sinisterra era un prófugo que viajaba al amparo de lo que, en el momento de su partida, había parecido el más lógico de los recursos desesperados: unos documentos falsos que él mismo había impreso. (Había hecho este trabajo con la misma artística atención al detalle que dedicaba a los billetes de banco, hasta el punto de utilizar la fórmula de Rembrandt para la base de cera en su plancha de cobre). Estaba tan afligido como el que más por todo el asunto. La suerte le había sido adversa, le había impedido con malas artes alcanzar el discreto retiro de su profesión crónica que había planeado en el asilo histórico de Iberia.

—«La primera vuelta de tuerca salda todas las deudas» [2] —había murmurado (santiguándose) en la popa del *Purdue Victory*, donde la cubierta vibraba bajo los pies mientras las palas de la única hélice agitaban a su espalda el agua de Boston; y el propio puerto, reacio a dejarlos partir, retuvo el sonido de la sirena del barco después de que tocara, para ir soltándolo tras ellos en reluctantes partículas hasta que se alejaron en silencio.

Ahora se vio rescatado del olvido por agentes de aquel país que no siendo lo bastante cristiano para tener plena fe en que pagaría cabalmente por sus pecados en el mundo venidero (a pesar del testimonio ocular de Dante sobre los tormentos hidrópicos que aún hoy sufre en Malebolge Adamo da Brescia, aquel precursor que falsificó el florín) estaba resuelto a que pagara en éste. En los Estados Unidos de América el señor Sinisterra había sido monedero falso. Durante la investigación intentó una breve defensa de su experiencia médica alegando que una vez había sido ayudante de un viviseccionista en Tampa, Florida; y cuando esto falló, se dedicó a murmurar hoscamente acerca de los judíos y la vanidad terrenal, y a citar fragmentos del Eclesiastés, Alfonso María de Ligorio y el papa Pío IX en respuesta a cualquier pregunta acusatoria. Dado que no era cierto, como informó un lejano diario, que lo hubieran pillado vigilantes agentes federales sustituyendo su propio retrato por los rasgos vulgares de Andrew Jackson en el billete americano de veinte dólares, el señor Sinisterra prestó poca atención a esta gratuita calumnia. Pero, como a cualquier artista sensible atrapado en las redes de críticos poco compasivos, todavía le escocía la reseña que dedicaron a su trabajo en la primera página del *Detector Nacional Mensual de Falsificaciones* («La nariz en la efigie de Jackson parece bulbosa debido al trazo grueso del puente…»); y poco después, mientras su pasión por el anonimato se alimentaba de su innata modestia entre muros de malebolgiana pendiente, decidió alcanzar un grado tal de futura excelencia en su trabajo que los críticos celosos no se atrevieran jamás a volver a atacarlo como su autor. Su contrición por la muerte que había ocurrido a manos suyas era auténtica, y su penitencia, sincera; sin embargo, no veía ninguna relación entre aquel accidente dejado en manos de Dios y la carrera que dependía de las suyas. No tardó en ponerse a trabajar en una plancha de acero grabada a mano, en el taller de la cárcel donde fabricaban placas de matrícula.

A falta de una sola constelación, el cielo nocturno habría podido parecer vacío a los ojos inquietos de un navegante griego que buscara las Pléyades, cuya desaparición en otoño señalaba el fin de la estación marinera. Las Pléyades se habían ocultado mientras el *Purdue Victory* estaba aún en alta mar, pero nadie las buscaba ahora, esa galaxia de soles tan remotos que el nuestro saldría y se pondría sin ser visto a tal distancia: una constelación cuya puesta ha inaugurado celebraciones para los que yacen en tumbas desde la América azteca al Japón, animando a los druidas a oficiar su más solemne misterio, el de la reconstrucción del mundo, trayendo a Persia el mes de Mordad y el ángel de la muerte.

Debajo, como una constelación cuyas estrellas configuradas sólo se atreven a trazar la figura que les impuso la tiranía de una antigua imaginación, donde Argo sólo se ve en el cielo meridional con un ojo interior de memoria que nadie tiene, así dibujaba el barco las líneas que articulaban su perfección para

aquel ojo contra el mar sin horizonte de la noche, donde el casco más deteriorado y maltrecho asumía limpias líneas armoniosas más allá de la disposición de sus luces. «Oscuro a tramos y sin estrellas, como de la proa / Al mástil, pero otras partes resplandecientes de luz», el *Purdue Victory* descansa en las aguas del puerto de Algeciras, y como en el Argo, ¿quién puede distinguir ahora la proa de la popa? ¿Vela, las velas? ¿Carina, la quilla…? Donde descansa amarrado al polo sur celestial, al final del viaje en busca del vellocino de oro.

Aquella fresca y clara noche de noviembre, el viudo desembarcó en una gabarra con un bulto más de los que llevaba al partir. Gwyon se había negado a permitir la sepultura en el mar. Afrontó arduas dificultades para entrar en el puerto español, la mayoría de las cuales tenían que ver con un artículo enunciado como «Importación ilegal de carnes dañadas», [3] dificultades que sólo pudo superar mediante el pago de una enorme suma que cubría la multa, los derechos de aduana, los impuestos especiales, las gabelas, los tributos y la dispensa arzobispal, ya que el cadáver era obviamente herético en origen. El incómodo bulto fue sellado por fin en una caja de caoba, que acarreó de un lado a otro del país en busca de un lugar adecuado para enterrarlo.

Finalmente, en el altozano tras el pueblo de San Zuinglio, dominando la llanura pedregosa de Castilla la Nueva, Camilla Gwyon halló cobijo en un espacio tapiado ocupado por otros inquilinos de pago, con una ceremonia que habría conmocionado la compostura calvinista de sus progenitores, y podido sobresaltar a su propio yo protestante, si le hubiera quedado aliento para protestar. Pero no ocurrió nada funesto. La caja se deslizó en su elevado nicho de la *bóveda* sin verse frenada por el revuelo de inquietud que bien pudo producir entre los fieles que la rodeaban, al verse hostigados por la introducción de aquella huésped hereje en una tierra donde se había llegado a quemar o a enterrar por separado a los leprosos, por miedo a que contagiaran su enfermedad a los muertos circundantes. A la caída de la tarde su presencia allí era indígena, incontestada, entre marchitas ofrendas florales y coronas de cuentas o de metal, entre fachadas de vidrio roto e imágenes maltrechas, nombres más adornados que el suyo, fotografías bajo cristal, entre numerosos niños, y compartimentos vacíos que esperaban, ocupados de momento por floreros rotos o una escoba rota. Junto a la fotografía de una niñita bizca con medias blancas, Camilla quedó abandonada con la áspera superficie de la llanura castellana extendida a sus pies, tan indiferente a la memoria de lo que había pasado sobre ella como el mar.

El reverendo Gwyon tenía entonces cuarenta y cuatro años. Era un hombre de estatura superior a la media, pelo ralo y entrecano, cara redonda y tez sonrosada. Su ropa, aunque del color moribundo prescrito, tenía un sutil aire informal que había inquietado a sus superiores desde el principio. A medida que envejecía su aliento se advertía cada vez más recientemente perfumado con alcaravea, esas semillas que se usan a menudo para dar sabor al aguardiente, y sus ojos brillaban durante un momento con vivo interés por el asunto que tuviera entre manos, para quedar después perdidos en la distancia, mas allá de las fronteras temporales. Por entonces tenía ya el aire de un hombre a la espera de algo que ha ocurrido mucho antes.

De joven, en una universidad de Nueva Inglaterra, había estudiado Lenguas Románicas y Matemáticas, y se había licenciado en Poesía Clásica y Antropología, estudios que su familia había juzgado confiadamente deprimentes, pues la lengua era una materia propia de un estudiante, y nada podía ofrecer una imagen menos carnal del mundo que la sólida geometría. Creían que la antropología era simplemente el estudio de viejos huesos y la medición de cabezas paganas; y en cuanto a los clásicos, pocos sospechaban las libertades de Menandro («perfumado y con la túnica suelta, con paso lánguido y lento…»).

Gwyon pasaba las noches encerrado con Tomás de Aquino, o construyendo con Roger Bacon formidables pruebas geométricas de la existencia de Dios. Pasaron los meses y luego los años en la Escuela de Teología y el seminario. Luego viajó entre las culturas primitivas de América. Hacía labor misional. Pero desde el principio tuvo poco éxito a la hora de convencer a los nativos de su responsabilidad de un pecado cometido en los comienzos de la creación, pecado que, según lo entendían, estaban dispuestos a y se sentían capaces de repetir (de hecho, llevaban amuletos para asegurarlo). Tampoco pudo convencerlos de que un hombre había muerto en un árbol para salvarlos a todos, acto que un viejo indio, si Gwyon lo había interpretado correctamente, juzgó como «pura presunción». Recordaba pocas conversiones, y ésas generalmente entre las mujeres, los débiles y los paganos enfermos y en tránsito entre este mundo y el otro, que aceptaban el paraíso que les ofrecía como niños que se apuntan a una excursión a un parque de atracciones desconocido. Aunque un viejo guerrero lleno de cicatrices dijo que sólo se convertiría si le garantizaban que acabaría en el vívido infierno que describía Gwyon: sonaba como un lugar más apropiado para un hombre; y al oír los sangrientos méritos de este candidato entusiasta (que se ofreció a añadir a su colección como garantía la cabellera de su mentor), el misionero le aseguró que lo conseguiría. Pero los altos hombres que lo rodeaban no parecían dispuestos a compartir ninguna de sus efímeras esperanzas, hijas de la culpa, y seguían

beatificando árboles, tempestades y otros prodigios naturales. Avisados con inquietud, sus superiores decidieron en solemne asamblea que Gwyon era demasiado joven. Ciertamente estaba demasiado interesado en lo que veía a su alrededor. Lo hicieron volver al seminario para seguir un curso de repaso, y fue en aquella época en la que tomó el gusto al aguardiente e inició el curso de mitraísmo que tan útil le habría de ser en sus últimos años.

De joven, en la universidad, se había interesado también por el placer mundano del teatro (aunque no era cierto, como alguien afirmó años después cuando estaba encerrado e indefenso, que mientras estudiaba en la Escuela de Teología hubiera ganado dinero para sus gastos interpretando el papel de los anónimos cuartos traseros de un caballo en un indecente teatrucho de Scollay Square). Según observó, ningún teatro puede prosperar sin adhesión popular; lo que bien puede explicar por qué lo atraían las sinceras representaciones teatrales de religiones más histriónicas que la suya. Fue por eso por lo que donó una resplandeciente casulla negra, profusamente adornada en la espalda con tibias y calaveras recamadas en oro, al sacerdote de San Zuinglio en España (a quien habría vestido de arzobispo si el pobre hombre se hubiera atrevido a dejarlo). Fue por eso por lo que había dado dinero para una nueva imagen en escayola del espectro canonizado (aunque, como dijo el sacerdote, lo que más necesitaban era un auténtico santo patrón natural del lugar) que velaba por los intereses de la plebe, a la que regaló la ropa de Camilla y un surtido de panderetas. Y fue por eso por lo que a su vez, con cristiana gratitud, la plebe le correspondió con el festival que llevó a descansar en la tierra el cuerpo que había compartido, y envió al cielo entre alabanzas la única alma que había pretendido.

En los meses siguientes llegaron a casa diversos rumores sobre el año sabático del pastor: cuentos rococós, adornados con cualquier elemento menos la verdad. No era cierto que, para practicar la humildad que había despertado en él aquel acto de Dios (en años posteriores se lo oyó referirse a la «implacable puntualidad del azar»), se hubiera vestido con harapos y alquilado tres críos lastimosos, con los que los turistas andariegos lo encontraban diariamente en estado de mendicante colapso ante el hotel Ritz de Madrid; no era cierto que hubiera invitado a beber durante tres días a la entera población de Málaga y la hubiera conducido luego a una caminata experimental hacia África a través del mar, pretendiendo que Aquel a quien buscaba los haría cruzarlo a pie enjuto; no era cierto que se hubiera casado con una vieja arpía con aros en las orejas, se hubiera proclamado legítimo heredero del trono de Abderramán y hubiera encabezado una insurrección de los moros de Córdoba. Ni siquiera era cierto que hubiera ingresado como novicio en un monasterio cartujano.

Había ingresado como huésped en un monasterio franciscano, una medida catártica que estuvo a punto de purgarlo de su vida.

El Real Monasterio de Nuestra Señora de la Otra Vez [4] había sido terminado en el siglo XIV por una orden ya extinguida. Su sentido de culpabilidad era tan grande, y sus medidas de expiación tan rigurosas, que los que salieron con vida eran una fuente de embarazo para los grupos laxos de religiosos que se mimaban de vez en cuando con algo de comida y sueño. Cuando el gran monasterio fue terminado, con muros provistos de torres albarranas, parapetos, almenas, matacanes, barbacanas, una escalofriante variedad de cimborrios y chapiteles de pasmoso románico y fulgente bizantino, una orgía gótica de ventanas con parteluces y tracerías, y un inmenso rosetón cuyas foliaciones eran tan rebuscadas que nunca se cubrió de vidrieras, los hermanos fueron prendidos y juzgados por herejía. *Homoiousios* u *homoousios,* ésa era la cuestión. Había sido resuelta mil años antes, cuando, en Nicea, el destino de la Iglesia cristiana pendió de un diptongo: *homoousios,* que significa de la *misma* sustancia. A los hermanos de la lejana Extremadura se les había pasado por alto el credo niceno, atareados como estaban al aire libre o sumergidos en agua fría hasta los ojos, y nunca habían oído hablar de Arrio. Escogieron *homoiousios,* de *semejante* sustancia, como una palabra más feliz que su tubular alternativa (nadie les dio la oportunidad de escoger *heteroousios),* y fueron encerrados sin dilación en tranquilas mazmorras, que desprovistas de medio alguno de contrariar los procesos naturales, resultaron ser tales refugios de molicie que los monjes murieron de pura vergüenza, incapaces siquiera de convocar fantasmas pornográficos como los que habían dado tanta guerra a san Antonio en el desierto (pues, a decir verdad, ninguno de aquellos excelentes varones sabía con certeza qué aspecto tenía una mujer, y todos podían apartar de sí sin ningún esfuerzo de inspiración divina aquella imagen realzada entre ellos por siglos de uso, en la que Ella lo observaba Todo con inflamados ojos clavados en la antena sustancial de su pecho). Su ciudadela pasó de un grupo a otro, hasta que unos franciscanos acomodadizos la aceptaron para almacenar su humilde acumulación de generaciones de caridad. Se trasladaron a ella cargados de mantos incrustados de perlas, coronas cuyas piedras preciosas las hacían demasiado pesadas para la frente humana y mantelería blanca de hilo para el servicio de mesa.

Habían sacado buen partido del lugar. Allí habían metido al hermano Ambrosio bajo una marmita de

hierro (donde aún seguía) por negarse a salir a mendigar para sus hermanos. Allí estaba el sitio donde el abad Shekinah (un converso) había instalado su notable alambique. Allí estaba la celda donde fray Eulalio, un exuberante lunático de ochenta y seis años que se estaba mortificando por el poco cristiano orgullo de tener todas las vocales en su nombre, y que era muy venerado por su constante llanto, se quedó ciego en un éxtasis de tan aulladoras proporciones que su canonización estaba asegurada. Lo apodaron Epiclantos, «el que llora tanto», y devolvieron al jardín, que era de donde venía, la cal viva que se había estado frotando contra los ojos. Y allí, en el granero, estaba el sitio donde un abad, un obispo y un abejorro… pero hay milagros de tan maravillosa envergadura que deben mantenerse en secreto, protegidos de oídos tan carentes de gracia que la incredulidad termina floreciendo en irrisión.

Les iba bastante bien, incluso con la Santa Sede, y las ligeras dificultades que surgieron en el siglo XVII fueron perfectamente comprensibles, pues quién podía prever qué costumbre doméstica denunciaría a continuación como vicio el italiano de la triple tiara residente en el Vaticano. Los hermanos fueron severamente amonestados por alentar inclinaciones geófagas entre la nobleza local, a cuyas damas habían inspirado un gran ansia por el sabor de la tierra nativa, como condimento o como plato en sí: al fin y al cabo, era tierra española. Pero la agitación se extinguió. Las damas fueron seducidas por la sal (era sal española, de Cádiz), y la paz volvió a reinar durante dos siglos más, rota solamente por ocasionales rociadas de leche sobre el altar de la iglesia, obra de campesinos que preferían entregar sus diezmos de este modo, o por monjes derribados sin sentido por pedradas cuando se advertía su presencia extramuros.

Nadie había llegado jamás a instalar calefacción central o de cualquier otro tipo. En verano nadie pensaba en ello; en invierno, los buenos hermanos estaban inmovilizados, paralizados en torno a mesas con pesados faldones y braseros debajo que les tostaban los pies calzados con sandalias, les calentaban hasta las partes pudendas y los dejaban buena parte del tiempo poco menos que parapléjicos. El invierno en que apareció el reverendo Gwyon fue especialmente riguroso en Extremadura. Lo admitieron como una curiosidad, pues pocos habían visto un *protestante vivo,* [5] y mucho menos a uno de sus *caudillos.* Pero fray Manomuerta, el organista, habría preferido que su huésped se alojara en algún otro sitio: ¿acaso no había declarado recientemente el confesor del joven rey que comer con un *protestante* era proponerse uno mismo como candidato a la excomunión?, no vitando, [6] quizá, pero ello implicaba como mínimo la necesidad de trabajar para ganarse la vida. Prevaleció la curiosidad. Y en Navidad, fray Manomuerta informó a su hermandad de que había visto a su herético huésped (por el gran ojo de la cerradura) administrándose la eucaristía en su habitación, una ceremonia solitaria y burda comparada con la suya. «Es un buen hombre —dijo fray Manomuerta a los otros—, hay algo de Cristo en él…». Pero algunos de aquellos otros querían que se castigase a Gwyon por profanar su rito, e incluso los que no lo creían capaz de oficiar una verdadera misa negra juzgaban imposible saber cuánto daño podía haber hecho con su mero intento. Fray Manomuerta entendía un poco de inglés y les aseguró que no había ocurrido nada de eso, pero para aquellos cuyas sospechas no se disiparon, la recompensa pareció inminente pocos días después.

Gwyon había impresionado a sus anfitriones con su capacidad para trasegar su vino tinto, cosa que solía hacer quedándose allí sentado durante largo rato después de que ellos hubieran terminado de comer, hubieran limpiado sus cubiertos de plata con sus servilletas de hilo, los hubieran escondido y se hubieran marchado con pasos silenciosos. Pero finalmente sucumbió a una afección bronquial que amenazó con convertirse en pulmonía y darle una oportunidad de pagar el más alto de los tributos protestantes a la Santa Iglesia muriendo en brazos de los buenos hermanos. En un cuartito cuya ventana daba a la fachada de la iglesia y dominaba la fangosa plaza central del pueblo, fue presa de un delirio que a algunos recordó las leyendas del venerado Eulalio Epiclantos, y a otros (más leídos) la persecución demoníaca de san Juan Vianney, el *curé,*
d'Ars
cuyo presbiterio estaba en continuo estado de sitio, con demonios que arrojaban fuentes y rompían jarros de agua, que aporreaban las mesas y reían diabólicamente, y que una noche llegaron incluso a prender fuego a las cortinas del lecho del *curé.* El propio Gwyon era un hombre robusto. Juzgaron prudente dejarlo solo durante aquellos ataques.

Y solo yacía un anochecer, sudando a pesar del frío, cuando de pronto lo despertó de su duermevela la mano de su mujer sobre su hombro, según solía ponérsela para despertarlo. Se levantó con dificultad de la cama, cobijada en un hueco de la pared, y cruzó la habitación hasta la ventana, por la que entraba calladamente una luz fría. Allí estaba la luna, tendiendo a su espalda un brazo inmóvil hacia la cama donde había estado tumbado. Se quedó allí temblando de frío, murmurando sílabas que casi articulaban el nombre de ella, como si así pudiera evocar, y hacer que volviera, una época anterior a la entrada de la muerte en el mundo, anterior al accidente, anterior a la magia, y anterior al momento en que la magia desapareció para

convertirse en religión.

Sobre el pueblo bogaban nubes bajas, amenazantes jirones de sucio gris como espíritus malignos apresuradamente reunidos, desdeñados por la luna que no podían apagar.

Al día siguiente, con aprensiva caridad, los hermanos cargaron a Gwyon a lomos de un mulo, y, tras conducirlo hasta el pie del valle, fray Manomuerta se despidió de él con una bendición, exhortándolo a que volviera. Después de un viaje horrendo, llevaron a Gwyon al mejor hotel del país, donde lo dejaron para que se recuperase.

De noche, la suya era la única ventana abierta en Madrid. A su alrededor yacía menos de un millón de personas encerradas desde fuera por persianas y contraventanas, y desde dentro por cortinas y visillos, escondidas tras puertas cerradas y atrancadas, en congruentes formas de inconsciencia, de la grávida noche que pasaba. Por aquella ventana abierta lo despertó un relámpago, aunque no advirtió el propio relámpago, sino su súbita ausencia, una vez el fogonazo lo hubo despertado a un instante eterno de semiinconsciencia y dejado completamente despierto, helado, solo y atónito ante la súbita oscuridad donde todo había sido luz un momento antes, tan minuciosamente helado que la conciencia de ello parecía extenderse a todo objeto vagamente entrevisto en la habitación, helado de pavor mientras la lluvia que golpeaba contra el alféizar golpeaba en su conciencia como para hundirla y ahogarla. «¿Cerré la ventana del despacho…? ¿La puerta de la cochera? Algo… ¿Dejé algo fuera bajo la lluvia? ¿A Polly…?» una muñeca que había tenido hacía cuarenta años, señora de una casa bajo los abedules al sol vespertino, y aquellos árboles ahora flexibles bajo el vendaval inagotablemente cargado de agua y oscuridad, y el resto lodo: la sensación de algo perdido.

En la colina de San Zuinglio la lluvia golpeaba contra la figura crucificada en piedra sobre la verja, con los brazos extendidos como un bailarín. Golpeaba contra la *bóveda*,[7] nicho sobre nicho, flores de cuentas y coronas de metal, tallos rotos y cristal roto como el cristal en el marco de una foto sobre un nombre y un lastimero lapso de años donde la niña bizca con medias blancas esperaba junto a Camilla, y el agua entraba a raudales en los nichos vacíos. Fuera, otra tapia cercaba un terreno de hierba larga y desigual desmayada sobre túmulos que se habían hundido y sólo podían ser localizados por triángulos y cruces de madera, descuidados y torcidos en medio de aquella hierba feroz, indefensos como los cuerpos de debajo, a quienes la pobreza había negado una casa propia en la muerte como se la había negado en vida, y sólo la fe les había valido aquel refugio de tierra consagrada, ahora mojada.

Gwyon saltó de la cama con súbita inquietud, sus pies sobre las frías baldosas lo hicieron volver en sí en Madrid, y quedó en pie temblando de vida, con la sensación de estar hundido en el tiempo de España, que al igual que ella nunca abandonaría. Se vistió con su acostumbrado esmero, pero con mayor rapidez; se bebió de un trago una copa de coñac, y salió. Había dejado de llover. Cuando abrieron las enormes verjas, se internó en los ceremoniosos yermos invernales del parque del Retiro, esperando el tardío amanecer, amenazado a cada paso por inmóviles figuras de monarcas.

Bajo aquella luz anterior al alba, los macizos bancos de granito tenían el tamaño y la forma apropiados para parecer féretros insepultos de niños. Tras ellos se erguían los árboles sin hojas, esperando la vida, pero todavía fríamente expuestos en sus diferencias, esperando formalmente ordenados, como ese momento de silencio cuando uno entra en una fiesta de gente que se vuelve de repente, cuadrándose con sus vasos en la mano, una fiesta llena de gente de tamaño equivocado. Allí, equilibradas sobre pedestales, hincando su propio peso contra el peso del tiempo nunca sometido ni rechazado sino absorbido por las vacantes desportilladas, la erosión, la negligente inflexibilidad de la piedra blanca, esperaban figuras del pasado insepulto.

Gwyon palpó el bastón bajo su brazo, lo extendió, intentó golpear una hoja y falló. Volvió a mirar. Esperaban como su familia, y seguía siendo un extraño entre ellos a cada latido que gastaba su sangre, y culpable de la vida que había en él; pues como aquellas estatuas de piedra, cuyos bloques estaban separados entre sí por un corte, de modo que las piernas eran una entidad, el torso encorazado otra y la cabeza otra, su familia lo había rodeado siempre con una fría e inconexa desaprobación de la vida. Al igual que las estatuas soportaban el curso de las estaciones, su familia había vivido con pétrea negligencia el paso del tiempo, vidas concebidas en la culpa y perpetuadas en la negación. Habían esperado lo mismo de él.

Cada generación era un ensayo de la anterior, de modo que aquella familia formaba paulatinamente el modelo repetitivo de un calado griego, interrumpido una sola vez en dos siglos por un niño de nueve años que había echado un vistazo a sus perspectivas, se había atado una cuerda al cuello con un ladrillo en la otra punta y había saltado desde un puente peatonal sobre dos pies de agua. Aparte de valor, tenía esa tenacidad de propósito característica de la familia, y se ahogó, una grieta en el modelo rápidamente borrada por la cal muerta del silencio.

«Perdida: una hora de oro, compuesta de sesenta minutos de diamante…». Citado en un sermón de su

padre frecuentemente citado. Cualquier cosa agradable podía juzgarse, si no categóricamente mala, algo peor, una pérdida de tiempo. Hacía tiempo que las virtudes sentimentales habían sido arrancadas de sus organismos. No consideraban a los pobres como necesariamente amigos de Dios. Los pobres de espíritu eran algo bien diferente. El trabajo duro era la expresión de gratitud que Él quería, y, según están dispuestas las cosas, era de esperar que el dinero acudiese como un testimonio incidental. (Así entraba el dinero en la familia Gwyom como desaprobaba los placeres de la mesa, un antepasado suyo había montado una fábrica de harina de avena, con la que le había ido muy bien. Como sus descendientes desaprobaban casi todo lo demás, salvo el interés compuesto, la fortuna había crecido hasta alcanzar proporciones casi inmodestas, que sólo ahora empezaban a menguar).

Gwyon se había casado con Camilla el año siguiente a la muerte de su padre. Todo fue bien en la boda, salvo el brusco final de la marcha nupcial con una triunfal nota alta. La señorita Ardythe, que había atacado el órgano regularmente desde que le estafaron la doncellez hacia el cambio de siglo, se había derrumbado más muerta que una piedra sobre el teclado, con su afilada barbilla sobre un re sostenido. Hubo también la desaprobación por parte de tía May del padre de Camilla, el Carpintero del Pueblo, que según se decía tenía sangre india, y que se divirtió de lo lindo en la boda. Tía May prefirió excluirlo de su plan, dado que había sido bautizado en la razón cristiana y su salvación era cosa suya, a diferencia de un acosado grupo de lapones que aún entonces seguían siendo perseguidos por representantes de una de las sociedades por medio de las cuales extendía sus Buenas obras. Aquellos paganos estaban a una distancia segura, y no era probable que uno fuera a encontrárselos bamboleándose por Summer Street a horas indecorosas, cantando canciones poco cristianas.

Camilla había dado un hijo a Gwyon y había vuelto, virginal, a la tierra; virginal a los ojos de los hombres, en cualquier caso. La blanca carroza fúnebre de San Zuinglio estaba destinada a niños y doncellas. Para los viciados y corrompidos había un pesado vehículo negro, al que Gwyon había vuelto la espalda nada más verlo. «Jamás se montaría en eso», murmuró en inglés, dirigiéndose no al sacerdote de San Zuinglio, que estaba a su lado, sino a alguien que parecía estar en su interior. Y antes de que cerraran aquel ataúd por última vez, Gwyon los había detenido para alargar la mano y quitarle a Camilla los pendientes, unos pesados aros bizantinos de oro, que habían contrastado con los finos huesos de su cara durante aquellos últimos años de su vida. En la primera semana de su matrimonio, un amigo arqueólogo, al que no había vuelto a ver desde entonces, se los había enseñado a Camilla, y, advirtiendo los delicados orificios de sus orejas (hechos años antes con aguja y corcho), dijo riendo: «Si eres capaz de ponértelos, puedes quedártelos…», sin conocer a Camilla, sin saber que saldría corriendo de la habitación con los aros de oro en la mano y lo sorprendería poco después (aunque no a Gwyon) volviendo a entrar impetuosamente con un brillo salvaje en los ojos y los pendientes de oro puestos, enteramente cubiertos de sangre.

Ahora, con unas cuantas mentiras delicadas y la promesa de una garrafa de agua bendita de un célebre manantial norteño, consiguió que la carroza blanca la llevase colina arriba, renovada como aquella diosa remontante que cada año salía gateando del estanque con la virginidad restaurada. En aquella perenne inocencia… «Si al menos hubiera habido tiempo…». Podía oír su voz desgranando esta melancólica queja durante toda su vida. «Si al menos hubiera quedado tiempo», le habría pedido instrucciones. «¿Qué haré yo en un purgatorio… donde todos hablan español? Nunca he estado en ningún tipo de purgatorio, y nadie… No tengo miedo, sabes que no tengo miedo, pero… si al menos me dijeras lo que debo hacer…».

Gwyon rozó distraídamente con el bastón el perfil femenino representado en el escudo de piedra de don Felipe V, que se erguía ante él repeliendo desde la superficie cóncava de su cara sin nariz el frío inmóvil que descendía sobre la ciudad desde los picos blancos de la sierra de Guadarrama, al norte. *El aire de Madrid es tan sutil que mata a un hombre y no apaga un candil*,[8] había leído en algún sitio, y aquel frío mortal no parecía venir de fuera, sino difundirse por su cuerpo desde la médula de los huesos. Tras la falsa aurora, el sol preparaba al cielo para su aparición, y allí yacía la curva de la vieja luna, un fragmento de perfección confiadamente abandonado al borde de la tierra, antes de que la llamarada que se alzaría tras ella extinguiese la fría calma de su reinado.

Un sentimiento de liberación invadió al reverendo Gwyon. No habría sabido decir si era liberación de algo o para algo. Sintió que en alguna parte, más allá de su conciencia, se había tomado una decisión: que ahora debía seguir su impulso, y descubrir más tarde su sentido. Habría tiempo.

Habría tiempo: mientras el sol rebasaba el borde de la tierra en el milagro de su aparición y luego, confiado en su logro, ascendía lentamente en el día.

El reverendo Gwyon hizo las maletas y viajó lentamente por la península. Vio gente y reliquias, movimiento y colapso, la acumulación del tiempo en los muros, los pórticos derruidos, mosaicos en monocroma exposición que recuperaban sus colores de vida romana cuando se les echaba encima un cubo

de agua, las fachadas rotas de catedrales donde el tiempo no había pasado, sino que se había aglomerado, y que perduraban no como testigos de su destrucción, sino como custodios de su pervivencia. Al entrar en las ciudades lo perseguían los gritos de los buhoneros, hombres que compraban botellas, que vendían escobas, que gritaban como hombres afligidos por grandes dolores. Por las calles lo perseguía la desesperada esperanza de felicidad de las melodías rotas de los organillos, y se detenía a contemplar los juegos de los niños sobre el pavimento, buscando allí (como buscaba en la forma de los tejados, en el trazado de las escaleras, los pasillos, los dormitorios y las cocinas abandonados en paredes todavía en pie donde el edificio colindante se había derrumbado, o en la sombra del respaldo de una silla sobre el embaldosado repetitivo de un suelo) indicios de un modelo persistente, de una forma significativa. Visitó catedrales, la desentrañada mezquita de Córdoba, la inmensa mole de Granada, y esa frenética demostración gótica de Burgos donde hay un Cristo firmemente clavado del que una vez se dijo que estaba hecho con un pellejo humano disecado, pero que luego había pasado por cuero de búfalo, un material menos frecuente, que recordaba en su humor a la sirena compuesta de un mono y un bacalao. Coleccionó cosas, cada una con una intención de suyo santa, pero pagana en la variedad de su elección. Cuando empezó la temporada fue incluso a una corrida de toros.

Durante todo este tiempo encontró poca gente que conociera San Zuinglio. Los que habían oído hablar de este pueblo recordaban el único suceso que lo había distinguido en el curso de un siglo de sucesos. Doce años antes, una niña de once años había sido brutalmente violada cuando volvía a casa después de hacer la primera comunión. Días después murió. Se descubrió que el hombre que lo había hecho tenía una enfermedad cuya curación creía poder lograr gracias a semejante comercio con una virgen, y como todo en su aspecto confirmaba su probable virginidad, siguió los pasos a la pequeña novia bizca con este simple propósito curativo. Estaba en la cárcel.

San Zuinglio apareció de repente en una curva de la vía férrea, un pueblo hecho de roca contra roca, con calles que corrían entre las casas como lechos de ríos agostados y casas descuidadamente amontonadas unas contra otras como cantos rodados a lo largo de un arroyo de montaña. Las golondrinas se lanzaban en picado y pasaban rozando con pasmosa seguridad la torre de la iglesia, y el aire estaba lleno de sus chillidos matinales, del rumor del agua corriendo, de rebuznos de burro y voces humanas distantes. Gwyon había subido hasta los pinos que dominaban el pueblo, deteniéndose cada poco a respirar y aspirar la deliciosa frescura del estiércol, para darse cuenta de cómo habían caído en desuso sus sentidos bajo los abusos de las ciudades. El día se intensificaba ingrávidamente, un día festivo, con multitudes deambulando por las calles, cantando y tocando en grupos, en uno de los cuales un niño con medio brazo, que sostenía una botella rota de anís, acompañaba a los músicos rascando aquella superficie de vidrio estriado.

Casi nunca fumaba, pero después de cenar se quedó sentado con un puro, cargando sus bocanadas de humo con el aliento vivificador del coñac, mientras hablaba con el señor Hermoso Hermoso de España y el gigante Anteo, cuya fuerza era invencible mientras permaneciera en tierra, y Hércules, al descubrirlo, lo alzó en el aire y lo ahogó entre sus brazos.

—España… —decía Gwyon—, la contención personal, y aun así aquí tengo una sensación de propiedad, pero incluso ahora… parece corresponder al momento el amor de los forasteros, pero una vez fuera se ven excluidos para siempre, su vacuidad ante un vacío, una superficie rugosa que se niega a admitir… España permanece aún sobre la tierra, y a nosotros, en nuestro país, nos están ahogando en el aire…

—Lo que más falta nos hace aquí —dijo el señor Hermoso, que había estado escuchando cortésmente— es desde luego una santa patrona de nuestra propiedad. Quizá haya advertido esta carencia durante su visita. Quizá se la haya hecho notar nuestro amable sacerdote… —El señor Hermoso enseñaba lenguas extranjeras, o lo habría hecho si alguien hubiera creído necesarios tales absurdos instrumentos, y regentaba algo semejante a una droguería. Tenía la cara redonda, de textura fofa y débil, desmentida por un primoroso bigote y unos ojos penetrantes. La raya le dividía limpiamente el pelo desde la nuca hasta el copete—. Pero esas cosas cuestan dinero, mucho dinero, sabe usted —siguió, elevando la voz sobre los estridentes acordes de un organillo que se había detenido ante el café—. Sumas de dinero tan grandes como quizá sólo pueda entender alguien de su posición. Demasiado grandes, quizá, es decir, para esta gente pobre e ignorante que tanto necesita la bendita custodia de una santa patrona… —Se detuvo, y sorbió su café con desamparada expectación, pero Gwyon no lo interrumpió—. Por eso estoy seguro, como esta gente tan buena, de que nuestra Niñita —con esto se refería a la desgraciada cría apiolada doce años antes— nos fue enviada con ese fin. El Señor no yerra, ¿cierto? En verdad, como dice su Biblia, ¿cierto? En verdad fue una santa, una pequeña santa entre nosotros. No pedía nada para sí, se mantenía con muy poca cosa, alubias y

arroz, era… —El señor Hermoso se interrumpió, como si hubiera perdido el hilo de un discurso cuidadosamente preparado y memorizado de antemano—. Aunque quizá fuera porque era tan pobre… —siguió razonando desvalidamente, tratando de recuperar el hilo.

Gwyon arrojó el puro a la calle, donde fue atrapado antes de que llegara a tocar el suelo. Murmuró algo sobre Anteo y se incorporó, pero el señor Hermoso lo agarró de la manga.

—La recuerdo tan bien —insistió el señor Hermoso—, ¿sabe usted?, jamás utilizó una palabra indecorosa. «Mi lengua será la primera parte de mi cuerpo que toque la Hostia… *¡qué fervorosa luna de miel para esta pequeña esposa de Jesús…!»,* [9] cuando la hirió tan cruelmente toda la vileza que hay en el hombre…

Gwyon se acercó a los escalones que conducían a la plaza. Las calles estaban atestadas, dispersa y débilmente iluminadas.

—Pero hay formas, ¿no es verdad? —dejó diciendo al señor Hermoso—. ¿Nos señala Nuestro Señor la adecuada? Muchos miles de pesetas, millones de liras —susurró, entrelazando sus gruesas manos, abandonado, mientras Gwyon bajaba los escalones—. Hay formas…

En las calles de abajo, Gwyon se vio saludado por diversas prendas del guardarropa de su esposa, llevadas con juguetona y a veces indigente indiferencia hacía el modelo original. La larga falda floreada de su traje de noche favorito pasó repartida entre tres niñitas claramente diferentes. Luego apareció una mujer con tres de sus vestidos puestos, todos sembrados de agujeros, cada uno cubriendo con sus restos las carencias de los otros. Su sombrero verde acampanado, su sombrero de la Quinta Avenida, con aspecto de que alguien había dormido con él y comido en él, estaba encasquetado en un ángulo belicoso sobre la cabeza del cerillero local. Tras la fiesta celebrada aquella mañana habían retirado la mayor parte de la parafernalia, pues los santos óleos, el agua bendita y las sagradas obleas salpicadas de cagaditas de moscas se guardaban bajo llave y candado por miedo de que los robasen y los utilizasen en prácticas de brujería.

Pero otros instrumentos sacros estaban dispuestos para la conmovedora ceremonia de despedida de la visitante extranjera que descansaba en lo alto de la colina. Se abrieron relicarios, se columpiaron incensarios en peligrosos arcos, se manosearon rosarios y se hojearon salterios, se asperjó agua, se hicieron repicar campanillas, se encendieron luminarias, se consumieron cirios, se chapurreó y tosió latín en monodia.

En medio de este caos perfectamente ordenado, sobre las olas negras que se alzaban y caían en genuflexiones, sobre la marea de sonido que subía y bajaba, dijeron a Gwyon que realmente era una pena *(lástima)* [10] que no hubiera una santa patrona para defender sus derechos y hacer progresar su causa por intervención directa. Las panderetas nuevas, aunque un poco fuera de lugar, se usaron con brillante resultado: su clamor intensificó el espíritu de impaciencia con el que, presumiblemente, el espectro melancólico y afanoso de Camilla Gwyon esperaba a que lo lanzasen hacia las puertas del paraíso.

Nunca le perdonaron que no hubiera traído el cuerpo a casa. Y Gwyon juzgó más prudente, o al menos menos complicado, no informar nunca a las familias sobre las extravagantes disposiciones que se habían tomado respecto al alma. «Seguro que habría pesado mucho menos», dijo tía May (hablando del cuerpo), «que toda esa basura que se ha traído». La basura incluía cierto número de reliquias no protestantes que pronto habrían de oscurecer la casa del párroco, entre ellas un mono rabón (era un mono de Berbería gibraltareño) que la aturdida mujer aún no había visto.

Wyatt tenía cuatro años cuando su padre volvió solo de España, y era un crío malhumorado de pelo color arena, ojos avellana que ardían en verde cuando se enfadaba y manos constantemente ocupadas, abriéndose y cerrándose sobre nada, rompiendo algo o hurgándose en la nariz. Aquel día de primavera se sentía con ánimo celebrante, y observó el solemne regreso a casa vaciando en un registro del suelo el orinal sobre el que meditaba cada mañana durante cosa de una hora. Poco después apareció tía May. Le dio un fuerte azote en el trasero, advirtió su error y, mientras se lavaba las manos, reflexionó con cierta amargura sobre el fin de aquella familia cristiana. Acababa de dejar al padre, que le había hablado del impaciente bulto de su equipaje que aguardaba en cuarentena. Tras salir bruscamente de su habitación, para digerir esta revelación y tratar de encajarla en el esquema febril de los recientes acontecimientos, apenas había llegado al primer balaustre de la escalera cuando oyó un ruido estrepitoso. Al volver encontró al reverendo tambaleándose con aire inseguro entre los añicos de un jarrón de loza de Bennington, un objeto singularmente feo al que ella tenía mucho cariño. El reverendo, que había empezado a cambiarse y trataba ahora de subirse de nuevo los pantalones, dijo algo sobre el balanceo del barco y su pérdida de equilibrio cuando el tocador no consiguió acercarse y sostenerlo. Si el primer resoplido de su tía pretendía manifestar

desdén, cuando lo repitió apareció en su cara una expresión atenta y cortante, y estaba a punto de hablar cuando llegó del piso de abajo el hilarante sonido del metal golpeando contra metal. Y allá fue tía May, lanzándose a toda velocidad por la ancha escalera de roble dorado, pero conservando caladas en la nariz las gafas y, por tanto, la dignidad.

—Seguro que ha llegado ya a la caldera —dijo cuando apareció el padre del niño, mientras se secaba las manos con un viejo paño de cocina—. Huele a eso toda la casa —añadió innecesariamente para aumentar el efecto, y se volvió hacia Wyatt—: ¿Por qué has hecho una cosa tan guarra? —El niño se quedó mirando por encima de ella el retrato de su madre sobre la repisa de la chimenea, una fotografía tomada antes de que Camilla se casara. Tía May lo agarró del hombro de pequeños huesos y lo sacudió. Era su preceptora cristiana. Era ella quien le había lavado la boca con jabón de fregar tras el episodio del conejo—. ¿Te gusta el olor? —siguió, arrastrando la palabra de tal modo que parecía cargada por sí misma de hedor.

—Será mejor que te vayas a tu cuarto —dijo su padre, con voz severa gracias sólo al esfuerzo, pues aquella súbita exigencia de disciplina resultaba desconcertante.

—¡A su cuarto! —exclamó la mujer, como si quisiera cortarle una mano para que aprendiera—. Pero si este niño…

—Vete a tu cuarto, Wyatt.

El reverendo Gwyon se mostró severo ahora, pero con ella, no con el crío; y tía May salió con aire majestuoso de la habitación para escribir una nota apresurada en la que declinaba la invitación a tomar el té que le habían cursado las damas de la Sociedad Úseme. Padre e hijo quedaron frente a frente, separados por el abrupto declive de sus diferentes estaturas, el hombre contemplando mudamente aquella encarnación de algo que había imaginado hacía mucho tiempo, en una vida diferente, y el niño mirando fijamente a su madre virgen.

Gwyon se recuperó, pero antes de que pudiera articular el sonido que aún no era una palabra en su garganta, Wyatt se volvió y subió lentamente las escaleras hasta su cuarto, hasta una silla junto a una ventana cerrada, donde se quedó sentado mirando el paisaje incumplido de la primavera, hurgándose en la nariz, sin respirar en apariencia.

Más allá del tejado de la cochera, las nubes conspiraban sobre el monte de la Lamentación. Miró hacia allí con ojos abiertos que no parpadeaban, como si en aquella dirección yaciera el futuro sin esperanza que ya existía, del que ya era plenamente consciente, al que estaba irremisiblemente abocado. Tenía los hombros encogidos, como inveterado en la costumbre de pasar frío.

Para alguien consagrado al servicio del Señor, como le aseguraba tía May que estaba, Wyatt parecía haber amontonado ya sobre sí una buena carga de pecado. Podía moverse en contadas direcciones sin aumentarla. Su más notable hazaña había ocurrido inmediatamente después de la noche de Halloween. Estaba en el cuarto de costura de su madre, curioseando en el cajón de los botones, a la hora de la sobremesa en que debía haber estado durmiendo la siesta, cuando entró ella. Iba vestida de blanco, y aunque parecía ir buscando algo, no pareció verlo. Corrió hacia ella gritando de placer, pero antes de que la alcanzara se volvió y salió, en el preciso instante en que tía May entraba por la puerta. «Estaba aquí, ¿adónde ha ido? Madre estaba aquí…», empezó a decir a tía May, y apenas añadió una palabra cuando aquella mujer sin entrañas lo tomó bruscamente en brazos y lo llevó a su cama, donde lo obligó a quedarse con poco más que un giro de muñeca, y donde lo dejó para que «suplicara al Señor» que lo ayudase a dejar de mentir. Fue días después cuando tía May lo llamó, toda estremecida, con una carta abierta en la mano, y le hizo repetir con detalle la mentira. Temblando como la carta que ella tenía en la mano, de la que no podía apartar los ojos, Wyatt habló con temerosa renuencia, como si aquello fuera un recurso, lógico para tía May, para justificar más castigos. Pero cuando acabó, tía May hizo que se arrodillara junto a su cama y que rogara al Señor ayuda para olvidarlo, que rogara al Señor que lo perdonara. Hasta se arrodilló junto a él.

El Señor no lo había ayudado: lo recordaba muy bien. El regreso de su padre produjo cierta confusión en su mente, pues de algún modo su padre y el Señor eran la misma persona, y estuvo a punto de pedirle que lo ayudara a olvidarlo. Pero no podía hacerlo, porque tía May le había ordenado que jamás se lo dijera. ¿Es que su padre no lo sabía? Y si Dios estaba en todas partes, ¿no había visto *Él* entrar a Camilla, vestida con una sábana blanca, buscando algo?

Tía May no volvió a mencionarlo nunca. Pero no perdió el tiempo en contar a su padre lo del conejo.

—No sé cómo empezar a contártelo —comenzó, y cuando Gwyon se mostró satisfactoriamente alarmado, siguió—: Tu hijo ha aprendido a decir palabrotas. Apenas resulta sorprendente, teniendo como tiene un abuelo que le habla igual que a sus compinches de la taberna, y que no deja de llenarle la cabeza de toda clase de tonterías… —Siguió explicando que cada vez que había ocurrido aquello le había quitado

un juguete a Wyatt (pues era indulgente), hasta que no le quedó más que uno, un conejo de trapo. (En honor a la verdad, las palabras que le habían costado aquellos tesoros eran «jopé» y «cabrito»: ella parecía conocer bastante bien su derivación eufemística)—. Y luego, la última gota, casi… casi no puedo repetir sus palabras. Aunque el Cielo sabe cómo están grabadas en mi memoria. Sabía que yo estaba en la habitación, estaba sentado en el suelo con su último juguete, ese conejo, y dijo… tu hijo dijo, tan claramente como estoy hablando, dijo: «¡Eres el conejo más puñeteramente divino que he visto!». —Y entonces, al oírse decir esto, tía May casi sollozó exclamando—: ¿Qué clase de pa… pas… pastor cristiano crees que saldrá de él?

En realidad, Wyatt estaba empezando a recelar del sistema cristiano. El recuerdo de la fiesta de su cuarto cumpleaños pesaba aún ominosamente sobre su mente. Tía May la había planeado con minucia, hasta el número exacto de gorros, prendas y trozos de tarta. Un invitado, no amigo de Wyatt (de una familia «menos afortunada que la nuestra»), se presentó con un hermano incondicional de las fiestas. (No sólo no era su amigo: una semana antes había desafiado a Wyatt a través de la valla que había tras la cochera diciendo «Ea, ea, ea, chupalateta de tu mamá…»). Llevaron a Wyatt a un rincón oscuro, donde más tarde imaginó que se concebían todas las obras de Dios, y le dijeron que lo cristiano era ceder su ración. De modo que inició su quinto año destocado entre guirnaldas de papel crepé, silencioso entre crujientes galletas, vacío de amor cristiano hacia el no invitado que le preguntaba por qué no comía tarta.

Los domingos por la mañana se dedicaba a arrancar botones o tiras de crin del tapizado del banco de la iglesia, tratando de imaginar alguna forma de evitar la entrega de la moneda que apretaba en la palma húmeda de la mano. Pero el momento fatal llegaba siempre, anunciado por una voz que cantaba, según creía, desde el cielo: «Todas las cosas vienen de Ti, oh Señor, y a Ti devolvemos lo que es Tuyo». Más tarde descubrió que no era en modo alguno una voz celestial, sino la de la señora Dorman, una mujer regordeta y ancha de pecho, patrona de una casa de huéspedes, estratégicamente situada en algún lugar elevado en la vecindad del campanario. Todos los demás feligreses eran víctima de este ardid, y él los habría ilustrado al respecto de no ser por la perspectiva de la pastilla amarilla de jabón de fregar. Y aparte del poder adquisitivo real de cinco centavos, lo que le fastidiaba era la idea de que en tiempos hubieran pertenecido al Señor: de qué podría servirle un níquel al codicioso anfitrión celestial… «Alabad al Señor, fuente de toda bendición», rompía a cantar el coro, y la moneda era arrebatada por una cesta de mimbre para no volver a ser vista jamás sobre la tierra.

Ahora, antes incluso de que acabara el día, Wyatt estaba de nuevo mirando por la ventana. Tras el casi silencioso almuerzo, tía May lo había mandado a su cuarto por cantar una canción indecente.

—¿Cantar? —preguntó Gwyon.

—La estaba tarareando.

—Pero… ¿tarareando? Cómo…

—Se sabe muy bien la letra. Es una canción de taberna, la aprendió de ese… ese viejo verde.

El Carpintero del Pueblo había encomendado la crianza de su hija a una tía y a una silenciosa prima llamada Mary. Era un tipo vistosamente desaliñado, con el cuerpo ladeado por el manejo del cepillo, según decía, al que habitualmente podía uno encontrar en la Cantina de la Estación cuando acababa su jornada laboral, hacia las once de la mañana. Años antes, la muerte de su madre lo había exonerado de su principal ocupación: retirarla del pie del monumento de granito conmemorativo de la Guerra Civil, en el centro del pueblo, adonde iba cuando la casa la agobiaba, y donde acampaba hiciera el tiempo que hiciera con las piernas cruzadas bajo una manta. Hasta entonces, la única hazaña del Carpintero del Pueblo había sido engendrar a Camilla. En cuanto al curso de los recientes acontecimientos, que aquel hombre la hubiera tomado bajo su responsabilidad espiritual y económica y luego la hubiera dejado inoperante en una tierra rodeada de extranjeros, montañas y mar, estaba un tanto perplejo. Lo que entendió sin mucha dificultad fue la desaprobación de la hermana de su difunta mujer y de la prima silenciosa, que querían que les fuera devuelto el cuerpo. Siguiendo una cómoda costumbre, les llevó la contraria. Ello le dio una buena excusa para pasar el tiempo fuera de casa. Fue en la Cantina de la Estación donde recibió condolencias y aceptó ofrendas fúnebres de bebida, y cuando estos tributos se agotaron, cayó en el hábito de hablar familiarmente de personas y lugares desconocidos para sus compinches, con lo que varios de ellos empezaron a sospechar que leía. Aunque fue bastante impreciso, su período de luto no duró mucho, pues no era algo acorde con su temperamento, y nunca se lo volvió a oír mencionar el nombre de su hija, al menos en la Cantina de la Estación.

En sus parientes cercanos, la sangre demostró ser más espesa que tres mil millas de agua de mar, y sólo la posibilidad del escándalo impidió cualquier movimiento cismático, que quizá habría traído sin cuidado a la sangre de los Gwyon. Se consumieron lentamente en un silencio de labios apretados, aunque hubo algunos, almas vacilantes obsesionadas con sombras de duda darwinianas, que al descubrir el compañero

burlón traído de Gibraltar se hicieron saber unos a otros que no tenían la menor intención de perdonarlo, ni en este mundo ni en el próximo.

A finales de la primavera, el reverendo volvió al púlpito de la Primera Iglesia Congregacionalista. La gente lo respetaba innatamente, pues sus padres habían tenido a su padre casi en tan alta estima como a los suyos. El nombre tenía a su espalda el peso de varias generaciones, desde que dos siglos antes el reverendo John H. Gwyon hubiera muerto acuchillado por indios descontentos, cuyo mito había tratado de sustituir por el suyo. La mayoría de los feligreses contaba entre sus antepasados con pilares de la sociedad puritana, que jamás habían permitido que el afecto sensiblero a otros seres humanos interfiriese con el deber. Tolerar que una bruja viviese resultaba tan ofensivo para el Dios de Calvino, Lutero y Wesley como para Aquél del papa de Roma; y como si estuvieran resueltas a superar la marca de la Santa Inquisición en la región de Toulouse, donde quemaron a cuatrocientas en medio siglo, aquellas manos severas habían conservado limpio el aire del Nuevo Mundo del mismo modo, y bien podrían haber acabado en la cárcel si hubieran aparecido en esta presente posteridad, pero estaban sabiamente exiliados en la muerte. Habían hecho su trabajo y dejado el legado de la culpa. Lo demás no era asunto suyo.

Los feligreses de esta congregación admiraban el porte del reverendo, como lo llamaban, bajo su sufrimiento (aunque había algunos pérfidamente humanos que envidiaban su destino), y nunca se enteraron con todo detalle del episodio español. Les bastaba saber que su pastor era de linaje conocido, que había sufrido dolorosas tribulaciones y que ahora había vuelto de sus calamidades temporales para guiarlos resueltamente, con la palabra y el ejemplo, por los senderos de la fortaleza cristiana.

Sus sermones se volvieron muy animados. En su soledad, Gwyon se encontró estudiando de nuevo. Con la pérdida de Camilla volvió a la época en que no la conocía, la época de los zuñi y los mojave, de los indios de las praderas y los kwakiutl. Se alejó considerablemente de su continente, y pasaba las horas avanzadas de la noche participando en oscuras prácticas desde Borneo a Asam. Ante él, sobre su escritorio, o apilados y desparramados por su despacho, yacían Eurípides y santa Teresa de Ávila, Dionisio Cartujano, Plutarco, Clemente de Roma y el Nuevo Testamento Apócrifo, ejemplares del *Osservatore Romano* y un folleto de la Sociedad para la Prevención de los Enterramientos Prematuros. *De contemptu mundi, Historia di tutte, Cristo y los poderes de las tinieblas, De locis infestis, Libellus de terrificationibus noctumisque tumultibus. Magia malaya, Religions des peuples non-civilisés, Le culte de Dionysos en Attique, Philosophumena, Lexikon der Mythologie.*
l'heresie

Sobre un volumen de sir James Frazer (abierto por el epígrafe «Sacrificio del hijo del rey») aparecía abierto *Las glorias de María,* y allí, subrayado, se leía: «No hay misticismo sin María». Detrás de los tejos, cuyas ramas densamente pobladas y bayas venenosas protegían las ventanas, pasaba una noche tras otra sobre él, sobre las actas de Pilato, las narraciones cópticas, la *Pistis Sophia,* el relato en que Tomás da cuenta de cómo el Niño Jesús convirtió en cabras a sus compañeros de juego; pero el libro que más a menudo sacaba de su estante era las *Obras completas* de san Juan de la Cruz, un volumen lo bastante grueso para albergar una botella de aguardiente en la cavidad despiadadamente recortada de la *Noche oscura del alma.*

En la iglesia, sus feligreses prestaban atención a sus sermones por rigurosa costumbre, y a veces se veían sacudidos por algo incómodamente semejante a un vivo interés. Le permitían incluso que los agasajase en latín, y más tarde, con creciente frecuencia a medida que pasaban los años, empezó a arrojar sobre sus pétreos rostros oleadas de lenguas inconfundiblemente paganas, como voluptuoso italiano, que fluían sobre sus almas nórdicas como el agua iluminada por el sol sobre unas rocas. No tenían en mucha estima a aquella raza desaliñada. Los exhortaba a espirar cuando rezasen…, ¿o era a aspirar? Nadie estaba seguro después, a solas con Dios. Y cuando aquellos bajíos grises mostraban inquietud, los tranquilizaba sombríamente una vez más recordándoles que incluso en aquel momento los contemplaban desde Lo Alto como a una generación obstinada e incircuncisa de víboras: estas palabras de aliento les resultaban muy consoladoras.

Consiguió incluso sustituir de nuevo por vino el zumo de uvas prescrito por ancianos abstemios para la celebración de la eucaristía, y una mañana soleada animó a su rebaño con las palabras: «No bebas agua sola, sino mezcla un poco de vino por el bien de tu estómago y tus frecuentes dolencias». Esto desconcertó a tía May, y aunque no podía atreverse a discutir con san Pablo Apóstol, era en momentos como aquél cuando sospechaba que en realidad nunca había dejado de ser Paulo, el judío de Tarso, con una nariz como la de san Edmundo, y con esos sucios hábitos inmoderados por los que son famosos los judíos. A diferencia de su caridad y la de sus sociedades, que jamás se aventuraba al sur del paralelo 6o salvo para hacer incursiones en el África más negra, la de Gwyon turbaba a todos, pues en lo que atañía a objetos dignos de piedad no sobrepasaba el radio de alcance de su voz. Janet, una chica con un tic que torcía a un lado la cabeza en alegres sesgos afirmativos de idiotez, ejemplo de un desliz de la moral puritana por parte de su

madre (trincada por un viajante de Nueva York que vendía bragueros ortopédicos), fue sorprendida una noche, tras el ensayo del coro, entregada detrás del órgano a un sobeteo juguetón con el conserje de la iglesia. Janet había nacido minutos después de la muerte de su madre, lo que algunos, incluida tía May, consideraron desde el principio una mala señal. Así lo demostró el incidente tras el órgano, y tía May dijo algo sobre el cepo y la picota, lástima que hubieran pasado de moda. «Lástima que nos veamos privados todos de esa satisfacción», convino Gwyon. «¿Qué quieres decir?», preguntó ella, con aire receloso. «La gran satisfacción de ver a alguien castigado por un acto del que todos nos sabemos capaces». «Pero yo…». «¿Hay algo más grato que esa exteriorización de nuestras propias maldades? El sufrimiento de otro en expiación de la vileza de nuestras fantasías…». «¡Basta!», exclamó tía May. «Estoy segura de que jamás he tenido tales pensamientos». «Entonces, ¿cómo puedes juzgar su crimen, si jamás te has visto tan tentada?», preguntó él calmosamente. «Hablas… hablas como un hereje», logró decir tía May, «un hereje de tu Iglesia y de tu… ¡y de tu familia!», y salió de la habitación.

El texto que eligió para el sermón del domingo siguiente estaba sacado del sermón de la Montaña (Mateo 7:1), y Janet entró en la casa del reverendo Gwyon como moza de cocina.

Hubo algunos, de carácter intuitivo muy poco frecuente en semejante comunidad, que sospecharon que su caridad era una máscara con la que encubría su sentido del humor para burlarse de todos. El Carpintero del Pueblo fue uno de ellos. Empezó a aparecer regularmente los domingos por la mañana en los rincones más sombríos de la iglesia, vestido con tirantes de policía y camisas tan respetuosamente púdicas que hasta ocultaban el botón más alto de su ropa interior, por lo general visible.

La casa del párroco era un edificio de madera cuyo interior estaba revestido de papel oscuro y paneles de tablas. Los árboles ensombrecían casi todas las ventanas del piso bajo. Cuando el amo deshizo su equipaje, el carácter de la casa cambió, descubriéndose por primera vez en simpatía con la oscuridad. El cuadro de Watts que representaba a sir Galahad, colgado en el pasillo del despacho, fue reemplazado por una pequeña cruz con un espejo en cada brazo. Un petirrojo, un zorzal y un azulejo (obra de un primo lejano que había descubierto en la taxidermia la Salida y había sido visto por última vez en el Museo de Historia Natural de Ciudad del Cabo, Sudáfrica, matándose a beber en una sala llena de yertos colibríes que él mismo había disecado) cedieron la hornacina a una mutilada estatua de piedra de una santa española, Olalla. Un cromo de un alce tímido que se escondía entre árboles desnudos fue sustituido por una copia de un cuadro de Brueghel el Viejo, y el manifiesto de la locura de san Antonio en el desierto fue colgado sobre un cuadrado de pared más claro, causado y cubierto por una pintura de Árboles (perpetrada por una parienta soltera sepultada hacía tiempo, y rescatada ahora por tía May).

Bajo la ventana del comedor apareció una gran mesa baja. Era la joya sin precio de su incipiente colección, aunque por ella se había acordado un precio que Gwyon pagó sin rechistar al anciano noble italiano que se la ofreció con tristeza y en secreto. El tablero de esta mesa era un original (aunque en la aduana italiana había hecho falta chalanear un poco, confirmando que era una falsificación para sacarlo del país) de Hieronymus Bosch, El Bosco, que representaba los Siete Pecados Capitales con complacencia medieval («mediemal», pronunciaba el reverendo con una luz impía en los ojos). Bajo el cristal que lo cubría aparecía Cristo con una mano mutilada en alto, y debajo de él en rúbrica, *Cave, Cave, videt…*
Ds

—¡Católico! —exclamó tía May con voz anatematizante. Añadió algo sobre la vanidad católica, o española, que revelaban los espejos de los brazos de la cruz. El reverendo Gwyon creyó mejor no explicarle su finalidad.

En cuanto al mono inconfundiblemente pagano, se lo obligó a vivir en la cochera.

La bienaventuranza de la niñez consiste en que nos deforman más cuando menos nos enteramos. En la casa del párroco medievalmente decorada, Wyatt pasó del pequeño orinal a una eminencia de porcelana más exaltante, y aprendió a hurgarse en la nariz con el índice en vez de con el pulgar. Pasaba más tiempo en casa que fuera, y ningún cambio de estación ahuyentaba el frío de aquellos pasillos sombríos, donde a menudo se lo encontraba vagando sin propósito, o simplemente inmóvil, contemplando las estrías de los paneles o las cóncavas molduras, escuchando los crujidos que brotaban de las aristas agudas del maderaje, repitiendo entre dientes palabras y frases una y otra vez, para alejarse luego como si alguien lo observara. Se quedaba así hasta que le interrumpía la apertura de la puerta del despacho a su espalda, y la truncada expresión de sorpresa de su padre al encontrarle allí, mirando fijamente la cruz con los cuatro espejitos, aunque nunca le preguntaba por ella; y sólo evitaba un pasillo, o apretaba el paso cuando tenía que atravesarlo para llegar al comedor, y aun entonces echando una ojeada por encima del hombro a Olalla,

que vigilaba desde su nicho, desnarigada, con la mano alzada que siempre esperaba le golpease por la espalda al pasar.

—*Al-Shira-al-jamânija*… —susurró.

—¿Qué? ¿Qué es lo que dices? —preguntó tía May, doblando una esquina.

—*Al-Shira-al-jamânija*… la brillante estrella del Yemen…

—¿Dónde oyes esas cosas? —lo riñó—. ¡Nada menos que el Yemen!

Y lo hizo volverse hacia las escaleras, y lo mandó arriba a leer el *Libro de los mártires* de Foxe, una de las obras encargadas de prepararlo para el sagrado ministerio. Desde la primera vez que le preguntaron «¿Amas al Señor Jesús?», se sintió incómodamente azorado, y como el odio es un concepto más fácil de expresar que el amor, el papa hollaba las espantadas galerías de su mente con un paso mucho más firme que el Señor. A su edad, la Sangre del Cordero no parecía un elemento demasiado agradable para bañarse, y la resurrección resultaba una preocupación prescindible para alguien que todavía no había vivido. Si era la senda de Dios (según decía ella) la que recorría con tía May, sólo habría podido quejarse de que los pies encallecidos de ella le permitían pisar en lugares donde los suyos no podían: sólo la atmósfera exclusiva de aquella espinosa expedición resultó durante algún tiempo insalubremente atractiva, eso y la promesa de que su madre había llegado ya a aquel Elíseo intermedio donde se reuniría con ella, al cual, a pesar de todo, lo conducía tía May guiándose por una estima de proporciones órficas. Por no decir nada del miedo, y menos del terror, pues el Dios celoso que esgrimía tía May volvía el paisaje de ultratumba del pecador más terrible aún que su vida feliz en la tierra. «El diablo da trabajo a las manos ociosas», le enseñó, y «En la caída de Adán / Pecamos todos», con la severa penitencia de alguien que nunca había tenido ocasión.

Padre e hijo se apartaban de ella en direcciones opuestas. Wyatt se alejaba hacia adelante, eludiendo casi siempre con despreocupada inocencia a cualquiera que quisiera retenerlo con la nostalgia egoísta del amor. Y su padre parecía encontrar la aventura de la vida cotidiana cada vez más molesta. El reverendo Gwyon se retraía de ella, por siglos, en cuanto podía refugiarse en su despacho, donde se hundía, inhumado, hasta que la voz de tía May lo golpeaba con la aspereza de un pico de enterrador. Como suelen hacer los hombres cuyos hijos les nacen a avanzada edad, contemplaba a Wyatt desde una distancia maravillada, viendo en su comportamiento una fantasía de perfecta lógica que manifestaba aquellas partes de sí mismo que habían tenido que crecer en secreto. Es verdad que compartían confidencias, pero aun éstas solían centrarse en residuos de la parte frontal de la mente de Gwyon, asuntos que quizá acababa de dejar hacía un minuto en su despacho, de Oisín o Teofrasto a Sirio, la estrella del perro, un sol cuya salida anunciaba el comienzo de la crecida del Nilo, o *Al-Shira-al-jamânija,* la estrella del calor y la peste, de las que Gwyon hablaba familiarmente cuando se veía obligado a conversar por la brusca y aún más tímida presencia de aquel fragmento de sí mismo con el que no dejaba de encontrarse. Hasta pronunciaba sin familiaridad el nombre de su hijo. (Pero había una razón para ello. Meses antes de que naciera, Camilla y él habían acordado llamarlo Stephen si era niño, y no lo recordaron hasta meses después de su nacimiento, cuando tía May había proporcionado ya, perentoriamente, el nombre Wyatt, extraído de algún lugar de la genealogía de los Gwyon. O más bien lo recordó Camilla, y aunque podía haber sido una elección sensata incluso para tía May, en homenaje al nombre del primer mártir cristiano, ninguno de los dos se lo mencionó, pues ya había tenido lugar el bautizo).

Cuando surgían cuestiones de disciplina, la cara de Gwyon adoptaba la expresión de un hombre al que han hecho una pregunta cuya respuesta conoce el resto de los presentes en la habitación. O cuando su hijo gimoteaba desobedientemente, Gwyon se inclinaba sobre él apretando los puños como para contener el impulso de matar al crío, y luego lo agarraba de modo estrafalario por una mano y un pie, y lo balanceaba de un lado a otro en fatigosos arcos hasta que Wyatt gritaba de placer.

Era tía May quien conservaba la austera medida del presente, por irredento que fuera, atenta a propósitos prácticos, manteniendo unidos a los dos como un viejo trozo de alambre de embalar.

—Ve a preguntar a tu padre —decía bastante a menudo, cuando surgían dudas en las lecturas que le imponía—. Pregunta a tu padre qué significa *homoousios*…

Pero media hora más tarde volvió a encontrarlo, inmóvil en el pasillo junto a la puerta del despacho, susurrando: *«¿Homoousios? ¿Homo-oisios…?».*

—¿Qué pasa? ¿Por qué no has…? ¿Qué te pasa?

Minutos después mandó a Wyatt a la cama por decir que no podía moverse, como si los espejos de los brazos de la cruz que pendían de la pared lo hubieran agarrado por detrás. Gwyon salió del despacho con aire confuso, y ella se lo explicó con voz malhumorada.

—Me viene con todo tipo de embustes —siguió, aprovechando la ocasión—, cosas que se inventa y pretende que son así, cosas que aprende Dios sabe dónde. Me ha hablado de siete cielos, hechos de

diferentes clases de metal, ¡en serio!

Anoche dijo que las estrellas eran almas humanas, y que los hechiceros sabían distinguir las buenas de las malas. ¡Los hechiceros! Debe de aprender esas sandeces de ese viejo verde, ese… abuelo, ¡en serio! Le cuenta todo tipo de cosas, que las brujas bajan a la luna de los cielos…

—Ejem… sí —murmuró Gwyon, la mano en la barbilla, mirando pensativamente hacia abajo—. En Tesalónica…

—¿Qué?

—¿Eh? Sí, las ejem… las brujas tesalonicenses, claro está…

—¿Quieres decir que tú… que tú le has contado esas… que le estás llenando la cabeza con todos esos disparates?

—Bueno, es… el propio Virgilio dice, ejem…, en algún lugar de las *Bucólicas*…

—Y supongo que le has contado que las perlas son el precipitado de la luz del sol cuando atraviesa el agua…

—La octava *Bucólica,* ¿no es así?, «Carmina vel caelo…».

—Y también te habrá oído a ti —siguió, alzando la voz en el oscuro pasillo— esa estúpida historia de que la Vía Láctea es el lugar por donde asoma la luz porque la sólida bóveda del cielo está mal ensamblada, ¿no?

—Teofrasto, sí, ejem…

—Y ese cuento de que el cielo es un mar, el mar celestial, y de un hombre que baja por una cuerda para soltar un ancla enganchada en una lápida…

Gwyon la había estado escuchando con la expresión de un hombre que encuentra una espina en un bocado de pescado; ahora alzó la vista como si entendiera por primera vez el tenor de su conversación. Inició un murmullo defensivo:

—Gervasio de Tilbury…

—¡Su propio padre! Y un pastor cristiano, contándole… y yo que echaba la culpa a ese viejo tontaina…

—Bueno…

—Sí, ¿cómo no iba a ser tonto? Mira que caerse en un pozo y salir diciendo que había visto las estrellas en pleno día. Por supuesto, creía que debía agradecerle a él esa historia sobre los espíritus malignos que mantienen sucio el sendero del paraíso, y limpio el sendero del… del infierno ¡para engañar a la buena gente!

Retrocediendo hacia su despacho, Gwyon empezó a decir:

—Entre los wathi-wathi…

—¡Los wathi… wathi! —gritó ella—. ¿Es eso propio de un cristiano?

—No es peor —replicó de pronto Gwyon, con la espalda contra la puerta y su figura llenando el umbral; luego bajó la cabeza y habló de modo más sosegado—, no es peor que algunas de las cosas que le das a leer, el hombre que se arroja a unas zarzas y se saca los ojos…

—Los niños…

—El hombre de doble obra, que siembra su campo sin simiente…

Pero se había vuelto, y sus tacones se alejaban ya en enconada pugna con los ásperos crujidos de la madera a su alrededor: así su mordaz rezongo atemperaba casi el frío que hendía, evocando no aquello sino fragmentos de una conversación anterior que había interrumpido felizmente, el Carpintero del Pueblo con el niño acorralado en el porche, diciendo en tono confidencial: «Tu padre cree que Sirio es un sol, pero yo lo he visto, desde luego. Lo he visto a la luz del día. Lo he visto a plena luz del día, he visto todas las estrellas a plena luz del día, el día que me caí al pozo. Hay demasiada luz durante el día, el aire está lleno de ella, pero bajas al fondo de un pozo, vaya, yo sigo yendo a mirarlas, un día te llevaré conmigo y tú también podrás verlas, las estrellas a plena luz del día…».

Subió las escaleras, pasó junto a un armario lleno de latas cuadradas vacías, marcadas con las etiquetas de tiempos mejores, cuando la fábrica de harina de avena de la familia era un próspero negocio; allí sorbió por la nariz, se caló las gafas sin detenerse y entró en su habitación, donde se sentó en su silla con el primer libro que encontró y llamó a Janet para que le subiera la cena. Desgraciadamente, el libro resultó ser la *Historia natural* de Buffon, pero se aferró a él, abierto de par en par por la página que hablaba del *magot,* «generalmente conocido por el nombre de mono de Berbería. De todos los monos sin rabo, este animal es el que mejor soporta la temperatura de nuestro clima. Hemos tenido uno durante muchos años. En verano permanecía con gusto al aire libre, y en invierno se lo podía tener en una habitación sin fuego alguno. Era muy sucio, y de natural hosco: utilizaba una mueca feroz tanto para mostrar su cólera como para expresar su hambre: sus movimientos eran violentos, su porte desgarbado, y su fisonomía más fea que ridícula. Cada

vez que se lo molestaba hacía una mueca y enseñaba los dientes…».

Aquella noche el reverendo Gwyon cenó solo, mirando con aire ausente por encima de la gran mesa de comedor hacia la mesa baja junto a la ventana, donde su hijo había cenado poco antes.

A diferencia de los niños a quienes se anima a rebañar el plato con el acostumbrado incentivo de unos animales felices pintados en el fondo, Wyatt daba apresurada cuenta de cualquier comida tediosa para encontrarse con un Pecado Capital. O a veces se olvidaba de comer, turbado por la presencia de la Figura en paños menores en el centro de la mesa, a la que se quedaba mirando con los ojos sin amor de la infancia hasta que lo interrumpían. Después de que le dijeran el significado de la rúbrica, se lo podía oír murmurando por aquellos oscuros pasillos: «Cave, cave. Dominus videt».

Ni siquiera tía May, pese a su herencia antipapal fielmente aceptada, cuestionaba esta letanía, pues como todas las mujeres que la habían precedido, aún planeaba dar a la familia otro respetable pastor. Recientes revelaciones no la habían incitado sino a renovar sus esfuerzos. Wyatt la oyó un día discutiendo su futuro con Janet. Se trataba de saber si se haría lo bastante robusto como para soportar los inviernos de Laponia, adonde iría a predicar el Evangelio. Después de aquello, dejó de rogar al Señor que lo hiciera fuerte y sano.

Había diversos flancos que se sentía obligada a proteger por él, y posibles influencias que prever y combatir, además de Roma, que según le habían enseñado era el mayor agente del mal, el veneno y la depravación sobre la tierra (tía May parecía conocer la historia completa de la corte papal de Aviñón: fue hablando de ella cuando se le oyó utilizar por única vez en su vida la palabra «burdel»). Le hacía aprender las exquisitas carreras del *Libro de los mártires,* le leía en voz alta pasajes de *El último día* del doctor Young, y le hacía leer en voz alta *La tumba* de Blair. Juntos leían en voz alta al obispo Beilby Porteus, autor de *Muerte,* mientras lo disuadía de pasar el tiempo con Janet, de visitar al inquilino de la cochera y de salir a pasear con su abuelo. La casa del párroco no estaba junto a la iglesia, como es costumbre, sino expuesta en una elevación del terreno a casi dos manzanas de distancia, al otro lado del pueblo viniendo de la Cantina de la Estación, un acceso protegido por una curva de la carretera cuya flecha indicadora señalaba en la dirección errónea. Había casi una milla desde allí a la casa por la corta y decorosa nave de la calle mayor, milla que el Carpintero del Pueblo recorría con bastante frecuencia, y cuando podía y se lo permitían llevaba a su nieto de paseo a las obras recientemente abandonadas de un puente, ingeniándoselas en estas breves excursiones para aumentar de modo apreciable el cúmulo de «sandeces» que con tanto denuedo combatía tía May. Nunca estaba segura de cuál de los dos hombres le inspiraba su parloteo sobre huevos de grifo, o sobre la alquimia, o aquella historia vergonzosa y nauseabunda sobre la mujer y el toro; pero cuando el niño dirigía su curiosidad a los grandes viajes, y a personajes como Kublai Khan, Tamerlán y el Preste Juan, sabía que debía agradecérselo al Carpintero del Pueblo.

Ahora, a media tarde de un día de finales de otoño, tía May estaba parada en el porche de poniente, frunciendo los labios, los codos en las palmas, contemplando cómo se oscurecía el cielo sobre el Monte de la Lamentación. Un agudo campanilleo procedente del pie de la cuesta la hizo apretar los codos y fruncir con más fuerza los labios. No se movió cuando vio aparecer a Wyatt por la entrada de la cochera y empezar a subir la cuesta hacia ella.

Nadie sabía, y nadie (salvo quizá el Carpintero del Pueblo) se molestó en preguntarse por qué el reverendo había llamado Heracles al mono de Berbería. De hecho, la mayoría optó por la vía fácil de la ignorancia, y creyó que el nombre del inquilino de la cochera era Hércules, cosa bastante fácil de explicar, pues era un tipo fornido de tres pies largos de estatura y claro pelaje pardo amarillento, con una raya más oscura cruzándole las mejillas, pelaje que desaparecía en algunas zonas de sus manos y sus pies. Era activo y afable, y ocupaba todo un extremo de la cochera con sus cabriolas y sus cantos. Dormía en un viejo trineo. Cuando creía que era la hora de la comida, cuando necesitaba compañía o cuando parecía sentir simplemente la efervescencia de algún mensaje que comunicar, agitaba furiosamente las campanillas del trineo. Un conejo blanco que le dieron para que le hiciera compañía reveló el lado más sensiblero de su dulce carácter. Se sentaba con él en brazos, canturreando mientras lo mecía. Pero su mejor amigo seguía siendo el niño que bajaba a darle aceite de hígado de bacalao de la misma botella y con la misma cuchara que usaba él (un vínculo que tía May ignoraba), y que pasaba horas haciéndole confidencias. Heracles se rascaba pensativamente la barbilla cuando le hacía preguntas, inclinando la cabeza de modo muy parecido, si alguien se hubiera fijado, al del reverendo Gwyon. Pues también Gwyon venía a verlo a otras horas, siempre solo, siempre oliendo mejor que nadie, con el leve frescor de la alcaravea. También él le hacía preguntas.

Pero a medida que envejecía, Heracles cantaba cada vez menos. Tomó la costumbre de quedarse sentado con aire taciturno en el trineo, mirando a lo lejos, más allá de las paredes de la cochera, como si soñara en

los días pasados bajo el sol marroquí, en otra generación, robando en los huertos de los árabes. Nunca se había entrevistado con tía May. Conocía su enjuta figura de haberla visto tendiendo la colada en la cuerda (cosa que solía hacer, u ordenaba hacer a Janet, colgando por separado las prendas masculinas y femeninas), o saliendo sola con un desplantador y unas tijeras a cuidar el espino situado al extremo del prado superior. También conocía su voz vibrante, y la odiaba. Ella no había visto nunca a Heracles, y nunca hablaba de él, pero cuando su nombre salía en la conversación apretaba los labios con fuerza y miraba hacia otra parte. La sensación de que aquel mono había sustituido a Camilla resultaba tan inquietante para su esquema cristiano que jamás hablaba de ella, y ni siquiera la admitía en su fuero interno.

—Bueno, ¿dónde has estado? —preguntó mientras Wyatt subía los escalones, pero su voz era casi afable —. ¿Y qué te pasa?, ¿has llorado? —El crío se frotó los ojos, y luego se pasó la mano por la cara, pero no contestó—. Tienes un aspecto febril —dijo, mientras se recogía las faldas con el repentino ademán modesto de la infancia, y maneada de tal guisa lo condujo al interior de la casa—. Hoy es el cumpleaños de tu madre —dijo una vez dentro. Y luego—. Tienes las manos llenas de mugre.

—¿Qué es un héroe? —preguntó Wyatt bruscamente, separándose de ella y mirándola desde abajo.

—¿Un héroe? —repitió ella—. Un héroe es alguien que sirve a algo superior a él con inmarcesible devoción.

—Pero… ¿cómo sabe lo que es? —preguntó allí parado, restregando una mano mugrienta contra la otra ante ella.

—El verdadero héroe no necesita hacer preguntas —dijo—. El Señor le señala su deber.

—¿Cómo se lo señala?

—Como se lo señaló a John Huss —contestó al momento, sentándose, echando mano confiadamente del pasado para evocar a aquel «hombre pálido y delgado de humilde atavío», y empezó a referir con todo detalle la carrera del gran reformador bohemio, desde sus enseñanzas y triunfos bajo el buen rey Wenceslao hasta su traición por el emperador Segismundo.

—¿Y qué le pasó después?

—Murió en la hoguera —dijo con amarga satisfacción, mientras se oían pasos acercándose por el pasillo del despacho—, con el kirieleisón en los labios… Ven aquí, ¿adónde vas? ¿Qué trastada has hecho…? —Se había vuelto para huir, pero Gwyon estaba en el umbral bloqueando la salida, y el niño se echó a llorar entre ambos. Gwyon levantó la mano nerviosamente, dudando entre castigar o defender, y tía May volvió a la carga—: ¿Qué has hecho? Conozco esa expresión culpable en tu cara, ¿qué ha sido?

—Vete a tu cuarto —logró decir Gwyon, tratando de rescatarlo.

Tía May saltó de su silla, diciendo:

—¡A su cuarto…! —Pero la mano alzada de Gwyon pareció detenerla, y se volvió hacia la menuda figura fugitiva diciendo—: A tu cuarto, entonces vete a tu cuarto, y lee… lee lo que hemos estado leyendo, y antes de la cena subiré a ver si te lo sabes.

—¿Qué habéis estado leyendo? —preguntó Gwyon con voz tensa.

—Se está aprendiendo el Sínodo de Dort.

—¿Dort? —musitó Gwyon, dejando caer la mano.

—Dort. La perseverancia final de los santos. Cielo santo, tú…

—Pero… el niño…

—¿Has visto la expresión culpable de su cara? Su pecadora…

—¡Pecado! Dónde ha pecado… ya…

—Que tú, un pastor cristiano, preguntes eso… Tú… —De repente se acercó a Gwyon, que retrocedió al pasillo, huyendo de la acometida de su voz—. No su pecado, entonces, sino la posibilidad —siguió con voz ronca y jadeante, casi un susurro, como si también ella fuera a echarse a llorar o a gritar—, la posibilidad lo atrae, la posibilidad del pecado.

Se quedó allí temblando, hasta que el sonido de los pasos de Gwyon se extinguió al fondo del pasillo. Entonces sorbió por la nariz, mordiéndose el labio inferior, y salió también al pasillo.

Aquella noche, más tarde, Gwyon estaba reclinado sobre el atiborrado escritorio de su despacho, mirando fijamente por el cristal hacia la oscuridad exterior. «¡La perseverancia final de los santos!», murmuró. Luego se volvió hacia la puerta, como si hubiera oído un ruido. Esperó, con la mano tendida hacia el picaporte, a que se repitiera la débil llamada, pero nada ocurrió. Acababa de volverse cuando oyó un crujido en el pasillo, pero nunca supo si era alguien que se alejaba lenta y cautelosamente o la simple reanudación de la pugna perpetua entre aquellas aristas agudas del maderaje.

La casa era grande y, quizá por el anhelo inalterable e insatisfecho que reflejaba la cara de Camilla sobre la repisa de la chimenea del salón, contemplada desde la pared de enfrente por el severo John H., parecía

envuelta en un aire de duelo, aunque hacía mucho tiempo que nadie había nacido o muerto en ella.

Aunque ni siquiera la actitud medieval de tía May le habría permitido creer que su estómago fuera un caldero donde el calor del hígado contiguo cocinaba los alimentos, solía buscar pruebas del disgusto del Señor en las catástrofes extranjeras y los apuros de los demás, y por regla general encontraba buenas razones para explicarlos. Entre las facultades cuyo dominio conservaba Él en exclusiva figuraba la de crear, y el trabajo creativo mortal era una de las cosas que más categóricamente condenaba. Ella misma no había pasado nunca de hacer un dechado, expiando en él de palabra y obra cualquier presunción que hubiera podido tener, a la edad de diez años, de asumir poderes creativos:

> Permite Jesús que tu dulce nombre clemente
> Los primeros esfuezos de una mano niña aliente
> Y mientras sus dedos se mueven sobre esta tela
> Llena su alma tierna con el Amor que anhela
> Deja que comparta de tus niños queridos el don
> Y escribe tú mismo tu nombre en su corazón

La *r* que faltaba no era, como la tacha de las alfombras orientales, una medida deliberada de humildad destinada a aplacar al Creador de toda perfección: llevaba medio siglo lamentando aquel error, y de niña lo habría desgarrado con los dientes si una cansada mano paterna no se lo hubiera impedido. (De modo que bordó NO HAY CORONA SIN CRUZ en otro dechado, colgado aún con los colores frescos en su habitación).

Pero fue por eso por lo que el día en que Wyatt sometió a su aprobación su primer dibujo, según dijo de un petirrojo, que parecía una *E* torcida, le espetó sin más:

—Así que a fin de cuentas no amas a nuestro Señor Jesús, ¿eh? —Él dijo que sí—. Entonces, ¿por qué tratas de suplantarlo? Nuestro Señor es el único verdadero creador, y sólo los pecadores tratan de emularlo —siguió, mientras su voz se sumía en aquel tono paciente que adquiría cuando prometía mayor peligro—. ¿Recuerdas a Lucifer?, ¿quién es Lucifer?

—Lucifer es el lucero del alba… —empezó confiadamente—. Padre dice…

—¡Padre dice…! —lo cortó su voz—. Lucifer fue el arcángel que se negó a servir a Nuestro Señor. Pecar es falsear algo en el Orden Divino, y eso fue lo que hizo Lucifer. Su nombre significa Portador de la Luz, pero él no se avino a traer al hombre la luz de Nuestro Señor, quiso suplantar el poder de Nuestro Señor y traer al hombre su propia luz. Intentó ser original —pronunció malévolamente, plasmando en aquella palabra la entera estructura de la condenación, repitiéndola mientras estrujaba en su mano el dibujo del petirrojo—, original, suplantar la autoridad de Nuestro Señor, dirigir su propio destino, ¡portar su propia luz! Por eso es Satán el Angel Caído, porque se rebeló cuando trató de emular a Nuestro Señor Jesús. Y ganó su propio dominio, claro. ¡Claro! ¡Y su luz es la luz de los fuegos del Infierno! ¿Es eso lo que quieres? ¿Es eso lo que quieres? ¿Es eso lo que quieres?

Podía haber habido muchas cosas, para entonces, que Wyatt habría querido hacer a Jesús: emularlo no era una de ellas. Sin embargo siguió adelante. Hacía dibujos en secreto y los tenía escondidos, aterrándose con culpable asombro a medida que las figuras iban tomando forma bajo su *lápiz*. Envolvió algunos en un periódico y los enterró detrás de la cochera, cada vez más convencido, a medida que pasaban los años y su talento florecía y crecía con la exuberancia del laurel, de que estaba condenado. Una vez, cavando allí de nuevo, dio con los restos podridos del pájaro que había matado aquel día en que se deshizo en lágrimas ante la regañina y el castigo conjeturales de tía May, los vívidos detalles del Sínodo de Dort: aquella misma noche había ido al despacho de su padre para intentar confesarlo, pues al fin y al cabo había sido un accidente (había tirado una piedra al reyezuelo, y no pudo dar crédito a sus ojos cuando lo alcanzó de lleno, y lo recogió muerto). Pero cuando su primera y leve llamada a la puerta del despacho no recibió respuesta, se retiró. También ahora estuvo a punto de ir a confesarlo a su padre, con una última esperanza de salvarse; pero desde entonces había aprendido de tía May que no había más esperanza para los condenados que temor para los Elegidos. Y su padre, que se refugiaba en su despacho con una habilidad para ausentarse en los momentos cruciales semejante al talento del Señor, se había vuelto casi tan inaccesible como Él.

La tierra que había tras la cochera se removía tan a menudo que cada vez que Wyatt enterraba allí otro paquete de dibujos, desenterraba a un tiempo la culpa enmohecida de años antes. Ni siquiera fue capaz de quemarlos cuando, crecido ya, habría podido hacerlo. Siguió enterrándolos en los alrededores del vertedero, como si algún día hubieran de exigírselos.

Finalmente tía May le permitió copiar ilustraciones de algunos de los maratones de sufrimiento y desastre que, encuadernados en cuero, albergaba su estantería; pero ni siquiera ella tenía idea de la envergadura de su trabajo. Apenas era original, sino que derivaba del horror de la copia de Brueghel colgada en el despacho de su padre, y de la crueldad del Bosco, que estimulaban una imaginación articulada de la que cualquier primitivo flamenco habría podido sacar provecho. A diferencia del niño sano que idea ingeniosas torturas para animalitos, Wyatt creaba un dominio donde el dolor humano tomaba extraños derroteros, y donde la Figura en paños menores del centro de la mesa del Bosco sufría muy diversas aflicciones indecorosas.

Los transportes y las comunicaciones progresaban, trayendo a la puerta de tía May los infortunios del mundo, un mundo que cada día veía peor.

Sólo dejaba a un lado la Biblia para hacer incursiones en las *Vidas, sufrimientos y muertes triunfales de los primitivos mártires protestantes, desde los inicios del cristianismo hasta los últimos períodos de las persecuciones paganas, papistas e infieles* («adornado con grabados»), y en aquellas obras de profetas recientes que hacían para ella las veces de periódicos. Leía interpretaciones de las profecías de Malaquías, del siglo XI (sobre los papas, de los que sólo quedaban siete por venir, y con el séptimo la destrucción de Roma), con la misma avidez con que otros leen las noticias matinales, el mismo entusiasmo que dedicaba a la *Penetralia* de Andrew Jackson Davis (que podía ver el interior de los objetos), la misma ansia que dedicaba a William Miller, convencido como estaba un siglo antes de que el fin del mundo estaba cerca, según demostraban los hechos «acudiendo en tropel de todos los confines. “La tierra se tambalea de un lado a otro como un borracho”. En este espantoso momento, ¡mirad! Las nubes han estallado en pedazos; aparecen los cielos; ¡el gran trono blanco está a la vista! ¡El asombro llena el Universo de pavor! ¡Él viene! ¡Él viene! ¡Contemplad cómo viene el Salvador!».

Ella esperaba, hojeando la Revelación de san Juan el Divino, que leía como una transcripción literal de la marcha de la ciencia, un desfile encabezado por Darwin que había hollado con pie de simio el curso entero de su vida. Pasaba más tiempo con Janet; o más bien obligaba a Janet a pasar más tiempo con ella. Tras dejar bien sentada su desaprobación original de la moza de cocina, tía May trataba de guiarla hacia la salvación sembrando a su paso todos los obstáculos de que podía echar mano. Janet mostraba buena disposición. En realidad, iba muy aventajada en el camino hacia esa simpleza de espíritu que mucha gente desesperadamente inteligente considera un requisito para entrar en el reino de los cielos. Aunque esta cualidad le impidiera comprender algunos de los arcanos más complejos que le proponía tía May, todavía quedaba espacio en la morada en ruinas de su mente para que el terror estableciera allí su residencia. Darwin no tardó en resultarle tan familiar como el papa, el uno parecido a Heracles, el otro con tres cabezas. A ambas les llegaba desde la cochera el tintineo de las campanillas del trineo. Creyendo negarles la entrada, tía May se las ocultaba a sí misma en aquella parte de su mente que la asaltaba en sueños; Janet parecía abalanzarse al encuentro del infernal campanilleo, y sólo al despertar empezaban sus sueños. Pero de todas las desdichas que soportó Janet, la más pertinaz fue la venganza de su cuerpo de su intento de desdeñarlo. Al principio, como apenas sabía en qué se diferenciaban el hombre y la mujer, aceptó los cambios que le sobrevenían con no mayor pesar que el que la propia vida producía. Fue tía May quien llamó su atención sobre el oscurecimiento de su barbilla, y le hizo preguntas de tan profunda delicadeza que, una vez confirmadas sus sospechas, la consternación que abrumó a la interrogadora sólo fue igualada en aquella casa por su recepción de las noticias del juicio de Scopes en el lejano Tennessee. [11] Apenas podía hablar de aquello, pero pasó horas meneando la cabeza sobre la *Historia natural* de Buffon, leyendo una y otra vez el epígrafe sobre los animales llamados pigmeos, y esperando, como si lo que esperaba fuese un secreto para todo el mundo menos para ella y su Creador.

Tía May se retiró poco a poco de los asuntos de la casa, y pasaba el tiempo leyendo la Biblia en voz alta en su habitación, con una voz que sólo era un sonido apenas quebrado por la articulación. Esta salmodia monocorde llegó a ser una parte tan familiar de la casa que uno se detenía cuando variaba de tono, oyéndola alzarse en suplicante argumento ante el desafío de los absolutos, «*Yo* soy la Resurrección y la Vida…», tan lastimera que parecía quejumbrosa, temerosa no de dudar, sino de admitir siquiera por un instante tal posibilidad existencial. Luego se extinguía el destello de humildad, y la voz recobraba el tono sonámbulo de la certidumbre.

Esperaba, con el pelo cortado a lo paje (no según la moda del mundo exterior, donde las *flappers* lo estaban introduciendo en la buena sociedad desde los lupanares, donde todas las modas tienen origen), sino con el limpio corte tablilla de un hospital público, siempre con el mismo pulcro peinado, levantando un espejo clínicamente incompasivo para arrancarse los pelos de la nariz.

—Hoy sería el cumpleaños de tu abuelo —dijo a Wyatt el primero de mayo—. Cumpliría ochenta y seis

si estuviera vivo.

Un minuto antes había estado hablando de John Huss, y miraba de arriba abajo al chico pálido y delgado (para quien el rey Wenceslao de la historia guardaba un chocante parecido con el Carpintero del Pueblo) cuando éste exclamó:

—Pero el abuelo, si… si lo vi ayer…

—El padre de tu padre —lo corrigió ásperamente, pero su voz se quebró casi con amargura mientras desviaba la vista, no por la muerte de su hermano sino para insinuar que la había abandonado en aquel cautiverio de la mortalidad. Hablaba familiarmente a Wyatt de la muerte, como si llevárselo consigo fuera la más tierna expresión posible de su amor por él: pero nunca hablaba de ella directamente, nunca la nombraba, sino que seguía tratándola con la eufemística cautela que en otras partes se reserva a la obscenidad.

—¿Y esto? —Apareció un día con porte envarado en la puerta del despacho, mostrando un folleto que sostenía entre el índice y el pulgar—. ¿Cómo ha aparecido esto entre mis cosas, di? —Una corriente de aire pareció agitar el folleto, entreabriéndolo y haciendo temblar su título suspendido: *Breve guida della basilica di San Clemente.* Gwyon hizo ademán de levantarse de su silla para agarrarlo, pero lo detuvieron su brazo rígido y sus ojos inflexibles, que habían fijado la distancia entre ellos. Con un leve estremecimiento liberó sus ojos de los suyos y los clavó en el folleto, dándose cuenta de que en realidad no se lo ofrecía para devolvérselo, sino más bien como prueba: su severa aparición no hacía pensar ni por un instante en capitulación—. ¡Otro recuerdo de España! —acusó, mientras una hoja encabezada con *La basílica sotterranea dedicata alla memoria di S Clemente papa e Martire* se desprendía bajo su pulgar—. Fotos de ídolos españoles… —Los fragmentos de un fresco bizantino con el pie *Nostra Signora col Gesù Bambino* captaron casi su atención—, imágenes católicas… —Cayó otra hoja de la mano que temblaba al extremo de su brazo extendido, y adelantando el pie un paso cruzó el umbral y lo acercó más a él: nada se movió. Pero se oyó crujir la madera bajo sus pies, una señal para que ella se lo arrojase o lo dejase caer, para que él saltase y se lo arrebatase. Pero nada se movió hasta que ella se retiró desandando el terreno ganado, y habló con acerba calma mirando directamente a aquella cosa—: ¡Bonito… lugar de culto! —La ilustración traspasada por su mirada llevaba el pie «Il tempio di Mitra»—. ¡Míralo! Una sucia cavernucha subterránea, sin lugar para arrodillarse ni para sentarse, a menos que puedas llamar asiento a este banco de piedra roto. —Tomó aliento mientras él alegaba «Pero…»—. ¡Y el altar!, míralo, mira el cuadro que tiene encima, un hombre… ¿Dios?, ¡y parece un toro!

—Sí, un templo pagano, excavaron y descubrieron que la basílica de San Clemente estaba construida justo encima de un templo donde los adoradores de…

—¡Pagano, claro! Y supongo que no pudiste resistir la tentación de poner los pies dentro, ¿no? ¿Lo hiciste? —Volvió a detenerse, mientras tomaba aliento pareció preparar el desquite de su respuesta, lo admitiese o lo negase, y cuando él se apartó murmurando solo «¿Poner los pies dentro…?», le espetó inmediatamente—: ¡Al menos he tenido por fin la satisfacción de oírte llamar pagana a la Iglesia Católica Romana! —Llenó su severa mirada durante otro instante con la foto, y terminando con—: Ahora que todos sabemos qué aspecto tiene el interior de una iglesia católica… —Salió sosteniendo el detestable recuerdo con el brazo extendido, mirándolo con alarma, como si pudiera cobrar vida y atacar.

Gwyon se echó lentamente hacia adelante en su silla, las manos cerradas sobre nada, escuchando cómo se alejaban sus rápidas pisadas hacia la cocina. Esperó hasta que las oyó en las escaleras, y entonces se dirigió apresuradamente hacia la cocina. Cuando al cabo de un rato entró Janet, lo encontró hurgando en el cubo de la basura; pero salió sin decir palabra y con las manos vacías. Y cuando luego, durante la comida, empezó a preguntárselo titubeando una o dos veces, ella miró hacia arriba y más allá de él y de la habitación, como si escuchara una confidencia, o una llamada, de la lejanía.

Aunque la mayor parte de la conversación parecía pasarle por encima, a veces interrumpía su curso para rescatar algo que le chocaba. Pocas cosas parecían impresionarla agradablemente salvo las noticias de sucesos luctuosos ocurridos en Italia: ya fueran temporales o huelgas o accidentes ferroviarios, veía inminente en ellos la caída de Roma. Esperaba, imaginando la condenación en masa del entero mundo no cristiano con mirada tan impávida como la de san Buenaventura: no más madre que él, la perspectiva del achicharramiento eterno de millones de niños sin bautizar no la hacía pestañear siquiera: «La visión de los sufrimientos de los condenados colma la medida de los gozos accidentales de los justos», y con esas palabras en sus labios, ella confiaba firmemente en ver a san Buenaventura colmando su propia medida en la vida venidera. Pero hasta aquel tórrido paisaje se enfriaba y se hacía añicos horadado por las campanillas del trineo, más agudas por su infrecuencia, dejándola sin aliento si estaba hablando, o elevando su voz a la defensiva cuando leía.

—Está muy bien, claro, ¡muy bien para un hombre que va a corridas de toros! —exclamó al día siguiente en la mesa, evocando este remoto detalle para interrumpir la conversación entre padre e hijo—. Traerse un… un ser como ése de África, debería haber una ley que lo prohibiera.

—¿Un ser? —repitió Gwyon.

—Ese ser que te trajiste, de eso estabas hablando, ¿no? ¿No?

—Estaba diciendo… hablando de esa pintura, aquélla, la mesa bajo la ventana.

—Debería haber una ley que lo prohibiera, traer seres como ése.

—Oh, oh, Heracles, sí, quieres decir, está prohibido, sí, sacarlos de Gibraltar —empezó a contestar con aire confuso.

—¡Quebrantando la ley, orgulloso de ti mismo! —La luz cegó sus gafas mientras dirigía de nuevo su atención a su plato; y Wyatt, aprovechando su intervalo de distracción, preguntó:

—¿Cómo estabas seguro de que era el original? Supón que…

—Hizo falta cierta… ejem… connivencia para pasar la aduana. ¿Sabes?, está prohibido sacar obras de arte de Italia…

—¡Italia! —lo interrumpió tía May desde el otro lado de la mesa—. ¡Nunca me has dicho que hubieras estado en Italia! Nunca. ¡Nunca me lo has dicho!

—Es extraño que nunca lo haya mencionado —dijo Gwyon.

—¡Mencionado! Nunca me lo has dicho —dijo, levantándose de la mesa.

—Qué bendita diferencia…

—¡Bendita! Ninguna bendita diferencia, como dices. Ninguna bendita diferencia en absoluto. Para alguien que cuenta historias sobre espíritus malignos que engañan a la buena gente poniendo perdido de porquería el sendero del paraíso, ninguna bendita diferencia en absoluto —siguió, acercándose a la puerta —. ¡Al menos le ahorraste eso a Camilla! —terminó, y salió. Un momento después, dirigiendo a su hijo un murmullo de disculpa, aunque sin levantar la vista hacia él, Gwyon se levantó de la mesa y salió al porche, donde se quedó mirando directamente al sol.

Los días agradables como aquél, tía May seguía saliendo a cuidar su espino. Aquella tarde, cuando volvió de hacerlo, se sumió en un silencio impresionante. Gwyon imaginó que sería por el incidente italiano, pero ella dijo al rato en voz baja: «Esta tarde he visto una polla de agua». La polla de agua macho era el blasón de su familia. «Y no había ningún macho a la vista en ninguna parte. Llevo años sin ver una polla de agua macho».

Aunque despacio, todavía se movía con energía. Su mundo se había reducido finalmente a sus libros y su espino. Cuando alguien hacía preguntas de foránea subitaneidad, alzaba la vista con sobresalto y temor, como si alguna circunstancia mundana pudiera interferir en sus preparativos de marcha. Con el paso de los días dio en cantar con débil voz, que creía conservaba una melodía, un himno que recordaba haber aprendido de John Wesley, y que expresaba su divino anhelo, pues a veces parecía dispuesta a decir con santa Teresa «que muero porque no muero».

> Oh hermoso semblante de la muerte,
> Qué visión terrena es tan bella,
> Qué espectáculo, que primor de la vida
> Puede con un cadáver compararse,

llegaba su lamento por el vívido aire primaveral a los oídos de las cosas vivas.

Se puso un viejo blusón sobre su bata y se ató una cofia a la cabeza. Sus viejos zapatos de jardín hollaron la hierba matinal, hirviente de seres más pequeños que sus propias hojas. Un petirrojo remontó el vuelo ante ella cuando se acercaba al espino, arrancado del suelo y tendido, sus capullos rosados entre las malas hierbas. Su voz dejó de cantar mientras lo contemplaba con incredulidad. Levantó frenéticamente el árbol y volvió a meterlo en la tierra abierta en un ángulo inclinado. Luego volvió a la casa, y antes de que llegara, el árbol cayó de nuevo.

Heracles se había escapado la noche anterior. El Carpintero del Pueblo, que lo encontró junto a la Cantina de la Estación, lo trajo de vuelta y trató de replantar el árbol. Pero fue inútil. Antes de que acabara la semana murió el árbol, y también tía May.

Tenía sesenta y tres años. En su caso no era una edad madura, sino todo lo contrario, una reducción sistemática de años y pensamientos estériles, de desaprobación, una vida generalmente limitada por términos de negación, satisfecha con su resistencia a cualquier tentación que pudiera haber dado fruto. Mejor casarse que quemarse, pero ella no se había visto forzada a esa pusilánime elección: encallecida,

había pasado sin vacilar de una virginidad a otra. Aquí, tres siglos después de Dort, su cara tenía una firme expresión de Elección, como si supiera adonde iba, como si hubiera estado allí muchas veces. Parecía tener prisa por separarse de aquel cuerpo, como habría podido tenerla cualquier alma engreída, los quietos dedos desvaídos bajo el arrebol enmarcado de no hay corona sin cruz. Rodeado de libros cerrados, con la *Historia natural* de Buffon en el suelo, encontraron aquel cuerpo en la silla donde lo había dejado al partir, inequívocamente abandonado, como si ni siquiera la última trompeta pudiera hacerla acudir para recogerlo y llenarlo de nuevo. Sus últimas palabras fueron: «Creo que lo dejé en el cajón superior del escritorio». Más tarde buscaron allí, pero sólo encontraron la redonda cajita blanca de concha, con un agujero en la tapa, donde solía guardar el pelo que se le caía cuando se peinaba.

Wyatt tenía doce años, y quedó profundamente impresionado por el sermón fúnebre que su padre pronunció sobre aquella anónima caja donde tía May, con un vestido lavanda que nunca se había puesto, yacía con la tapa cerrada, una estipulación tan inoportuna como la de la beata Umiliana (otra devota de la cal viva), que con su último aliento pidió que le pusieran las medias, para que la multitud no pudiera venerar sus pies descalzos.

«¡Oh, hombre, considérate! Hete aquí en medio de la porfiada pugna perpetua entre el bien y el mal —tronaba el reverendo Gwyon, arrojando las palabras de William Law sobre las caras grises (cuyos propietarios lo recordarían años después, cuando estaba encerrado e indefenso, como el último sermón auténticamente cristiano que había leído)—. Toda la naturaleza trabaja de continuo para alcanzar la gran redención; la entera creación se esfuerza con arduo y laborioso afán para verse libre de la vanidad del tiempo; y tú, ¿dormirás acaso?

Todo lo que oyes o ves no te dice ni te muestra sino lo que la eterna luz o la eterna tiniebla han engendrado; pues al igual que el día y la noche dividen la totalidad de nuestro tiempo, así dividen el cielo y el infierno todos nuestros pensamientos, palabras y obras. Cualquiera que sea el camino que elijas, cualesquiera que sean tus actos o intenciones, habrás de ser agente del uno o del otro. No puedes quedarte quieto, porque vives en el perpetuo quehacer de la naturaleza temporal y eterna; si no trabajas con el bien, el mal que hay en la naturaleza te arrastrará consigo. Tienes en ti la altura y la hondura de la eternidad, y, por tanto, hagas lo que hagas, ya sea en la alcoba, en el campo, en el taller o en la iglesia, estás sembrando lo que crecerá y habrá de ser cosechado en la eternidad».

Tres años después, aquella deidad partidista cuya más reciente atención con la familia había sido rescatar a tía May de la mortalidad, actuó sobre Wyatt (aunque, como el chico y su padre sospecharon por separado, quizá fuera un dios completamente distinto). Wyatt fue atacado por unas fiebres que lo consumieron hasta dejarlo en setenta y nueve libras. En este refinado estado fue expuesto ante estudiantes de Medicina en el anfiteatro de un hospital muy bien dotado. Les pareció un caso muy interesante, y así lo dijeron. En realidad, dijeron muy poco más. Médicos, técnicos e internos radiografiaron al chico desde todos los ángulos posibles, le inocularon en los brazos una nueva enfermedad que creían poder curar, le sacaron de un brazo frascos enteros de sangre para investigar, y le metieron en el otro sangre de otras seis personas. Se reunieron en torno a su cama y lo martillaron, le hicieron punciones en el pecho, lo estrujaron con manos furiosas en busca de su hígado, sondaron su estómago con un tubo lastrado con plomo, le sobaron la ingle, le palparon el bazo y grabaron con aparatos eléctricos los desafiantes latidos de su corazón.

Se sintió violento por las hordas de dedos que lo exploraban en busca de cáncer, o de algo igualmente satisfactorio, y mortificado cuando una guapa enfermera lo fotografió en desvalida desnudez. Las manos de aquellas jóvenes fueron las primeras que le llegaron con el socorro del amor indiferente; y hubo dos que nunca olvidaría, aunque nunca vio a quién pertenecían. Yacía en un quirófano con la mirada clavada en la lámpara que tenía encima, leyendo el círculo de palabras que había en su centro, *Carl Zeiss, Jena, Carl Zeiss Jena Carl Zeiss…,* mientras los dedos insistentemente torpes de un cirujano escarbaban en una incisión bajo su brazo en busca de un nodo que no lograban agarrar. Las manos de la enfermera que tenía junto a la cabeza le enjugaban la cara con un paño húmedo, y cuando perdía el sentido estaban allí para reanimarlo con alcoholes aromáticos: así lo cuidaban las manos de la mujer, y las del hombre agarraron por fin el nodo, lo extirparon, cosieron aquel agujero y descendieron para hacer otro en la pierna, donde se detuvieron a quitar un trozo de piel moteada y penetraron luego para sondear y extraer un fragmento de músculo. El doctor Fell, un joven y entusiasta interno, le introdujo una aguja en el espinazo y sacó aquel precioso fluido. Semana tras semana siguió siendo campo abonado para aquella conspiración de talentos sin escrúpulos e insaciable curiosidad.

El reverendo Gwyon sacó de todo ello una impresión muy poco favorable. Mientras su hijo agonizaba de

una enfermedad sobre la que los médicos obviamente no sabían nada, que le inoculasen otra plaga simplemente porque les resultaba conocida sólo podía ser consecuencia de un grado de insania minuciosamente calculado. Los brazos de Wyatt se inflamaron en cada uno de los puntos donde le habían inyectado. El doctor Fell se adelantó de entre sus colegas con un escalpelo en la mano y un brillo en la mirada raramente permitido en libertad en las sociedades civilizadas, un brillo que el reverendo recordó haber visto en la mirada de un curandero de los indios de las praderas, cuyo paciente lo consideraba respetuosamente como parte del equipo profesional reunido para matarle. Con el arrojo de un mozalbete en una ceremonia de iniciación, sajó los brazos en cada punto de infección. El doctor Fell hizo un buen trabajo. Supuraron durante dos meses.

El invierno se derritió en la empapada primavera; abril cruel y mayo depravado llegaron y pasaron, y los médicos advirtieron que aquel caso estaba a punto de agotarse, y que de hecho podría traicionarlos refugiándose en la mesa de disección. Algunos de ellos propusieron valientemente, en interés de la ciencia, nuevos experimentos y extirpaciones; pero durante la prolongada estancia de Wyatt habían ingresado en el hospital numerosos pacientes comparativamente sanos, que aguardaban con comprensible impaciencia el momento de rendir su propia contribución vital al progreso de la ciencia. Con gran pesar, los médicos dieron fin a su deporte conviniendo en ponerle un nombre: *erythema grave.* Tras este supremo logro, concluyeron el ritual estrechándose las manos e intercambiando palabras de magia profesional, felicitación mutua y respeto recíproco, y enviaron al chico a morir a casa.

En la casa del párroco, Wyatt yacía transpirando abundantemente entre las sábanas. Había momentos en que los músculos y articulaciones de su cuerpo estaban tan saturados de dolor que pasaba varios minutos deliberando antes de decidirse a mover un miembro o a volverse. En otras ocasiones estaba febrilmente despierto, y los libros apilados a su alrededor no podían retener su exhausta atención. Sus títulos abarcaban desde los *Viajes por Arabia Deserta* de Doughty hasta *Un tratado cóptico* incluido en el *Codex Brucianus,* el *Rosarium Philosophorum,* dos libros de la *Divina Comedia* de Dante, el *De Praestigiis Daemonum* de Wyer y la *Inquisition*
d'Espagne
de Llorente, cuyas páginas, como las de todos los demás, tenían los márgenes atestados de notas de puño y letra del reverendo Gwyon. Gwyon los había subido uno a uno con la intención de utilizarlos para la conversación, que le resultaba difícil; pero, una vez en la habitación del enfermo, no hacía sino pasarse el libro nerviosamente de una mano a otra hasta que le preguntaban por él. Entonces bajaba la vista, como sorprendido de encontrarlo en sus manos, y un momento después estaba hablando de él con un fervor que poco a poco se convertía en agitación, hasta que se callaba bruscamente y lo tendía, tan medroso ante la idea de inculcar en su hijo las cosas que tanto le interesaban como excitado por la posibilidad de compartirlas con él. Luego podía quedarse allí parado sin más, tratando de sujetarse una mano con la otra a la espalda, mirando al suelo, profundamente azorado por aquella intimidad que la enfermedad había creado entre ellos. Por otra parte, Wyatt leía todo lo que podía a fin de prepararse para estas conversaciones que tanto placer deparaban a su padre, para romper los silencios cuya tensión tan prontamente revelaba aquella cara ruborizada y las breves exhalaciones teñidas con el dulce frescor de la alcaravea. A veces Gwyon se volvía sin más y salía atropelladamente de la habitación, dominándose a duras penas hasta llegar a la puerta, como hizo un día en que distinguió un conocido folleto manchado entre los papeles de su hijo que cubrían el suelo.

—¿De dónde has sacado esto? —preguntó mientras lo cogía, abierto por una ilustración que mostraba un orlado monograma papal, cerrado al pie por un ancla.

—Lo encontré en la basura, en el montón de la basura —balbuceó Wyatt—, hace años, en el vertedero, detrás de la cochera. —Se quedó mirando la codiciosa expresión del rostro de su padre—. No sabía que…

—Y lo has guardado, sí, todo este tiempo, me lo has guardado, ¿verdad? —farfulló Gwyon sin alzar la vista del folleto, volviendo sus páginas salpicadas de manchas—. ¿Lo has leído?

—Un poco, el italiano era difícil, no entendía todas las palabras, pero las ilustraciones… ¿ésa? ¿Ese monograma, con el ancla?

—Sí —murmuró Gwyon, apretándolo con el pulgar—, el monograma de Clemente, fue martirizado, sí, aquí, «gettato a mare con
un'ancora
…» le ataron un ancla al cuello y lo arrojaron al mar Negro.

—¿Sí, al mar con un ancla? ¿Como el hombre del que me hablaste? ¿El ancla enganchada en una lápida, y el hombre que bajaba por la cuerda al mar celestial para soltarla, y se ahogaba? Escucha…

Pero Gwyon, temiendo que el monotono insistente que embargaba la voz de su hijo anunciase el delirio,

salió apresuradamente de la habitación, contemplando la foto del santuario subterráneo descubierto bajo la basílica de San Clemente de Roma con una luz repentina en los ojos, como si sus sentidos flotaran entre los vapores de dos mil años antes.

Las entradas de Gwyon eran a menudo tan precipitadas como esta huida, y había veces en que al oír los pasos de su padre subiendo por las escaleras, Wyatt fingía dormir.

Cuando no podía leer, pintaba, con una extraordinaria destreza que consumía su entera conciencia, y que a menudo lo dejaba tan tenso que empezaba a delirar. «Escucha, yo… ¿qué era? Escucha…».

Lo que temía Gwyon eran estos delirios, que lo dejaban doblemente desvalido; intentaba ocultar su ansiedad tras la espalda retorciéndose una mano con la otra, y se apresuraba a llamar a Janet, que ahora era durante buena parte del tiempo lo único que se movía en la casa. Allí seguía, farfullante testimonio de la inquisición de tía May.

Por lo que se sabía, nunca salía de la casa. Su voz había adquirido el timbre de la de un hombre adulto, lo que se revelaba cuando la alzaba en el tono regular del habla. Pero esto era poco frecuente. Generalmente hablaba con un áspero susurro, lubricado por un flujo salival que le resultaba difícil dominar (causado, aunque no lo sabía, por una medicina compuesta de mercurio que había encontrado en el botiquín de tía May, y que desde la muerte de tía May renovaba y consumía reverentemente en sobredosis uniformes). Tenía los hombros anchos, los muslos delgados y unas manos rotundamente musculosas con las que se restregaba una tela de esmeril para arrancarse los finos filamentos que oscurecían su barbilla.

En cualquier otra casa del país, sus ausencias regulares del trabajo, o aquellas ocasiones en que se la encontraba insensiblemente rígida ante una ventana vacía, o postrada en el suelo de la cocina, habrían podido tomarse por desórdenes orgánicos; y como a la venerable Úrsula Benincasa, cuya niñez del siglo XVI se vio atacada por innumerables éxtasis mal interpretados, la habrían podido llenar de cardenales, pinchar con agujas y quemar con velas para despertarla. Pero el reverendo Gwyon observó que sus abandonos del deber habían tenido lugar de modo más apreciable durante la Semana Santa de aquel año: que la noche del jueves, hacia las ocho, mientras iba y venía sirviéndole la cena, se había quedado tiesamente extasiada ante el horno de la cocina; y que la tarde siguiente, a las tres, estuvo a punto de tropezarse con ella al encontrarla en el oscuro pasillo ante la puerta de su despacho, donde estaba con los miembros estáticamente extendidos ante la *cruz-con-espejos*. [12]

Cuando los recursos modernos fallan, tendemos por naturaleza a buscar otros entre los remedios de nuestros padres. Si éstos también fallan, hubo otros padres antes que ellos. Podemos retroceder siglos y más siglos. A medida que pasaban los meses, Gwyon apreciaba cada vez menos las manos tendidas de sus ascendientes. Los médicos le negaban cualquier información directa, guardando los frágiles secretos de su magia fallida con tanto cuidado como el que ponían los sacerdotes zuñís al plantar sus varas de plegarias. Y luego estaba aquel santificado acuerdo tribal entre ellos de no admitir jamás sus mutuos errores, al que llamaban Ética.

Por otra parte, la espiritual, los feligreses exhalaban rancias plegarias por el restablecimiento del chico. Pero al final daban siempre a su Dios pleno permiso para hacer lo que quisiera, para llevárselo si tal era Su santo antojo, cargando al chico calenturiento con la culpa que habían acumulado durante generaciones enteras. A esto lo llamaban Humildad.

Los sermones tronaban sobre ellos con creciente violencia desde el púlpito de su pacífica iglesia, y cada vez incluían menos súplicas expiatorias al Señor su Dios. No obstante, las caras grises seguían acudiendo, arrastradas por el deber y (aunque sólo el Carpintero del Pueblo lo hubiera admitido) por una especie de peligrosa curiosidad. La tensión fue aumentando hasta el sermón sobre los males de la vivisección, en la mañana del 24 de junio, tras el cual el reverendo se retiró durante el resto del verano.

Aquella mañana de domingo, el día de san Juan, o como les recordó el reverendo con voz decepcionantemente pacífica, el día del solsticio de verano, el sencillo altar estaba adornado con floridas ramitas de roble. La cálida luz que entraba por los ventanales, con cristales en forma de diamante, se derramaba sobre los feligreses en largos dibujos sin sentido. El sabueso de alguno de ellos, rojo hígado y blanco, entró y se debatió brevemente con la cuerda de la campana, se internó un trecho en la nave lateral y luego, sintiendo algo, se volvió y huyó.

Mientras tanto, el sermón había pasado de la vivisección a los indios mojave, «quienes entienden humildemente, y cito a una insigne autoridad, que “matar a la gente de ese modo es propio de la naturaleza de los médicos, del mismo modo que es propio de la naturaleza de los halcones matar pajaritos para sustentarse”. Los mojaves creen que todo el que muere a manos de un médico cae en su poder en la próxima vida. ¿Superstición? Es lo que nosotros, reunidos hoy aquí en presencia de Dios, llamamos

superstición. Llamamos a esa gente salvajes ignorantes, y les enviamos misioneros para iluminarlos con la palabra de la Verdad que nos hemos reunido hoy aquí para venerar. Durante siglos, los misioneros han vuelto contando historias como para hacernos palidecer de horror, historias de sacrificios humanos practicados en aras de la religión sobre los altares manchados de sangre de los aztecas. Sin embargo, entre nosotros mismos toleramos a una clase muy respetada de hombres que son aztecas por derecho propio. Como nosotros, puede que también ellos se lleven las manos a la cabeza ante la idea de asesinar a una doncella sobre un altar de piedra. Pero lo único que los indigna es que esto se hiciera para servir a un dios diferente del suyo. Podemos verlos retorcerse las manos con gesto de reproche al pensar en aquellos que asaron a san Lorenzo en una parrilla. ¿Es el asado lo que lamentan? ¿Es el sufrimiento de santa Catalina en la rueda? ¿Los gritos ahogados de Tyndale mientras lo estrangulaban? Las apagadas palabras de perdón de John Huss en la hoguera… las de Nuestro Señor en la Cruz… O *sancta simplicitas!* ¡No! Lamentan simplemente que ninguno de estos experimentos se llevara a cabo bajo las condiciones científicas de un laboratorio médico patológico». Ya habían pasado diez minutos del tiempo que solía dedicar al sermón, pero las caras grises estaban maravilladamente absortas. «Decidme, ¿cómo acabó Esculapio? —preguntó, llegando al punto decisivo—. Esculapio, el dios griego de la medicina. ¡Ah, Zeus lo fulminó con un rayo! Pero nosotros, mortales, ¿qué podemos hacer? Ni siquiera tan poco como Juan de Bohemia, que arrojó a su médico al río por no haber sabido curar la ceguera del rey. Ni dictar condiciones, como el rey húngaro de hace cinco siglos que prometió una gran recompensa al médico que le curase su herida de flecha, y la muerte si fracasaba. No, nosotros los dejamos ir, con dinero en los bolsillos y expresiones de profundo respeto por sus fallos. Con la misma confianza, e intimidad quizá, que tenía san Cirilo en el cirujano que le extirpó el hígado y se lo comió…; que tenía el papa Inocencio VIII en el galeno que recetó la sangre de ocho niños pequeños para los nervios de Su Santidad…; que tenía el cardenal Richelieu, al que dieron en su lecho de muerte estiércol de caballo mezclado con vino blanco… ¿Os habéis fijado —siguió, bajando la voz, inclinándose hacia ellos sobre el alto púlpito— en el amuleto que llevan los médicos? ¿Una cruz? No. ¡No, en nombre del Cielo! Es un emblema llamado caduceo. Miradlo más de cerca… dos serpientes enrolladas a una vara, el cetro de un dios pagano, el cetro de Hermes. Hermes, el patrón de la elocuencia y la astucia, de la superchería y el robo, la misma vara que llevaba cuando conducía a las almas al infierno». El organista, un joven despabilado, hojeó las páginas del siguiente himno y se aseguró de que hubiera aire en los fuelles. Y cuando el reverendo Gwyon golpeó el púlpito con la palma de la mano y alzó la voz, tras la sabrosa confidencia que acababa de hacer, para iniciar un nuevo inventario de las hazañas de la profesión médica, empezando con «¡Quién fue el que sugirió el uso de la guillotina en la Revolución Francesa sino un médico, que sucumbió bajo su propia cuchilla…!», se oyó un grito de entusiasmo procedente del extremo opuesto de la nave, hubo un momento de impío silencio, y el órgano prorrumpió en los acordes de *La roca de los siglos,* mientras el Carpintero del Pueblo salía precipitadamente por un extremo de la iglesia (en dirección a la Cantina de la Estación) y el reverendo Gwyon, temblando pero resueltamente, salía por el otro.

Un sermón inspirador, convinieron todos, como convinieron en que su pastor estaba cansado, y haría bien en descansar durante el verano. Estaba pasando una dura prueba, y eso lo honraba a sus ojos, como cristianos practicantes que al compartir magnánimamente sus pecados aprobaban el sufrimiento ajeno.

Janet tenía la mandíbula caída en un gesto de concentración.

—Escucha. Cuando la simiente empezó a florecer, fue como un jardín lleno de nieve, yo… no… quería… ¿Padre? Un salvoconducto del emperador Segismundo, pero ya ves cómo lo traicionaron… Dejan lleno de inmundicias el sendero del paraíso para engañar a la buena gente. Expiación limitada, depravación total espera. Elección incondicional, expiación limitada, depravación total, eh… ejem… irresistibilidad de la gracia, yo no quería… ¿Padre? Yo… ¿qué era? Escucha…

—El poder de Dios para guiarme —susurró Janet—, la fuerza de Dios…

—Si quieres una prueba, si quieres una prueba, escucha, padre. Ese… y ese reyezuelo, yo no quería… ¿Padre? ¿Padre…?

—La sabiduría de Dios para enseñarme, el ojo de Dios para vigilarme —siguió Janet, abandonando la cabecera de la cama para correr escaleras abajo y aporrear la puerta del despacho, cosa que nunca había hecho, pero esta vez volvió con el reverendo Gwyon brincando tras sus talones, para escuchar la inconexa confusión balbuciente de que su hijo había matado al reyezuelo aquel día, una confesión que cesó bruscamente y dejó al chico tiesamente incorporado en la cama, rechinando los dientes, sus llameantes ojos verdes clavados en su padre.

Gwyon hizo ademán de tender la mano, pero la retiró diciendo:

—Un reyezuelo, dices, ¿un reyezuelo? Hijo mío, eso… vaya, un reyezuelo, ¿sabes?, los propios misioneros, los primeros misioneros cristianos solían mandar cazarlo, cazarlo y matarlo, ellos… se consideraba al reyezuelo un rey, y eso… no podían tolerar eso… por Navidad… no podían tolerar eso —terminó, retirándose lentamente, bajando la voz mientras su hijo se hundía de nuevo en la cama, y entonces Gwyon se volvió bruscamente y corrió escaleras abajo hasta su despacho, donde cerró la puerta con cerrojo y echó mano al estante en el que guardaba las obras de san Juan de la Cruz.

—El oído de Dios para oírme, la palabra de Dios para hablar por mí…

A la cabecera de la cama, Janet se detuvo a escuchar la campana de la iglesia, que daba la hora. Pero sus labios, como los que tenía ante sí en la almohada, siguieron moviéndose.

Escondiéndose de la gente y el sol declinante tras el espeso verdor de los tejos, Gwyon quedó encerrado en su despacho. Estaba retrocediendo en el tiempo.

Ya había pasado el día más largo del año, y hacía tiempo que había pasado la magia anual de las hogueras del solsticio de verano, encendidas para impulsar al sol en su curso repentinamente menguante, una medida sin esperanza ya cuando la religión tomó las riendas, la fe el ritual, y el día fue adjudicado a san Juan Bautista, que a cambio de aquellas mismas hogueras libraba al ganado de enfermedades y desterraba a las brujas que las causaban, hacía crecer espléndidas cosechas y hasta traía la lluvia en Rusia a las familias de mujeres que se bañaban en su día (aunque allí la fe no había triunfado del todo: si la sequía persistía, se podía atraer la lluvia con seguridad arrojando al lago más próximo el cadáver de un aldeano que hubiera muerto de borrachera). Pero en Nueva Inglaterra la lluvia caía según el capricho de una Divinidad que sólo podía propiciarse haciendo buen uso de ella, y la mejor forma de pasar un día festivo, como aquel domingo, era en la reverente complacencia de estarse quieto. Aún quedaba luz fuera pasada la hora de la cena, aunque Gwyon había rechazado la suya sin salir del despacho, y Wyatt apenas había comido un bocado antes de volver a recostarse, susurrando hacia el techo, dejando a Janet retorcida en oración a su lado. Janet había pasado todo el día moviéndose casi en silencio por los pasillos, las escaleras y la cocina, traicionando sólo su presencia por el farfulleo baboso de su más alta devoción, que ahora seguía practicando: «La mano de Dios para protegerme, el camino de Dios para conducirme, el escudo de Dios para cobijarme, el ejército de Dios para defenderme, Cristo conmigo, Cristo ante mí, Cristo detrás de mí, Cristo dentro de mí…».

Por los prados desiertos de la casa del párroco correteaban los pájaros picoteando formas irregulares de manzanas silvestres verdes. Las golondrinas trazaban erráticas trayectorias silenciosas por encima de la cochera. El único sonido claro era el sonido de las campanillas del trineo.

—Cristo debajo de mí, Cristo encima de mí, Cristo a mi derecha, Cristo a mi izquierda, Cristo a lo largo, Cristo a lo ancho, Cristo a lo alto…

Wyatt yacía de espaldas cuan largo era, escuchando sin oír, mirando sin ver las líneas familiares del techo, una red de grietas que en su niñez habían formado un dromedario, transformado luego en un camello bactriano al que le había crecido un largo rabo. Las ventanas estaban abiertas, y la casa entera tan silenciosa que el calor del día parecía incluso haber penetrado en los sombríos pasillos y detenido la contienda entre aquellos ángulos oscuros del maderaje. Por eso el sonido procedente de la cochera llegaba al interior interrumpido sólo por sus propias pausas impacientes. Fueron aquellas tintineantes astillas de sonido las que de pronto parecieron alcanzar a Janet, levantarla de su posición junto a la cabecera de la cama y llevarla como en volandas a su habitación, donde nadie más que ella había entrado corpóreamente desde la primera vez que ella entró. Su puerta se cerró, ahogando el ruido ahogado que se le escapó al desplomarse al suelo.

Quedaba casi una hora para que oscureciera. Gwyon miraba fijamente por la ventana del despacho las ramas al alcance de su mano. Del otro lado de aquellos encajes de tejo llegaba el sonido de las campanillas del trineo, que parecía cada vez más insistente a medida que caía la noche. Su brazo descansaba como exánime sobre el *Libro de los muertos* egipcio, y con la punta de un dedo daba golpecitos en la dura cubierta cerrada del *Malleus Maleficarum.* Sin moverse apenas de su silla, sacó la petaca de su cavidad en la *Noche oscura del alma* y se bebió de un trago medio vaso de aguardiente. Dejó el vaso vacío sobre la superficie lisa de un volumen del *Index*, y pasados varios minutos dijo en voz alta: «Da prueba cabal de tu ministerio». Pero el libro que tenía abierto ante sí no era la Biblia, ni las palabras las de san Pablo.

> «Cerca de los arrabales de los grandes poblados puede verse gran número de piedras hundidas en el suelo sin orden ni sistema aparente. Son conocidas con el nombre de *asong,* y sobre ellas se ofrece el sacrificio que la Asongtata exige. Se sacrifica una cabra, y un mes después se considera necesario sacrificar un *langur* (mono *Entellus)* o una rata de los bambúes. El animal escogido, con una cuerda atada al cuello, es llevado de casa en

> casa por dos hombres, uno a cada lado. Lo introducen por turno en todas las casas del poblado, mientras los aldeanos golpean las paredes desde fuera para asustar y ahuyentar a los espíritus malignos que hubieran establecido allí su residencia. Una vez dada la vuelta al poblado de este modo, el mono o rata es llevado a las afueras, donde lo matan de un golpe de dao, que lo despanzurra, y luego lo crucifican sobre bambúes clavados en el suelo. En torno al animal crucificado ponen una estacada de bambúes largos y afilados, que forman *chevaux de frise* a su alrededor. Estos recuerdan los tiempos en que tales defensas rodeaban los poblados por todas partes para protegerlos de enemigos humanos, y ahora son un símbolo para guardarse de las enfermedades y del peligro mortal de los animales salvajes de la selva. Al *langur* requerido para el propósito se lo caza días antes, pero si resulta imposible capturar uno, puede ocupar su lugar un mono pardo; un gibón no puede usarse».

Subió lentamente las escaleras. Wyatt estaba dormido, con la sábana que lo cubría alzada en puntas sobre las huesudas protuberancias de su cuerpo. Sin percatarse apenas de la inquietud que producía en su mente la extrema cortedad aparente de las piernas del chico, Gwyon hizo aflorar de pronto a su conciencia aquella terrible impresión, y al hacerlo se dio cuenta de que las prominencias de la sábana no eran los pies, sino las rodillas de Wyatt, tan descarnadas que abultaban como pies. Salió rápidamente. Volvió a bajar las escaleras y fue de cuarto en cuarto por la casa a oscuras, pasando por la pequeña despensa donde tía May había llorado a solas en silencio el día en que su espino había aparecido arrancado del suelo. Pasó ante Olalla, con la nariz rota un siglo antes por un suplicante cuyas plegarias no habían sido atendidas, el brazo alzado en su nicho como para detenerle. Durante un instante reflejaron fragmentos de su paso los claros espejos de alinde de aquella *cruz-con-espejos* que, según se decía, había usado sor Patrocinio, la Monja Sangrante, cuyos pululantes estigmas trastornaban de tal modo la política española y el trono que se decidió a llevar guantes. Gwyon echó una ojeada a la mesa baja del comedor, mesa de los pecados mortales, «Cave, cave, Dominus videt. Abscondam faciem meam ab eis et considerabo novissima eorum», sin leer aquellas palabras sino repitiéndolas entre dientes, como para darse fuerza, las palabras de aquel traductor de la Biblia del siglo XIV que murió en la cama, para ser más tarde desenterrado y quemado, recompensado ya por su labor de Amor Divino con la revelación: «En este mundo, Dios debe servir al diablo».

En el salón volvió la espalda al retrato de Camilla, ante el que se había detenido, y descolgó a John H. de la pared de enfrente. Luego guardó aquel cuadro en un trastero, murmurando que el antepasado se había llevado probablemente su merecido. Durante todo este tiempo, Gwyon parecía estar posponiendo una decisión que ya había tomado. Se detuvo incluso a tapar un gran espejo con un mantel. Finalmente, salió al porche trasero de la casa y bajó al prado.

Quizá fuera la visión de la blanca luna saliendo lo que había trastornado a Heracles. Las campanillas del trineo sonaron furiosamente y luego se detuvieron, dejando un silencio apremiante. Gwyon sudaba copiosamente mientras se paseaba entre la casa y el cenador, pese al fresco aire nocturno que empezaba a envolverlo. Luego estuvo un minuto entero contemplando la mole sombría del Monte de la Lamentación.

Cuando entró en la cochera, Heracles se quedó quieto, meneando levemente sus largos brazos, y luego se irguió en toda su estatura, agitando un trozo de pan. Gwyon descolgó la trailla de la pared, la ató al cuello del animal y juntos se encaminaron por el prado hacia la casa.

Más tarde, Wyatt no pudo distinguir la realidad de aquellos días, y de las noches de las semanas que acababan de pasar. Los delirios se mezclaban en su memoria y se negaban a separarse unos de otros, de lo que había ocurrido y de lo que podía haber ocurrido. Los recuerdos del dolor se perdían entre la vigilia y el sueño, y a excepción de las despiadadas punzadas en sus pies aquella noche, no se identificaban ya con partes concretas de su cuerpo. Las prolongadas horas en vela, cuando lo único que deseaba era dormir, podían revelarse como horas de sueño cuando despertaba; pero lo más insoportable era el fenómeno sensorial que consistía más o menos en esto: parecía que la conciencia era una sucesión de partículas sueltas, arrastradas en la superficie del profundo y constante flujo inconsciente de la vida, del propio tiempo, y al desmayarse, las partículas de conciencia se detenían simplemente, mientras lo demás seguía fluyendo, hasta que se recuperaban; pero era esta detención, la completa desaparición de aquel flujo más profundo, lo que dejaba a las partículas de conciencia suspendidas, amontonándose, prontas a disgregarse en cualquier instante sin que nada las retuviera. Sin embargo, en momentos así todo estaba en orden, desde la forma y el color hasta la masa y la distancia, los minutos que formaban horas por acumulación del mismo modo que el propio reloj permanecía en la mesa donde estaba, aunque sólo fuera porque llevaba tanto tiempo acumulándose allí: eso era la tranquilizadora certeza del peso. Pero ¿acaso una voz, la suya incluso, había citado «En san José de Cupertino, el Éxtasis iba acompañado de Levitación»? El áspero chillido de Janet seguía sonando en sus oídos: ¿la había perseguido por el muro de ladrillos de un jardín ajeno, donde se había vuelto hacia él transformada en un negro, y había huido? ¿Había entrado su padre con Heracles, había sacudido su cama y aporreado las paredes diciendo palabras que no entendía, y se había vuelto para

salir escaleras abajo llevando delante al animal? Y luego un grito apagado procedente de la cochera: ¿había saltado de la cama hacia el pálido recuadro de la ventana, olvidando que llevaba tanto tiempo sin usar los pies que eran inútiles, completamente olvidada su función, por lo que cayó gritando del dolor que le causaban? Porque despertó en el suelo con su padre al lado, sosteniéndole por los hombros, su padre al que no reconoció, con los ojos desorbitados bajo aquella débil luz. Luego rompió en sollozos al recordar el dolor que acababa de atravesarlo cuerpo arriba. «En los pies —gimió—, era como si me estuvieran clavando clavos en los pies», mientras lo volvían a tender en la cama, salpicado de sangre en los hombros por aquel hombre tembloroso que salió a duras penas de la habitación.

Días después, Wyatt empezó a restablecerse. Recuperó el peso de su cuerpo onza a onza, meticulosamente ganadas. La fiebre había cedido, pero durante el resto de su vida nunca abandonó sus ojos.

El Carpintero del Pueblo vino de visita, y se quedó mirando el papel pintado de la habitación. La cama del convaleciente había sido trasladada al cuarto de costura, pues sus ventanas daban al este y al sur, y las de su pequeña habitación al norte y al oeste, privadas de sol. El costurero de Camilla, con su largo cajón lleno aún de miles de botones, estaba a un lado de la ventana, y encima de él había un estante con unos cuantos libros suyos que no había vuelto a abrir desde que acabó el colegio. No había nada más de Camilla en la habitación, aunque había sido allí donde había entrado buscando algo en el momento de su muerte. «¿Qué era?», susurraba él a veces, mirando hacia arriba y a su alrededor como si esperase volver a verla, aunque su presencia había sido siempre silenciosa y expectante, y a menudo, hasta cuando estaba en ella, la habitación había parecido vacía.

Camilla había elegido el papel de la pared. Era rosa, con franjas perladas de azul claro hasta el techo e hileras de rosas entre ellas. La habitación la había empapelado su padre, y de modo muy profesional, aunque no pudo por menos de mostrar su placer por el privilegio de hacerlo para ellos: tanto lo mostró que puso el papel boca abajo. Y sólo ahora, mientras yacía de espaldas siguiendo sus líneas pared arriba, se dio cuenta Wyatt de que las rosas eran rosas, y no las caras rosadas de perros con gorros verdes que le habían parecido de niño, y que nunca había cuestionado desde entonces. Cuando entró por primera vez en la habitación recién empapelada, Camilla no advirtió inmediatamente lo que estaba mal. Luego sí, pero tenía al lado a su padre con una sonrisa orgullosa, y abrazó sus encorvados hombros, le dio las gracias y nunca se lo dijo. Así le habían salido las cosas desde el principio.

—Queda bonito, todavía queda bonito —dijo ahora el Carpintero del Pueblo, dejándose caer en una silla repleta de cuadros y dibujos que derribó sin excepción, lo que inmediatamente lo hizo sentirse bien al darle algo que hacer. Admiró cada obra por separado a medida que las iba recogiendo. «¡Qué detalles! ¡Qué detalles!», decía una y otra vez de aquellos recuerdos de la enfermedad de Wyatt, convertidos ahora en presencias permanentes en su vida. La mayor parte de aquellos fragmentos de intrincada factura eran copias. Sólo los que eran copias estaban terminados. Las obras originales estaban abandonadas en ese momento en que el dibujo está concebido, pero no ejecutado, en que el autor conoce las formas, pero ignora su disposición, oculta aún en la dignidad del boceto.

—¡Mira! —dijo el Carpintero del Pueblo, agitando un libro desde el suelo—. ¡Globos…! —Luego añadió —: Malditos sean los franceses. Alguien lo ha escrito en francés —siguió pasando las páginas, murmurando —: Lo hacen para confundir a la gente, por supuesto. Ya se sabe, cuando los franceses descubren una verdad, se la guardan…

Se quedó cerca de una hora, hablando por los codos casi todo el tiempo, una inclinación que había desarrollado cuando empezó a ser duro de oído y la gente a cansarse del esfuerzo de hablar con él. Hizo un resumen aproximado de la *Odisea* (Gwyon le había dejado un día la traducción de Chapman), y como si el viaje se hubiera acortado repentinamente, acababa de presentar a Odiseo al Preste Juan en Ogigia cuando entró Janet con la cena de Wyatt. El Carpintero del Pueblo se comportó con todo el cortés refunfuño de un héroe tímido, retirándose ante ella, despidiéndose con la mano desde la puerta del chico en la cama y gritando como a través de un abismo:

—Y me han hecho sacristán de la iglesia, ¿sabes? Tu padre, el reverendo, me ha hecho sacristán por encima de sus cadáveres, ya me entiendes… —Y salió a escape con los dos tomos de la *Histoire des ballons* de Tissandier.

Así, desde entonces, los toques de las campanas fueron puntuales en las primeras horas de la mañana, pero a partir de las once empezaron a retrasarse un poco, pues había sus buenos quince minutos de camino de la Cantina de la Estación a la iglesia.

Despertar en aquella habitación de rosas boca abajo era una nueva experiencia, la aurora roja de las

rosas del Edén (según citaba del Talmud uno de aquellos libros que tenía junto a la cabecera de la cama) tras los crepúsculos en su habitación, rojos por los fuegos del infierno. Aquí, después de que las primeras partículas de luz en el cielo interrumpiesen el flujo vibrante de la noche, a menudo cogía una manta de la cama y se deslizaba hasta la ventana, para quedarse allí sentado sin moverse durante todo el tiempo que tardaba en salir el sol, mientras las horas sin medida de la noche se hacían lentamente añicos, se disgregaban en una sucesión de partículas que se extinguían por separado, al tiempo que el paisaje se dividía en identidades tangibles, cada una apreciándose a sí misma en extática retirada hasta que todo se destacaba nítidamente de las calladas apreciaciones circundantes.

Pasó los meses de convalecencia pintando, y cada vez apartaba más la mirada de la ventana para ponerse a trabajar. Se sentía más despejado y menos febril en aquellas horas tempranas, cuando su mano podía delinear de forma tan poco compasiva como la luz del día las razonables complacencias congregadas de la separación.

Sólo una vez, cuando se acercaba a la ventana antes de que hubiera luz, detuvo en seco sus pasos la masa astada de la vieja luna flotando solitaria en el cielo, y aquello pareció trastornarlo mucho, pues se estremeció y trató de apartarse pero no pudo, trató de ver la hora en el reloj pero no pudo, escuchó y no oyó nada, y finalmente no pudo hacer nada sino sentarse, maniatado por aquella intimidad que lo rechazaba, esperando, hasta que al fin llegó la luz y la extinguió.

También oía de madrugada, poco antes de la salida del sol, los pasos de su padre debajo, en el porche oriental. Y aunque a veces oía su voz hablando, nunca distinguía una palabra.

Wyatt echaba de menos el sonido de las campanillas del trineo. En su primer intento de un paseo largo al aire libre, bajó hasta la cochera y la encontró cerrada y silenciosa.

—Sí, le… le llegó la hora —dijo Gwyon, aclarándose la garganta y tirando de una mano con la otra a su espalda.

—Pero tú… nadie me lo dijo.

—Bueno, no… estabas enfermo, no quería darte un disgusto estando enfermo.

—Pero ¿qué hiciste luego?

—Sí, yo… lo enterré allá abajo, detrás de la cochera.

—¿Cómo ocurrió, simplemente se…? Es curioso, algunas de las cosas que yo… a veces creo recordar cosas que son… que no pueden haber… como… —Alzó la vista ansiosamente y se quedó callado, como esperando que lo animasen a seguir, pero encontró a su padre observándolo con unos ojos que llameaban con la misma salvaje intensidad que los suyos cuando tenía fiebre—. Es… a veces es desconcertante… —dijo titubeando, bajando la mirada mientras su padre desviaba la suya, le volvía la espalda y le mostraba sus manos retorcidas. Pero sólo por un momento. Gwyon se volvió bruscamente con la expresión muy cambiada, tranquilizado, y trató de sonreír mientras decía:

—¿Estás bien? ¿Estás bien ya, casi bien? Sí, es desconcertante, desconcertante… —Cambió de tema torpemente—: Como los toros. Sí, la gente dice que los tienen en una celda oscura antes de dejarlos salir a la plaza, al sol brillante, para confundirlos, pero eso… eso… deberías ver su confianza, la majestad con que salen, un gran momento ése, cuando salen, su… con la cabeza alta, cuando salen meneando la cabeza… —Se detuvo para alzar la vista y ver si había relajado la atención de Wyatt, y luego siguió con entusiasmo—: Es después de eso, después de que les claven esas… las *banderillas*[13] en el lomo, las oyes retemblar en el lomo del toro, una auténtica danza furiosa, es después de eso cuando las patas empiezan a arqueárseles, después de eso se quedan allí parados, desconcertados, mirando a su alrededor… antes de que la espada, la… dicen que no se mata con la espada, sino con la muleta, el arte de la muleta… —Se serenó mientras hablaba, paseándose por la habitación hasta que llegó junto a la puerta, hablando como con prisa por marcharse, pero se detuvo allí para terminar diciendo—: La espada, cuando la espada está dentro y el toro no cae, bueno, entonces utilizan la muleta, para hacerle dar vueltas en un círculo estrecho de modo que la espada le haga trizas por dentro y caiga. Las patas se le ponen rígidas en cuanto lo apuñalan en el cerebro. ¿Quieres algo? Pero estás bien, ya estás bien. ¿Quieres algo? Diré a Janet que suba —terminó Gwyon, y salió hacia las escaleras.

Cuando llegó Janet, Wyatt le pidió que lo ayudara a salir y a bajar las escaleras, pero la dejó en la casa cuando bajó al prado con su bastón. Habían tapado con una gran piedra el agujero de la ladera de la colina, entre zarzas cargadas ya de moras tempranas. Aquel sitio había sido el vertedero desde que guardaba memoria. Su debilidad le impidió apartar la piedra, pues era muy grande; y cuando iniciaba el regreso hacia la casa tropezó con una hilera de pequeñas estacas, clavadas en la tierra sin ningún propósito aparente. Se levantó con aire inseguro de la tierra y las piedras mancilladas, y volvió lo más deprisa que pudo al prado abierto. Había algo impuro en aquel lugar que lo asustaba.

Desde su ventana, en el piso de arriba, Janet lo vio tambalearse de vuelta al terreno abierto, y bajó a ayudarlo a subir al porche y a entrar, sin que cruzaran una sola palabra. Subió las escaleras y se puso a trabajar al momento.

Más o menos cada semana solía empezar algo original. Trabajaba en ello durante unos días, pero lo dejaba antes de trazar ninguna línea definitiva. Sin embargo, seguía haciendo copias a la perfección, con esa perfección que sólo la falsificación puede alcanzar, reproduciendo todo rasgo de insuficiencia, toda tacha en Perfección del original. Encontró una tabla de madera muy vieja, casi tan delgada como el papel en algunos sitios, pero de tamaño casi exacto, y empezó a pintar en ella los Siete Pecados Capitales: *Superbia, Ira, Luxuria, Avaritia, Invidia*… uno a uno fueron concluidos sin una sola tacha de originalidad. El sigilo no era difícil en aquella casa, e hizo la copia en secreto.

Su padre, una vez seguro de que Wyatt se había repuesto de su enfermedad, parecía menos interesado que nunca por lo que ocurría a su alrededor. A excepción del sermón dominical, las actividades públicas del pueblo le importaban menos que nunca. Como Plinio, que se retiraba a su villa laurentina cuando se acercaban las saturnales, el reverendo Gwyon evitaba las desoladoras festividades de su congregación retirándose a su despacho cada vez que se celebraban. Pero su desinterés no era ya un oscuro manto de preocupación. Una especie de peligrosa confianza había ocupado su lugar. Enfocaba sus sermones dominicales con una audacia complaciente, mencionando, por ejemplo, la veneración druídica por el roble como árbol divinamente favorecido por ser tan a menudo fulminado por el rayo. En todo esto, incluso en el sermón sobre la aurora boreal, el Día Tenebroso de mayo de 1790 en cuya noche la luna se convirtió en sangre, y la gran caída de estrellas de noviembre de 1833, como señales del Segundo Adviento, tía May habría podido advertir la persistente ausencia de lo que le habían revelado desde aquel mismo púlpito como el cuerpo de Cristo. Ciertamente, los miembros presentes de la Sociedad Úseme juzgaban «innecesarias» muchas de sus referencias. No parecía en modo alguno necesario, por ejemplo, señalar que Moisés había sido acusado de brujería en el Corán; que los cien mil conversos al cristianismo en los primeros dos o tres siglos en Roma eran «esclavos y gente de mala reputación»; que en un lugar a orillas del Nilo había diez mil «monjes peludos» y el doble de «vírgenes consagradas a Dios»; que Carlomagno bautizó en masa a los sajones haciendo que cruzaran un río cuyas aguas bendecían mientras tanto sus obispos río arriba, mientras que san Olaf obligaba a los pueblos que sometía a elegir entre el bautismo y la muerte. No pasaba día festivo sobriamente tolerado sin que el reverendo Gwyon se las ingeniase para proclamar su estricta observancia aludiendo a alguna ceremonia pagana que sonaba incómodamente a pasarlo bien. Pero las caras grises seguían en paz, por precaria que fuese. Jamás los habían tratado de aquel modo desde el púlpito. Es cierto que muchos rebulleron con indignado malestar tras escuchar el 25 de diciembre la conocida historia de alumbramiento virginal, mutilación y resurrección, al descubrir que no habían estado oyendo hablar de Cristo, sino de Baco, Osiris, Krishna, Buda, Adonis, Marduk, Balder, Atis, Anfión o Quetzalcóatl. Se acordaban del triste día en que se oscureció el sol, pero no recordaban que fuera con motivo de la muerte de Julio César. Y muchos corrieron a casa a encerrarse con sus biblias tras el sermón sobre la Trinidad, que resultó ser Brahma, Vishnú y Siva; como lo hicieron tras el relato de la Inmaculada Concepción, según el cual la simiente penetró en forma espiritual, dando a luz con pudor virginal a Rómulo y Remo.

Si algo ofendía el tono dulce y apaciguador del reverendo era el sentido de la propiedad de sus feligreses, que con auténtica fortaleza puritana se resistían a aceptar cualquier insinuación de que sus sangrientos sacramentos pudieran haber conocido otras voces y otros ámbitos. Difícilmente podían saber que la capacidad de resistencia del reverendo estaba siendo sometida a pruebas mucho más duras que las suyas, como cuando vencía la tentación de contarles detalles de la Última Cena en los misterios eleusinos, de la serpiente en el Jardín del Edén, de a qué se referían los primeros traductores de la Biblia cuando utilizaban la palabra «muslo» (donde los antiguos hebreos ponían la mano cuando prestaban juramento), del simbolismo del triángulo trino y uno, o en contrapartida generativa que tanto apenaba a los primeros Padres de la Iglesia, del origen de la Cruz.

Janet no iba a la iglesia. No había malquerencia por su parte, sino que parecía haber alcanzado cierta unidad personal. Y ya no se la encontraba paralizada en el suelo de la cocina, pero podía interrumpir cualquier tarea doméstica para correr a encerrarse en su habitación, donde si alguien hubiera escuchado habría podido oír sus extáticas boqueadas al otro lado de la puerta. Durante la mayor parte del tiempo hacía su trabajo contenta, con indiferencia, deslizándose por los sombríos pasillos en zapatillas, y poniendo en orden la cocina con manos enfundadas en guantes oscuros. De cuando en cuando se quedaba en la cama.

El interés de Gwyon por la pintura de su hijo era superficial cuando lo mostraba, con la expresión levemente distraída y confusa que ahora adoptaba cada vez que le imponían cualquier cosa de mundos

ajenos al suyo. Sólo una vez salió de su retraimiento, y fue cuando recibió una gran impresión al ver una copia sin terminar de la fotografía de Camilla que había sobre la repisa de la chimenea del salón. Estaba pintada en negro sobre un fondo liso de gesso, sobre lienzo de fuerte lino, un retrato escueto que dejaba a los ojos del contemplador la tarea de concluir sus trazos. Fue esta cualidad la que pareció trastornar a Gwyon: una vez lo hubo visto, empezó a mostrarse constantemente curioso, apartando la mirada de él para volverse y concluirlo en su mente, y mirando luego otra vez como si, con la ausencia momentánea de su mirada y la fuerza de su imaginación plástica, hubiera podido concluirse por sí solo. Sin embargo, cada vez que volvía a mirarlo aparecía ligeramente diferente de como lo recordaba, desbaratando así sin remedio la conclusión que había fraguado.

—¿Por qué no lo terminas? —preguntó al fin.

—Hay algo sobre una… una obra sin terminar, una… cosa como ésta donde… ¿ves? Donde la perfección todavía es posible. Porque está ahí, está ahí todo el tiempo, trabajas todo el tiempo tratando de desvelarla. —Wyatt se agarró una mano con la otra y la apretó ante sí, como su padre tenía apretadas las suyas tras la espalda vuelta hacia él—. Porque está ahí… —repitió.

Gwyon volvió la espalda al lienzo inconcluso, murmurando:

—Sí, sí… Praxiteles… —y su voz se fue apagando mientras se volvía hacia el retrato para seguir con la mirada la línea de la nariz, y recorrer luego el círculo incompleto de un aro bizantino de oro, en tanto que a su espalda sus manos se abrían y cerraban sobre nada.

La tabla de los Siete Pecados Capitales estaba sin terminar. Quedó sin terminar durante varios años, cuando Wyatt fue a estudiar fuera. Aún seguía oculta e inacabada cuando volvió a casa de la Escuela de Teología, donde había concluido un curso.

Algo iba mal entonces. Su padre lo sabía, pero en aquella época el reverendo Gwyon vivía inmerso en sí mismo. Rehuía hablar con Wyatt de sus estudios. Su cara ruborizada y su aire nervioso parecían dar a entender que una sola palabra podía traer a la memoria argumentos de tal complejidad que quizá se necesitasen horas, cuando en realidad se habían necesitado siglos, para desenmarañarlos: pero parecía ansioso por despacharlos lo más deprisa posible, comentándolos directa y luego oblicuamente, para cambiar al fin de tema por completo. «¿Mitra? Por supuesto», respondía a alguna pregunta de Wyatt. «No fracasó porque fuera malo. El mitraísmo estuvo a punto de triunfar sobre el cristianismo. Fracasó porque le faltaba muy poco para ser bueno». Musitaba algo y luego añadía: «Ese es hoy el problema. No hay ningún misterio. Todo está secularizado. No hay ningún misterio, nada tiene peso alguno…», y se levantaba y salía de la habitación, como hacía a menudo en medio de una conversación, sobre todo si las preguntas nacían de los estudios de Wyatt. «¿Pelagianismo?», repetía ante un plato de alubias blancas deshechas (pues Wyatt apenas lo veía más que en las comidas). «Si no hubiera sido Pelagio habría sido algún otro. Pero puede que ahora… puede que la mayoría de nosotros aceptemos el pecado original para explicar nuestra culpa, y nos comportemos… tratemos a los demás como si fueran consumados… ejem… pelagianos que hacen lo que les viene en gana…», y no daba más explicaciones, sino que se ponía a tamborilear con los dedos sobre la mesa de caoba del comedor.

«El libre albedrío», empezaba Wyatt, pero su padre no lo escuchaba ya. En todas estas discusiones parecía haber decisiones que había tomado en secreto, y en su esfuerzo por no revelarlas terminaba por no decir nada en absoluto. Pero a medida que pasaban la semanas, Wyatt lo acosaba cada vez más en busca de aliento para sus estudios eclesiásticos. A veces Gwyon intentaba dárselo como si fuera su deber hacerlo. Podía arreglárselas, por ejemplo, para disertar sobre las complejidades de la transubstanciación sin disentir ni desviarse siquiera de la ortodoxia; pero a medida que se multiplicaban sus referencias y crecía su entusiasmo, abordaba la doctrina —que llamaba aristotélica— según la cual Dios conservaba los «accidentes» del pan y del vino (a fin, añadía, de no sobresaltar a sus adoradores), y se embarcaba en una disertación sobre los «accidentes» de la realidad, y la redención de la materia, hasta que se levantaba bruscamente de la mesa para ir a consultar un dato, un papel o un libro que tenía en su despacho, y ya no volvía. Era como si no deseara empujar a Wyatt al sacerdocio, como un hombre cuyos antepasados han servido toda la vida en barcos de madera, y él es el último que lo hace, sin intención de obligar a su hijo a que sirva en uno, pues sabe que el último de todos se hundirá con él. Había empezado la prueba cabal de su ministerio. Ya no estaba en su mano detenerla.

Algo iba mal. El verano se deshizo en otoño, y Wyatt hizo las maletas para marcharse. En los ratos cada vez más largos que había pasado pintando se había fraguado un plan por sí solo, de generación tan espontánea que lo siguió sin ser consciente de él, y si no se desvió de los límites de ese proyecto fue aparentemente por pura casualidad. Cada vez había acudido con menos frecuencia a su padre en busca de aliento para el sacerdocio, y Gwyon parecía agradecérselo, se había sosegado un poco y ahora dirigía sus

conversaciones hacia el pasado, hacia el monasterio de Extremadura y fray Manomuerta, a quien seguía escribiendo y enviando paquetes de comida, o hacia el pueblo de San Zuinglio, los organillos por la calle, la santa patrona todavía sin canonizar, la única corrida de toros que había visto: «Y no se mata al toro con la espada, sino con la muleta, el arte de la muleta…», dijo, siguiendo a su hijo por las escaleras hacia el cuarto de costura, donde Wyatt estaba haciendo las maletas.

La habitación estaba llena de bocetos, estudios, diagramas y lienzos sin terminar. Había una gran tabla vuelta hacia la pared, y Wyatt, que había entrado primero, se apoyó de pronto contra ella y se quedó mirando al suelo como abrumado por una idea, algo que había sabido durante todo el tiempo, pero que sólo ahora se atrevía a encarar de forma consciente.

—¿Qué es, qué es lo que has venido a enseñarme? —preguntó Gwyon, paseando la mirada por el revoltijo de papeles—. Algún cuadro que has hecho, ¿es eso? ¿Terminado? —Entonces dio un paso hacia la gran tabla, y Wyatt extendió los brazos como para protegerla—. ¿Eh? —se detuvo Gwyon—. ¿Qué es? ¿Qué pasa? ¿No tienes algo que enseñarme?

—Sí, sí, pero yo… lo he hecho, pero… aquí está. —Los ojos de Wyatt habían estado asaeteando el suelo de un lado a otro, y entonces se inclinó bruscamente y cogió un papel—. Sí, aquí está —dijo, tendiéndolo—, ves, esto… esto es lo que he estado… haciendo.

Tendió el papel, con una expresión vacía en la cara que se fundió en una súplica desesperada cuando alzó la vista hacia su padre.

—¿Esto? ¿Todas estas líneas? —dijo Gwyon, cogiéndolo.

—Sí, son estudios de perspectiva.

—Ya veo, todas estas líneas juntándose aquí en un punto.

—Sí —murmuró Wyatt, retrocediendo de nuevo hacia la tabla—. El punto de fuga. Eso se llama el punto de fuga.

Miraba a su padre con ojos desorbitados, pero los apartó rápidamente cuando Gwyon alzó la vista, y se quedó allí esperando, temblando de pies a cabeza, hasta que su padre salió de la habitación. Ni siquiera entonces se movió, sino que esperó hasta oír sus fuertes pisadas al pie de las escaleras. Entonces se volvió bruscamente hacia la tabla, la apartó de la pared y se quedó mirando con una nueva expresión en la cara la copia terminada de la tabla del Bosco.

Aquella noche, durante la cena, ambos estudiaron su plato con un interés más ostentoso que el acostumbrado, nerviosamente pendientes el uno del otro, pero callados hasta que Gwyon llamó a Janet para que abriera una botella de vino. Parecía dispuesto a pasar toda la velada sentado ante aquel oscuro jerez oloroso, iniciando frases y dejándolas sin acabar, alzando la mirada hacía su hijo con el gesto furtivo de un conspirador, o más bien de alguien implicado en una conspiración de la que nadie se ha confesado partícipe. Durante un instante se encontraron sus ojos sin parpadear, luego Gwyon apartó los suyos y empezó a contar de nuevo el fino engaño del viejo noble italiano, el Conte di Brescia, mirando mientras hablaba hacia la tabla de la mesa de los Siete Pecados Capitales bajo la ventana del fondo, sin que una sola sombra en sus rasgos sugiriese que supiera que estaba mirando una impostura, o que se acordara de los meticulosos dibujos enmohecidos que había encontrado envueltos en periódicos, enterrados detrás de la cochera, aquella noche del solsticio de verano de años antes.

Al día siguiente, cuando las campanas dieron las doce del mediodía con casi un cuarto de hora de retraso, Janet acompañó a Wyatt hasta la puerta delantera, donde sus bendiciones lo sumergieron en un baño de sangre de despedida, la Sangre Preciosa que ahora parecía tener constantemente en los labios, «Oh, Sangre inefable, ardiente ardiente Sangre que yo he derramado y en la que me he bañado con mi Amado…», hasta que la puerta se cerró.

El equipaje estaba ya en la estación cuando llegaron Wyatt y su padre, que se quedaron callados en medio del polvo. El cielo estaba azul grisáceo oscuro, rayado con los colores de orín que se ven bajo el agua. Gwyon pareció varias veces a punto de hablar, nervioso, inclinándose sobre su hijo, crispando los dedos en el bolsillo de su chaleco negro. Finalmente farfulló:

—¿Te llevas ese cuadro? —Wyatt pareció abrumado, y la culpa enrojeció su cara hasta que su padre interrumpió su sofocado intento de hablar—. El… su retrato, el retrato de tu madre que no… que no quieres terminar.

—Ese, sí, sí, me lo llevo, en esa caja, esa caja plana de ahí —logró decir Wyatt jadeando, tratando de señalar la caja con despreocupada inocencia—. Va ahí, con… ya sabes, muchos otros lienzos.

—Debes terminarlo, debes intentar terminarlo —le dijo Gwyon—, termínalo, o ella estará contigo. —Se detuvo, mirando la cara de su hijo, donde tan pocos rasgos recordaban la suya, que llevaba tanto tiempo bajo dominio—. O estará siempre contigo —dijo Gwyon, retirando de pronto los dedos del bolsillo del

chaleco, sacando dos grandes aros bizantinos de oro—. Toma —se los tendió—. Eran de ella, eran… de ella.

Wyatt los cogió, ocultándolos en su mano pese a lo grandes que eran. Empezó a hablar, pero su padre, apartando la mirada de él y dirigiéndola al este, hizo un ruido, y ambos quedaron atrapados, como queda atrapado un nadador en la superficie del agua por esa corriente fría cuya subitaneidad lo paraliza con calambres, y lo envía al fondo con muda sorpresa.

El sol proyectaba sus sombras inmóviles sobre el tosco andén de madera. Luego una nube oscureció el sol, y las sombras desaparecieron. Cuando volvió a salir el sol las sombras se habían ido.

Pasaron los días, luego las semanas, y Gwyon salía sin sosiego de su despacho para pasearse por aquellos oscuros pasillos, prendiéndose al pasar de los espejos de la *cruz-con-espejos*,[14] deteniéndose un poco más allá para encararse en silencio con Olalla, o escuchando los crujidos que producían a su alrededor las aristas agudas del maderaje, mientras murmuraba: «¡Y se llevó mi navaja de afeitar! ¡Se llevó mi navaja…!». Y luego, cuando hubo recibido la carta: «La perseverancia final de… sí, perspectiva, el punto de fuga…», antes incluso de abrirla. Se quedó mirando los sellos desconocidos, descifró el matasellos, Munich, y finalmente salió con ella, para leerla mientras paseaba al aire claro de la estación. Se encaminó, sin que nadie lo viera, hacia las obras abandonadas del puente, aquel hombre nacido en Boston el día amarillo en que el volcán Krakatoa había hecho erupción en la otra punta de la tierra y la noche llegó a todas partes con un crepúsculo rojo, que sólo ahora se acercaba en edad a la madurez, esperando, como Manto, mientras el tiempo giraba a su alrededor, el momento de dar prueba cabal de su ministerio.

El anochecer de Nueva Inglaterra había adquirido el frío del día acabado, el frío de la realidad que sigue al crepúsculo. Se acercaba el día de Todos los Santos, y el de Difuntos, cuando en Francia irían de pícnic a los cementerios, y en España saldrían a poner crisantemos en las tumbas, junto a las coronas de cuentas y los nombres adornados de los muertos, donde el nombre de Camilla destacaba en fría vigilancia, esperando.

—¿Culpa? —murmuró, caminando con la carta abierta en la mano—. Por la culpa, mi hijo no puede estudiar para el sacerdocio. La culpa… ¡Dios santo!, ¿estás escondido en alguna parte bajo este maremágnum de miedo, este caos de sangre y mutilación, estos terrores de mentes débiles…? Un sentimiento de culpa, cielo santo, ¿qué otra clase de ministros cristianos nos envías o ha habido siempre? ¡El muy tonto…! Y creía que podría salvarlo… Quizá, si supiera la verdad…

De pronto se estremeció de pies a cabeza, y se detuvo como si algo lo hubiera atravesado, quizá la sacudida del pasado en aquella voz de mujer, «¡Pagano, claro!», y su vacilante retirada, «¿Poner los pies dentro…?». Sorbió por la nariz, como para despejarse la cabeza de recuerdos vaporosos procedentes de algún frío santuario hundido en la basílica del pasado, y cuadró los hombros, como había hecho al salir de aquel *mithraeum* subterráneo bajo la iglesia de San Clemente de Roma. Y de repente volvió los ojos al cielo vacío en busca del sol.

Pero el repentino enfriamiento del aire, y aquella carta, habían traído al anciano con sobresalto al presente, al que dio la espalda retrocediendo con una lucidez de memoria contra la que estaba indefenso. Los recuerdos se convirtieron en hechos, incluyéndolo plenamente en su tránsito pero apartándolo despiadadamente de cualquier intrusión, y lo dejaron caminando con lenta impotencia entre sus enconadas acometidas. El chillido estridente de Heracles, repetido desde la casa por dos voces, y las caras con manchas oscuras de los espejos engastados en la cruz. Su descubrimiento ante la cabeza de su cadáver de que tía May había sufrido una transformación, que le había ocultado durante aquellos últimos años de su vida con el cuidado de la beata Clara. Aquel sencillo féretro sepultado bien hondo en la tierra, mientras el otro se alzaba a la altura de un hombre sobre la tierra, previendo la deshiscencia, preparado para desvainar su semilla: Camilla, y su muerte de la que nunca hablaba, la blanca carroza fúnebre subiendo hacia los cipreses por la carretera sembrada de peñascos, jalonada de estaciones del *via crucis* y deyecciones de animales demasiado frescas aún para servir de combustible. Aquella eucaristía desolada del día de Navidad en Nuestra Señora de la Otra Vez: los accidentes de la realidad, Cristo hecho de cuero de búfalo, ¿o era piel humana?, en la catedral de Burgos. El desconcierto de los toros, el puerto, y Colón rodeado de leones. Luego los árboles de la Toscana en aguzada erección, la decrepitud contrita del Conte di Brescia, el pórtico de mármol en Lucca, tan hermoso que nadie se detenía a mirarlo, y la imagen, y las palabras de William Rufus al obispo Gundulf de Rochester: «¡Por la Santa Faz de Lucca, que Dios nunca me resarcirá de todo el mal que me ha hecho!».

Arrancando la mirada del lugar vacío en el cielo por donde se había puesto el sol, dejó de retroceder por años a trompicones y echó a correr, saltando de siglo en siglo. La carta que había hecho pedazos quedó por un instante flotando en el aire agitado, la atrapó un soplo, la esparció por tierra y la alejó de él como una bandada de pájaros blancos remontando el vuelo.

II

«Tres curieux, vos maîtres anciens.
Seulement les plus beaux, ce sont les faux».

PAUL EUDEL, *Trues et truqueurs*

En la terraza del Dôme estaba sentada una persona que se parecía al joven George Washington sin su peluca (por la época en la que luchaba por el territorio de Ohio). Leía, moviendo en silencio los labios, un libro que tenía ante sí. Estaba bebiendo un líquido de color bilioso de una copa globular, y cada veinte páginas más o menos llamaba al camarero en perfecto francés, «un Ricard…», y añadía un platillo de un franco a la pila que tenía delante. «Voilà ma propre Sainte Chapelle», habría dicho de aquella airosa torre (tenía la frase preparada) si alguien lo hubiera animado a hablar sentándose a su mesa. Nadie lo hacía. Siguió leyendo. Cualquiera habría podido ver, si hubiera mirado, que lo que estaba leyendo era *transición.* Nadie lo hacía. Por fin, un joven sin afeitar se inclinó levemente, como con dolor, murmuró algo en americano y dejó caer una mano sucia sobre el respaldo de una silla de su mesa. «
J'vous
en prie», dijo ella con claridad, bajando la *transición,* [15] esperando a que se sentase para seguir. «Mursi», murmuró él, arrastrando la silla hacia otra mesa.

París se conservaba como una promesa cumplida: la edad no la había marchitado, ni la costumbre agotado su infinita vulgaridad.

Cerca, un hombre exhibía dos dedos, uno vestido de hombre y el otro de mujer, actuando sobre una mesa. Tres jóvenes ingleses borrachos cantaban «El pícnic de los ositos de peluche». Tres niños sucios de Marruecos vendían cacahuetes que sacaban de lo alto de una cesta, y hachís que sacaban del fondo. Alguien dijo que aquella misma tarde iba a haber una ascensión en globo, en el Bois. Otro dijo que los huesos de Karl Marx estaban enterrados en Highgate. Alguien dijo: «Realmente me van a analizar. Psicoanalizar». Un chico con barba, en un estado de desaseo en pana negra *(corde du roi)* que había tardado tanto como la barba en desarrollarse, dijo: «Tengo que exponer esos cuadros, tengo que vender alguno, pero ¿cómo voy a hacer que la gente suba a verlos estando él allí? Se está muriendo. No puedo echarlo a la calle, muriéndose como está… ni siquiera en París». Una chica dijo que acababa de alquilar una villa en las mismas afueras de París, en un lugar llamado Saint Forget. «Por supuesto es un lugar horrible, y tuve que pagar una suma horrenda para echar a la llorona familia francesa que vivía allí, pero tiene una dirección tan mona y antigua para recibir el correo…». Otra chica dijo: «Mi *conçerage* ha estado devolviendo todo mi correo con la indicación *unconú* sólo porque nada más le di diez francos de "purbuar"». A la gente a la que pronto se vería en Nueva York leyendo libros franceses se la veía aquí leyendo en italiano. Alguien dijo en francés chapurreado *(blasé):* «Un café au lait».

Los camareros paseaban la mirada sobre esta tribuna de promesas con una reserva de vidriosa indulgencia que todos los reunidos bajo ella admiraban, como admiraban la grosería, que llamaban amor propio; el desdén, que llamaban dignidad innata; la avaricia, que llamaban autosuficiencia; la ropa mal cortada y de mal gusto de los hombres, alabada como indiferencia; y las muy espaciadas poses de *haute couture* al otro lado del Sena, llamadas inimitables o *shick* [16] según el tiempo que uno llevara allí. Este espectáculo de cultura plenamente realizada resultaba maravilloso para los ojos bien abiertos, los oídos aguzados y las mentes de esa naturaleza eréctil que revela escrúpulos ingenuos de origen trasatlántico (despiertas aquí bajo miméticas cabelleras largas y despeinadas en los varones, toscamente cortadas en las chicas). Consideraban el colmo de la excelencia que no quedase nada por hacer, ningún árbol por plantar, ningún edificio por derribar (no habían visitado Le Bourget, los escombros tras el Hôtel de Ville les parecían pintorescos), ningún árbol demasiado bajo, ningún edificio demasiado alto (esas farolas telescópicas del Pont du Carrousel), ningún capullo de posibilidad que no se hubiera abierto con la inalterable lozanía de las flores artificiales, ningún lugar para el crecimiento de esa flor perdurable que es la humildad.

«À mon très aimé frère Lazarus, ce que vous me mandez de Petrus
l'apôtre
de notre doux Jesus…», escribía María Magdalena. «Notre fils Cesarion va bien…», escribía Cleopatra a Julio César. Había una carta de Alejandro el Grande a Aristóteles («Mon ami…»); otra de Lázaro a san

Pedro (sobre los druidas); una de Poncio Pilato a Tiberio; la confesión de Judas (a María Magdalena); un pasaporte firmado por Vercingetorix; notas de Alcibíades y Pericles; y una carta a Pascal (sobre la gravitación) de Newton, que tenía diecinueve años cuando murió Pascal. Pero
M. Chasles
, eminente matemático de finales del siglo XIX, pagó
140 000
francos por esta colección de autógrafos, pues los creía auténticos; al fin y al cabo, estaban escritos en francés. Del mismo modo, la Virgen se apareció a Maximin y Mélanie en La Salette, se identificó hablándoles en francés, lengua que no entendían, siguió en *patois* local durante el tiempo suficiente para comunicarles Sus confidencias, y luego volvió a Su lengua nativa para despedirse: ¿qué hay de extraño en que los visitantes transatlánticos se acercaran a ella con escrúpulos?, murmurando la tiesa medida de su respeto con tonos nacidos en los bosques, en las praderas con libertad ilimitada, de la inmensidad de las montañas, se acercaban con reverencia al féretro donde cada partícula del cadáver estaba protegida de cualquier profanación viviente por los miembros de la Académie française, que lo llevaban a hombros.

Antes de su desplazamiento desde la naturaleza, confusos por la *grandeur* de una cultura que no sabían definir y, por tanto, creían inexistente, estos visitantes transatlánticos habían aprendido a admirar en esta definición de civilización pulcramente parcelada la tiránica presunción de muchos basada en los esfuerzos rebeldes de unos pocos, la ostentación con que miles se aprovechaban de la fuerza de una docena, que de cuando en cuando se habían alzado contra esta engreída complacencia con el pasado a la que pronto habrían de contribuir, dando con sus hostigadas muertes pretextos para la vanidad de la lengua, que ellos habían perfeccionado; para arrogantes poses del intelecto, que ellos habían permitido comprender y liberar, infringiendo sus reglas; para un insolente arbitraje del gusto, fruto de los esfuerzos de aquellos tachados de no tener ninguno; para un desprecio hacia los demás nacido de las plántulas que ellos habían plantado bajo la lluvia del desprecio a sí mismos; para una dogmática de la excelencia basada en desafíos insultantes lanzados con imposible esperanza, y luego dados por supuesto, arrebatados de sus manos caídas y esgrimidos como dogmas.

Desde la insoluble perfección de la crepuscular Île de la Cité (vista desde el Pont des Arts) hasta la estática depravación de los Grands Boulevards, era intachable: al trivializar esta perfección, absorbía al contemplador y excluía al creador; de ella no cabía más imitación que de una sirena (aunque se oían ecos de la Sirena de Djibouti).

«Voici votre Perrier
m'sieur
». «Mais
j'ai
dit café au lait, pas
d'eau
Perrier…». Un hombrecillo con un traje de zapa dijo: *«Son putas, y nada más. Putas, putas, putas…»* [17] Alguien dijo: «Picasso…». Otro dijo: «Kafka…». Una chica dijo: «Intentas confundirme deliberadamente. Por supuesto que me gusta el arte. Pregunta a cualquiera». Cerca, un joven con barba recibía felicitaciones por su reciente exposición. Se trataba de un grupo de paisajes en magenta y laca de granza. *Très amusant, gai, très très original* (era francés). Había hecho furor. Dijo que se había alejado cuatro kilómetros de Saint-Germain-en-Laye cuando descubrió que se había olvidado todos los colores menos el magenta y la laca de granza, de modo que siguió adelante y pintó de todas formas. Dijo: «Quelquefois je passe la nuit entière à finir un tableau…». Alguien dijo que había una ciudad en Suiza llamada Glande. Alguien contó el chiste de Carruthers y su caballo.

En la orilla derecha, una señora dijo: «Te gustará Venecia. Es tan parecida a Fort Lauderdale». En la misma mesa, un hombre dijo: «Voy a hacerle una visita. Lleva años viviendo aquí, en las afueras de París, un lugar llamado *banlieu*» [18]. En otra mesa alguien dijo: «Por Dios, ¿sabes?, son casi tan groseros con nosotros como entre ellos mismos».

En Montmartre, alguien levantó la vista hacia el Sacré Coeur y dijo: «¿Cómo diablos crees que llaman a eso?». La mujer que iba con él dijo: «Por qué molestarse en subir hasta allí arriba, no he traído la cámara». Una chica dijo: «Voulez vous voir le ciné cóchon? Deux femmes…».

En lo alto se alzaba aquella cosa exótica y gratuita, que proporcionaba el consuelo de lo grotesco: aquella sorpresa bizantino-románica de un blanco apagado que fue amontonada en bulbosas pirámides sobre la colina de los Mártires a finales del siglo XIX, poco después de que se terminase de instalar en la ciudad una completa estación depuradora de aguas residuales. Aquella iglesia no era, como muchos creían,

un monumento conmemorativo de la victoria francesa sobre Prusia, sino de la victoria jesuítica sobre Francia. Se tenía entendido de antiguo que en el nacimiento de Ignacio de Loyola sólo había habido un error de lugar: su país de procedencia era España, pero nadie había aventajado nunca a Francia en la guía vocacional de las ideas de otros, y resultaba obvio (en Francia) que la mejor forma de promover su Sociedad de Jesús era hacerlo por medio de la mente francesa. A mediados del siglo XVII la Sociedad tuvo problemas con los jansenistas, y las aportaciones de Pascal los trastornaron casi tanto como el Milagro de la Santa Espina, una reliquia que curó a la pequeña Marguerite Périer su *fistula lachrymalis:* fue un milagro jansenista. La Sociedad contraatacó: encontró a su propia Marguerite, que con la instrucción y el aliento benévolos del Père La Colombière, su confesor, reveló al mundo un desfile de lo maravilloso que espantó incluso a aquellos que estaban obligados a creer, un relato que convirtió la curación de una *fistula lachrymalis,* cosa nunca agradable de imaginar, en una trivialidad orgánica. El relato desgarrador de Margarita María Alacoque pasó de mano en mano durante unos dos siglos, hasta que al fin, en 1864, el papa Pío IX se vio asaltado por un memorial que pedía el más alto reconocimiento para el Sagrado Corazón (el órgano afligido). En realidad, el propio memorial participaba de lo milagroso, presentando según hacía doce millones de firmas en un país cuyos archivos provinciales declaraban incapaces de escribir su nombre a tres cuartas partes de sus novias y novios. Apenas una década después de la beatificación, un decreto papal consagró la Iglesia católica universal al Sagrado Corazón, y desde entonces la Sociedad ha defendido su provechosa explotación frente a todos los contendientes con la misma diestra fanfarronería que mostró en su consecución: frente a la Virgen de La Salette, frente a los promotores de la Devoción del Perpetuo Rosario, incluso frente a la pródiga (ochenta y cinco litros por minuto) Virgen de Lourdes, cuyos testimonios embotellados no tardaron en ser enviados a todas partes cuando se los declaró exentos de los impuestos de la República sobre artículos de comercio interior y exterior. En medio de una multitud pareja a la población de Afganistán, el Sacré Coeur erigió su iglesia sobre la cima de aquella colina a la que una vez se había acercado san Dionisio llevando su cabeza bajo el brazo. La nueva «empresa de utilidad pública», como se la llamó, fue consagrada por el cardenal arzobispo Guibert, desdeñando las murmuraciones insulares que insinuaban que la Sociedad había plagiado el Sagrado Corazón del eminente filósofo inglés William Godwin, a quien se le ocurrió primero. Y, finalmente, las Devociones de la tierra predilecta hicieron las paces: después de todo, como dijo monseigneur Ségur, la Virgen demuestra muy buen gusto al elegir Francia como teatro de sus apariciones.

Cerca de la Bourse, una señora dijo: «Des touristes, oui, mais des sales anglais… là, regardez ce type là…». Señalaba a una figura al otro lado de la calle; no un sucio inglés, como indicó, sino Wyatt, que vivía cerca de allí. Sin tener la menor idea de París cuando llegó, había sido lo bastante afortunado como para encontrar alojamiento en aquel barrio, que conservaba su anonimato en el mundo de las artes. Allí vivía poca gente. La actividad se centraba entorno a la Bolsa. Los domingos estaba vacío.

Conocía a poca gente, y la veía con poca frecuencia. Llevaba tres años sin escribir a su padre, y tras un año en París había terminado siete cuadros, trabajando con una chica llamada Christiane, una modelo rubia de rasgos y figura menudos. Cuando mostraba su cara de perfil, o la caída de un paño de su hombro, encontraba allí sugerencias de las líneas que precisaba, formas que conocía pero no podía descubrir sin tener ante sí aquella referencia a la realidad cabal. Le quedaba ya poco dinero, y por eso, además de su trabajo, hacía algunas restauraciones de cuadros antiguos para un anticuario que le pagaba regular y malamente. No pasaba el tiempo en las mesas de los cafés hablando de forma, línea, color, composición, tendencias o materiales: trabajaba en su pintura o no pensaba en ella. No sabía más de *surréalisme* de lo que sabía de la plétora de pintarrajos expuestos en las calles de Montmartre para los turistas, esos árbitros de la ilustración para quienes la pintura era una representación personalizada de seres y lugares a los que tenían cariño; tal vez no supieran de arte, pero sabían lo que querían, cuadros pintados a mano (originales) por los que pagaban con la única moneda que entendían a pintores cuyas visiones habían encogido en las mismas proporciones. De vez en cuando subía hasta allí y los veía, las callejuelas infestadas de ellos pintando la misma escena desde diferentes ángulos, el mismo cuadro variando de caballete a caballete, como diferentes versiones de una verdad mal entendida, pero una misma reproducción idéntica como progenie de cada caballete, siguiendo un precepto de Henner según el cual aquélla era la única forma de ser original. Al pasar mostraba tanto interés por ellos como el que habría mostrado por unos hombres que estuvieran encalando paredes.

Pero llegó un día gris de otoño, un día que le había perdido la pista al sol y a la importuna reiteración de minutos y horas que el sol dicta, un día en que aquella mole se destacaba sobre Montmartre con preternatural blancura, el espectro ceremonial de un pico, un escarpado Alpe en la dirección equivocada. De vuelta a casa, solo, sintiendo el frío como una espantosa carga de ansiedad, la sensación de algo perdido,

al cruzarse con la gente se la quedaba mirando con asombro, como si llevara años sin ver a nadie, mirando fijamente cada cara como si esperara reconocer algo allí. ¿Cambiaba el frío las cosas?, aparte del intercambio de vestuario entre la gente y los árboles: la gente que de pronto salía embozada, y los árboles que se exhibían con su abigarrado *déshabillé* de hojas descoloridas. Pero hasta las mismas calles y las luces que iluminaban las calles parecían diferentes, recordando la desnudez con anguloso desagrado, evocando la contienda de fábula entre el sol y el viento, dilatando la corta rue Vivienne hasta incluir en ella la atestada desolación de Maximilianstrasse, el seguro anonimato de la infancia recordado por el otoño del año, y un Múnich que sólo había conocido la primavera y el verano en la infancia irrecuperable de la Edad Media, pues a partir de entonces no hubo más dirección que hacia abajo, ningún color que no fuera más oscuro, ningún cielo que no estuviera más vacío, ningún suelo sino aquél más duro, ningún aire sino el frío. «Bitte…?». Perdida la corrección, el decoro uniforme de los tejados franceses podía interrumpir la fibrosa impostura del rococó italiano y francés, o un tumor fortuito de renacimiento decimonónico provocado por el ojo bizantino tras la fachada románica de la Allerheiligen-Hofkirche. Igualmente solitarios, o más solitarios (como dicen que uno se siente en una multitud), los edificios de la ciudad moderna de Múnich se mantenían apartados unos de otros por sus diferencias, exageradamente maquillados como los invitados de un baile de máscaras veneciano, tímidas perpetraciones de asertiva adolescencia, muy viajados, casi opulentos, *déracinés*, se habían reunido como trasuntos de sus seductores que no eran conocidos en aquella tierra, y ahora se erguían en erecto silencio en los paseos laterales de las avenidas, sorprendidos de que aquellos a quienes habían conocido en la conglomerada infancia también hubiesen viajado, también hubiesen sido seducidos, y además, en aquel instante sobresaltado, por amantes más apuestos que los suyos. Como culebrinas de relámpago paralizadas, las cruces gamadas en las calles habían anunciado el holocausto; mientras la Frauenkirche, la única indígena, anfitriona hermafrodita y doblemente estéril, daba su imparcial bienvenida abriendo el seno de sus altas cúpulas gemelas, contra lo que protestaban las otras, pero no podían suplantarla. Al otro lado del río, sobre una colina, vacíos pabellones con columnatas presenciaban el placer vespertino de un niño que al oír que lo llamaban se marchó, dejando que el viento rasgara su reluciente juguete.

Ahora pintaba de noche. Por la tarde restauraba cuadros antiguos o hacía bocetos, un trabajo poco absorbente que suspendía con el crepúsculo, cuando Christiane se iba sin mostrar ninguna curiosidad ni interés por el revoltijo de papeles que conservaban sugerencias del orden de sus huesos y de aquellas disposiciones de sus rasgos que dejaba atrás; sin sentir la amenaza de la magia, sin miedo y sin prisa caminaba hacia la Gare Saint-Lazare, aunque rara vez llegaba (pues no era su destino) antes de verse detenida, y de nuevo tendida, de nuevo abierta, indiferente a la resurrección que la llenaba y moría; y la Gare Saint-Lazare, una estación de ferrocarril y por tanto un comienzo y un fin, aparecía en la visión vespertina, erguida en testimonio, y luego (pues ¿qué fue del hombre resucitado?), como testigo de un futuro que, al igual que el pasado, carecía de destino y acumulaba mugre en sus llagas fenetradas.

Pintaba de noche, y a menudo acababa en un estado febril al amanecer, cuando le llegaba el sol como la luz del restablecimiento al paciente que acaba de superar la crisis de una enfermedad mortal, y el tiempo, el paciente, se relajaba, y extendía dedos de minutos y fríos miembros de horas en la convaleciente resurrección del día.

Cuando salía, las calles estaban llenas de gente recién lavada y vestida, gente para la que el tiempo no era un continuo de enfermedad, sino una inexorable repetición de conciencia e inconsciencia, inconexa como el día y la noche, o el negro y el blanco, el mal y el bien, en alternación independiente, como la vida y la muerte de los insectos.

Esto puede ocurrir: cuando se está en vela, los absolutos se confunden y el tiempo, el paciente, se ve tendido de cuerpo entero, agotado. Una tarde se quedó dormido, despertó solo a la hora del crepúsculo, y creyó que había pasado la noche entera durmiendo, que la había perdido, que estaba amaneciendo. Salió a tomar café. Las calles estaban llenas, pero desigualmente. Había una sombra en cada cara, un cúmulo de residuos con trazas de final, una melancolía de cosas acabadas. Con las ojeras que tenía, Wyatt miraba el día que empezaba así con ojos tan perplejos y furibundos que llamó la atención de un guardia, que le detuvo.

«Où allez-vous, donc?». «Chez moi». «Vos papiers,
s’il
vous plait». «Mon passeport? Je ne
l’ai
sur moi,
c’est

chez moi». «Où habitez vous?». «Vingt-quatre rue de la Bourse». «
Qu'est-ce
que vous faites?». «Je suis peintre». «Où, donc?». «Chez moi». «Où habitez vous?». «Mais…». «Avez vous des moyens?». «Oui…». Wyatt buscó en su bolsillo, sacó los francos que tenía, mostró el dinero. «Alors», dijo el guardia, «il faut toujours en avoir sur soi, de
l'argent
, vous savez…».

Tras tomar un vaso de café, subió las escaleras hasta su habitación. Había alguien esperando a la débil luz del pasillo. Cuando Wyatt se acercó, la figura se volvió, extendió una mano y murmuró un saludo. «Me llamo Crémer», dijo. «Le conocí la semana pasada, en la galería Muette. ¿Puedo entrar un momento?».

Hablaba un inglés preciso. Wyatt abrió la puerta de su habitación, grande y ordenada, con paredes desnudas y una amplia ventana que daba al norte.

—Tengo entendido que la próxima semana expondrá usted algunos de sus cuadros, ¿no?

—Siete cuadros —dijo Wyatt, sin hacer ningún esfuerzo por mostrarlos.

—Estoy interesado en su trabajo.

—Oh, ¿lo ha… visto?

—No, no, casi nada. Pero veo aquí —señalando hacia el caballete, donde había un lienzo apenas esbozado— que es interesante. Escribo la columna de arte de *La Macule.* —El cigarrillo de Crémer, que no se había quitado de los labios desde que apareció, se había consumido hasta la longitud de una uña de pulgar. Parecía descansado, sereno, difícilmente un visitante de madrugada—. Probablemente haré una crítica de sus cuadros la próxima semana —añadió tras una pausa que había dejado a Wyatt mesándose el pelo de la nuca, la cara confusa.

—Oh, entonces… por supuesto querrá verlos ahora, ¿no?

—No se moleste —dijo Crémer, alejándose hacia la ventana—. ¿Estudia en París?

—No. Estudié en Múnich.

—En Alemania. Es una pena. Entonces, ¿su estilo es alemán? ¿Impresionismo alemán?

—No, no… totalmente diferente. No tan…

—¿Moderno? ¿Impresionismo alemán moderno?

—No, quiero decir, el estilo de los primitivos flamencos…

—Van Eyck…

—Pero menos…

—¿Menos severo? Sí. ¿Roger de la Pasture, quizá?

—¿Qué?

—Van der Weyden, si lo prefiere. —Crémer se encogió de hombros. Estaba de espaldas a la ventana—. En Alemania…

—Hice un cuadro a la manera de Memling, muy a la manera de Memling. El maestro, el hombre con el que estudié, Herr Koppel, Herr Koppel lo comparó con David, con el cuadro de Gérard David *El desollamiento del juez injusto.*

—Memlic, *alors*…

—Pero lo perdí allí, pero… ¿quiere ver lo que he hecho aquí?

—No se moleste. Pero me gustaría escribir una buena crítica para usted.

—Espero que lo haga. Podría ayudarme mucho.

—Sí. Exactamente.

Quedaron callados durante casi un minuto.

—¿Quiere sentarse? —preguntó por fin Wyatt.

Crémer no dio más muestras de haberlo oído que un ligero encogimiento de hombros. Se volvió a medias hacia la ventana y miró hacia fuera.

—Vive usted en un barrio muy… clandestino para un pintor, ¿no? —murmuró afablemente.

En la habitación, cada vez más oscura, el cigarrillo apagado parecía una herida en su labio.

—La atmósfera anónima… —empezó Wyatt.

—Por supuesto —lo interrumpió Crémer. Había un libro a sus pies, en el suelo, y lo movió con la ancha punta de su zapato—. Nos acordamos de Degas, ¿eh? —siguió con el mismo tono distante de broma—, su observación de que el artista debe acercarse a su obra con el mismo estado de ánimo con que el criminal comete un delito. ¿Eh? Sí… —Se acercó a Wyatt ligeramente encorvado, las manos hundidas en los bolsillos —. Las críticas tienen una gran importancia —sonrió—. Toda la importancia.

—¿Importancia?

—Para vender sus cuadros.

—Bueno —dijo Wyatt apartando la mirada de la sonrisa herida, clavándola en el suelo, juntando los brazos a la espalda y retorciéndolos hasta que se cogió los codos, y su cara, enjuta y agotada, pareció vaciarse de vida—. Sí, eso… eso depende de los cuadros.

—Por supuesto que no —dijo Crémer en el mismo tono.

—¿Qué quiere decir? —Wyatt alzó la vista, sobresaltado, dejando caer los brazos.

—Puedo ayudarle mucho.

—Sí, sí, pero…

—La crítica de arte está muy mal pagada, ¿sabe?

—Pero… ¿bien? ¿Y bien? —Su cara se llenó de arrugas.

—Si usted me garantiza, digamos, la décima parte del precio de venta de todo lo que vendamos…

—¿Lo que vendamos? ¿Usted? ¿Usted?

—Yo podría garantizarle unas críticas excelentes. —La cara de Crémer no cambió un ápice. Los ojos de Wyatt fulguraron mientras lo miraba, volviéndose verdes—. ¿Está sorprendido? —preguntó Crémer, y su cara cambió ahora, expresando una sorpresa estudiada, desdeñando admitirlo; mientras Wyatt, ante él, parecía a punto de caerse de agotamiento.

—¿A usted? Por mi trabajo… quiere que le pague por… por…

—Sí, piénseselo —dijo Crémer, volviéndose hacia la puerta.

—No. No me hace falta. Es insensata, esa… proposición. No la acepto. ¿Qué quiere de mí? —siguió, alzando la voz mientras Crémer abría la puerta.

Apenas quedaba luz en la habitación, ni siquiera para proyectar una sombra. Mientras hablaban se habían ido volviendo cada vez más borrosos el uno para el otro, hasta que Crémer abrió la puerta, y la luz de la *minuterie* proyectó su sombra plana sobre el umbral.

—Lamento haberle molestado —dijo—. Creo que necesita descansar, ¿no? Pero piénseselo, ¿eh?

Wyatt lo siguió hasta la puerta, gritando:

—¿Por qué ha venido aquí? ¿A estas horas? ¿Por qué viene de madrugada con esas historias?

Crémer había empezado ya a bajar las escaleras.

—¿De madrugada? —dijo deteniéndose—. Pero, mi querido amigo, si está anocheciendo. Es la hora de cenar.

Después el sonido de sus pasos en la escalera y la luz de la *minuterie* se extinguieron bruscamente, dejando a Wyatt agarrado al marco de la puerta, mientras abajo los pasos desaparecían resueltamente en la oscuridad.

Il fait toujours en avoir sur soi, de
l'argent
, vous savez…

Como leones saliendo bajo el rastrillo a la arena del circo, los coches rugían al irrumpir por la boca de la rue Mogador en la explanada detrás de la ópera. A su alrededor se extendía el pastiche de esa falsa Roma imperial a orillas de su Tiber: aunque el curso del Tiber, desde las gargantas apeninas de la Toscana, bordeando las montañas Sabinas para atravesar Roma y desembocar por dos brazos en el mar, tiene una contrapartida muy poco ambiciosa en el Sena, canalizado y represado a través de la decorosa campiña francesa, relamida como papel pintado. No obstante, habían hecho lo que habían podido con lo que tenían. Los Napoleones lo habían intentado con ahínco. El primero se peinó el pelo, y mandó peinárselo a su mujer y a sus hermanos, como se lo peinaban Julio César y su familia. J. L. David (después de pintar a Bruto, Andrómaca y los Horacios) le pintó con el aire más parecido a Julio César que pudo adoptar, y a Josefina esforzándose al máximo (la *Coronación*) en parecer por encima de toda sospecha. Todo el mundo se apuntó a erigir arcos, cúpulas y frontones, copiando lo que los romanos habían copiado de los griegos. Muebles imperio, candelabros, peinados… en algún lugar, más allá de ellos, pendía la visión de la Roma de Constantino, con sus once foros, diez basílicas, dieciocho acueductos, treinta y siete puertas de ciudad, dos anfiteatros, dos circos, treinta y siete arcos triunfales, cinco obeliscos, cuatrocientos veintitrés templos con sus estatuas de dioses de oro y marfil. Pero todo aquello había pasado. Ahora ya no había competencia. No desde que el papa Urbano VIII había declarado el Coliseo cantera pública.

Como el espíritu del coleccionismo de arte nació en Roma, a la larga llegó también a París, donde alcanzó las pasmosas proporciones de la colección de aquel astuto potentado siciliano, el cardenal Mazarino, que cuando se vio obligado a abandonar sus obras de arte en su caída, camino del exilio, murmuró contemplándolas «Que
j'ai

tant aimé», lo bastante francés para añadir: «et qui
m'ont
tant couté». Si el *connoisseur* romano podía distinguir por el olor entre cinco clases de pátina sobre bronce, las sensibilidades francesas se volvieron pronto igualmente cultivadas. Si para agradar al *connoisseur* romano se falsificaban zafiros con obsidianas, y sardónicas con jaspes baratos coloreados, los talentos franceses eran igualmente versátiles: «Un client désire des Corots?
L'article
manque sur le marché? Fabriquons-en…». (Y un día, de los dos mil quinientos cuadros de Corot se encontrarían siete mil ochocientos en América). Ya entonces conocían el valor del arte. O de conocer el valor del arte. Como dijo Coulanges a Madame de Sévigné, «la pintura es oro en barras».

¡París, ciudad afortunada! Cumplido ya un tercio hinchado del siglo XX, todavía era importunada por quienes la seguían valorando por la importancia que ella misma se da. Quizá fuera bien merecido el homenaje de parentesco que resonaba al otro lado del mar (desde una tierra en cuya entera extensión resonaba aún el saludo «¡Hola, primo!»); quizá cincuenta millones de franceses no podían equivocarse. En todo caso, cuatro millones de ellos estaban tratando de curarse enfermedades venéreas, y aquel año la sífilis provocó entre las damas unos cuarenta mil abortos. «París», apodo mágico (su verdadero nombre era Lutecia), imponía su magia en el reino del Arte, tan sinónimo de la propia palabra como el de Mnesareté, «Friné», lo había sido antaño de Amor. Por supuesto, hacía tiempo que París, con el espíritu de ese *noblesse oblige* que personificaba, había cortado toda legítima relación con las obras de arte, para incrementar inmediatamente su *entourage* de aquellos que viven por amor al Arte. Uno de éstos, al verse juzgado hacía tan sólo dos o tres años, había esgrimido el razonable argumento de que un típico estudio de un campesino barbizano firmado con su nombre le reportaba sólo unos cuantos centenares de francos, pero firmado «Millet», diez mil dólares; y la excelente defensa de que este subterfugio no había sido utilizado con franceses, sino con ingleses y norteamericanos, «a los que se puede vender cualquier cosa…» aquí, en Francia, donde todo estaba en venta.

Bajo los ojos de Napoleón I (encima de una columna en la Place Vendôme, «en César») seguía riñendo la Tercera República. Una vez establecidas sus propias escuálidas bohemias, no hubo inconveniente en devolver el original a través de la Línea Maginot a su hambrienta vecina, que se dedicaba afanosamente a roer el Tratado de Versalles, pedazo a pedazo, hasta el día en que un enviado alemán fuese muerto a tiros en París y, semanas después, se firmase un tratado de paz para preparar una nueva representación del baño de sangre que había provocado esta expresión de fe en uno que murió en él: «Il y a tant de saints, ils forment un tel rempart autour de Paris, que les zeppelins ne passeront jamais». Y París esperaba, siempre tan dispuesta como Friné, asediada por calumnias y amenazas, a rasgarse la túnica y someter sus pechos desnudos a la clemencia de sus jueces.

En un callejón, hurgando en un cubo de basura, un perro revelaba una gracia infinita en el gesto inconsciente de su pata delantera derecha. Poco más ocurrió en aquella noche sabatina de agosto. El día de san Bartolomé fue caluroso. Era el bochorno del verano parisino, cuando los gatos parisinos se tienden a dormir en los alféizares parisinos y en antepechos elevados, y se caen, y atraviesan la claraboya del retrete. El centro de la ciudad estaba desierto. Un autobús de turistas salió de la Place de
l'Opéra
. Un camión y un Citroen chocaron frente a las Galeries Lafayette. En el Pont
d'Auteuil
sacaron del Sena el cuerpo de un hombre atado a una bicicleta. En el cementerio de Montrouge, entre formas cubiertas de mármol y azulejos que recordaban un gran cuarto de baño al aire libre, un viudo discutía con el amante de su difunta esposa sobre quién tenía derecho a poner flores sobre su tumba. Frente a la Bourse, un equipo de fútbol sordomudo conversaba en bullicioso silencio. En el Quai du Pont Neuf estaba sentado un francés hurgándose en la nariz. Luego rodeó con el brazo a su chica y la besó. Luego se hurgó en la nariz. Era domingo en París, y todo estaba muy tranquilo.

En la terraza del Lame, bajo la sucia fachada de la periptérica impostura de la Madeleine, Wyatt estudiaba una publicación alemana. Los taxis pasaban cojeando, belicosos como animales heridos, y se desplomaban más adelante, ante
Maxim's
, para un almuerzo tardío. Gente de apostura poco representativa pasaba a pie. Algunos se detenían y se sentaban a las mesas. «En Estambul, en verano —dijo una señora—, era en Estambul, ¿no? Solíamos dar largos paseos por la cisterna, en verano…».

Wyatt leía despacio y con dificultad *Die Fleischflaute,* una revista de arte. Su exposición había terminado.

No se había vendido ningún cuadro. Había tirado *La Macule* rápidamente, después de leer los comentarios de Crémer: «Archaïque, dur comme la pierre, dérivé sans coeur, sans sympathie, sans vie, enfin, un esprit de la mort sans
l'espoir
de la Résurrection». Pero en aquel momento los detalles de aquel fracaso estaban olvidados, y la cosa en sí intensificada, mientras descifraba en *Die Fleischflaute* la noticia de que acababan de descubrir en Alemania un cuadro original de Hans Memling. Una mano tosca, pintando encima, había transformado toda la escena en un interior, con el mismo propósito con que la cabeza de Holofernes había sido transformada una vez en una bandeja de fruta sobre la bandeja de Judit (haciéndola menos ofensiva como «pintura»): ésta resultó ser una figura a la que desollaban viva sobre un potro, luego repintado como cama, del mismo modo que los que en principio estaban ocupados en despellejarla atendían ahora a la figura postrada en la cama. Un fragmento de paisaje visto por una ventana abierta, contaba *Die Fleischflaute*, había despertado el interés de un experto, y una vez llevada a la Alte Pinakothek de Munich y limpiada, la figura estirada en tiesa agonía había sido identificada como Valeriano, perseguidor de cristianos del siglo III, que cayó cautivo del rey persa Sapor, cuyo manto rojo aparecía tirado en primer plano ante el cuerpo tendido sobre el potro, consumido en inelástica fuerza, tormento e indiferencia en la cara dañada del tirano, sus ciegos ojillos vacíos. Tal vez, admitieron los expertos, podía ser obra de Gérard David, pero era más verosímil que lo fuese de Memling, a quien David había copiado probablemente su *Desollamiento del juez injusto*. Luego venía un panegírico de los pintores alemanes, y de Memling en particular, que había llevado los flojos inicios del arte flamenco a la cumbre de su perfección, cristalizando los talentos menores de los Van Eyck, Bouts y Van der Weyden en las obras maestras de su genio alemán.

Día de san Bartolomé en Notre Dame, conmemoración refleja de la medalla que Gregorio XIII había acuñado para celebrar la matanza de cincuenta mil herejes por Catalina de Médici: la música fluía y refluía en la catedral, y en la tradición parisina de efectos preconcertados de pronto la luz entró a raudales, perdió intensidad, volvió a aumentar con la música y juntas se apagaron. Al final de la misa, mientras el órgano llenaba la nave con su sonido, el cuerpo de los feligreses volvió su rostro múltiple hacia atrás y lo alzó para mirar hacia la galería del órgano, y visto así desde la galería del órgano formaba una gran cruz. Luego, la cruz se desintegró y sus fragmentos se diseminaron por la ciudad, de nuevo a salvo en la pocilga de la complacencia.

París hervía pegajosamente, a fuego lento, a la sombra de la erección de la Torre Eiffel. Como el lecho de la amante de un emperador, la cuenca en la que yacía no tenía ni un pliegue ni una puntada fuera de lugar; y como la emperatriz Teodora, «bella de cara y también gentil, pero corta de talla y pálida de tez, no del todo sin color sino levemente cetrina…», París articulaba su encanto sin salirse de los registros bajos del espectro. Del mismo modo, Teodora, cuyo padre criaba osos, salió a escena sin más talento que un don para la parodia ni más genio que el del puterío y la intriga. Triunfó como emperatriz: ningún senador, ningún sacerdote, ningún soldado protestó, y el vulgo clamoroso le rindió la pleitesía de los esclavos; del lecho al baño, del desayuno a la siesta se pavoneaba de su realeza. «Ojalá no deje nunca esta púrpura, ni sobreviva al día en que los hombres dejen de llamarme reina…». Murió de cáncer.

A la caída de la tarde, la sombra de la Torre Eiffel se inclinó hacia el Barrio Latino a través de su cuerpo. París se arreglaba, se maquillaba con mil tubos y tarros, era joven, se sabía desesperadamente joven, y olvidado el espejo, cascada la voz, se arrellanaba sin rival en los recuerdos sensibleros de los hombres casados en otros lugares con la empapada realidad, pasmados con la madurez que habían ganado a cambio de esta amante que tuvieron de jóvenes. Cuando retornaban a ella podían devolverle la juventud, evocarla en el arrebol del neón que no se dejaba intimidar por las resignadas fachadas de la mediana edad, las horrendas obras de hierro y cromo, los cancerosos interiores.

En un bar de la rue Caumartin, una chica dijo a un americano: «Vous
m'emmenez
? Moi, je suis cochonne, la plus cochonne de Paris… Vous voulez le toucher? Ici? Donnez moi un billet… oui, un billet, pour le toucher… ici… discrètement…».

Una chica tumbada en una cama dijo: «Sólo sabemos el uno por ciento de lo que nos ocurre. No *sabemos* [19] qué poco cielo está pagando por tanto infierno».

En una habitación de hotel, alguien dijo «Pero llevas aquí *tanto* tiempo» a un americano que estaba mostrando su *savoir faire* continental orinando en el lavabo. Él dijo: «Quería casarme con ella, pero ya sabes, está atada a su ambiente». Alguien dijo: «Nunca lo conocí bien, es de la secta de los negros». En la orilla izquierda, alguien acababa de abandonar a su mujer y se dedicaba a la guitarra. Estaba en casa, en la cama. «La visto cada noche con su bata», dijo. Otro propuso utilizar un pato, meterle la cabeza en un cajón

y cerrar el cajón de golpe en el momento crítico. Un joven caballero pagaba a sus amigos los servicios de un limpiabotas por séptima vez en una hora. Estaba borracho. Los sucios niños árabes vendían cacahuetes que sacaban de lo alto de la cesta y hachís que sacaban del fondo. Hablaban un francés imperioso y nada intimidado a base de jadeos guturales, pues venían de una tierra donde no se la consideraba la lengua más hermosa, como en América, ni la única, como en Francia. En aquella mesa alguien dijo: «Eso no me hace ningún efecto. ¿Pero no habéis notado que el cielo se está acercando?». «Por supuesto que amo el arte, por eso estoy en París», dijo una chica. El chico que estaba con ella dijo: «"Ye man fú", eso significa en francés…». *«Putas, putas, putas»,* [20] murmuró el hombre del traje de zapa. Alguien dijo: «Tengo las manos ocupadas, ¿te importaría sacarme unas cerillas del bolsillo…? Aquí, el bolsillo de los pantalones». Alguien dijo: «¿Te gusta esto?». Otro dijo: «Por la mañana no quería, así que se la puse bajo el brazo mientras molía café». Un hombre con un opaco monóculo marrón dijo «Gzhzhzhzht… uh…», y se cayó de la silla. Alguien contó el chiste de Carruthers y su caballo.

En el *quai,* el hombre besó a su chica y volvió a su más delicada preocupación. En la rue de Montmartre manos recias alzaban vasos de vino tinto. Éstos eran el pueblo, tropezando, resbalando, pereciendo: habían triunfado una vez en una revolución, y celebrado una parodia pública de la Misa; tras exaltar con gran pompa a la Diosa de la Razón, cuando le quitaron el velo resultó ser una bailarina que muchos conocían íntimamente. El Pueblo, del que uno de sus oficiales, el Capitán de Mun, dijo: «¡Galileo, has vencido! Ah, sin piedad con ellos: ¡no son el pueblo, son el infierno!». Pero sabían lo que querían: *Liberté, égalité, fraternité*… evitaban las decorosas fachadas decretadas por sus mayores, o mejores, y se reunían en interiores públicos de carnívoro *art nouveau.*

En Père Lachaise, una mujer americana compró una parcela para que la enterrasen cerca de… ¿quién era? ¿Byron? ¿Baudelaire? En la Place Vendôme, otro visitante transatlántico volcó con un taxi robado a los pies de Napoleón; fue encarcelado, multado y agasajado por sus amigos. En Notre Dame du Flottement, una millonaria del Maine se casó con su chófer de color y fue agasajada por sus amigos. En la terraza del Dôme, asediada tras el estrepitoso bastión de su propia Sainte Chapelle, la joven George Washington leía moviendo en silencio los labios, ventoseaba pensativamente y miraba a su alrededor para ver si había llamado la atención. En el Boulevard de la Madeleine, una chica que iba sola, balanceando el bolso, se detuvo a mirar los pies que asomaban por debajo del *pissoir,* y esperó para abordar a su propietario. Alguien, mirando hacia arriba, exclamó: «¿Qué es eso? ¿Qué es?». «Los globos. Los globos han despegado». En los servicios del Café de la Régence, alguien garrapateó «Vive le roi» sobre el lavabo.

A un lado, un hombre leía el *Tribune.* Al otro, *Al Misri.* «Votre journal,
m'sieur
», llamó el camarero, agitando *Die Fleischflaute,* «votre journal…».

Y la sombra que al volverse proyectó a su espalda retrocedió siete siglos, para abarcar la disoluta juventud de Ramón Llul, y su pasión por la bella Ambrosia de Castello, que ella desalentó; y si pareció sucumbir al fin, ofreciéndose a desnudar sus pechos en recompensa por un poema que él había escrito en su alabanza, fue para mostrarle, mientras se acercaba en ese éxtasis del que sólo es capaz la carne, un seno devorado por el cáncer: se volvió hacia su conversión, hacia su muerte por lapidación años después en África del Norte, y hacia su celebridad como erudito, poeta, misionero, místico y una de las figuras más eminentes de la historia de la alquimia.

III

> «Así pues, ante todo es malo, a los ojos de Dios, quien no se pregunta qué es ventajoso para él. Pues ¿cómo puede alguien amar a otro, si no se ama a sí mismo…? Por consiguiente, para que pueda haber una distinción entre los que eligen el bien y los que eligen el mal, Dios ha ocultado lo que es provechoso para el hombre».
>
> Pedro, en los *Reconocimientos* clementinos

—Wyatt… vamos a casarnos antes de que sepamos demasiado el uno del otro.

Esto era impropio de Esther.

Le gustaba sacar las cosas a la luz, descubrir por qué *ocurrían.* Sin embargo, como para otras mujeres enamoradas, la salvación era su propósito original, la redención su privilegio eventual; y como la mayoría de las mujeres, no podía esperar a verlo definitivamente condenado para intervenir, creyendo, como quizá creen ellas, que si lo salvaba ahora nunca tendría que ser redimido. Había en Esther una autenticidad histórica, que persistía de algún modo pese al uso consciente que hacía de ella. En sus grandes huesos estaba implícita la historia temporal de un pasado, y de un futuro muy similar. Tenía envergadura. Tenía la facultad de presentar sus errores como obra de alguna agencia supramundana, posiblemente una de esas que a menudo se confunden vulgarmente con el destino, que la había elegido como capaz de dar algún ejemplo que el mundo esperaba. El principal de ellos (y no menor error, de alguna manera, porque tuviera que sobrellevarlo como si fuera suyo) era el de ser mujer. Se esforzaba con ahínco por entender todo esto, y como había llegado a ser rigurosamente intelectual, sondeando el pasado con masculina inflexibilidad, se convirtió en cómplice de aquellas mismas circunstancias que la Razón acusó más tarde de ser innecesarias, y en nombre del libre albedrío, que ella entendía como deseo consciente, se las ingenió para prolongar un pasado construido sobre ellas, restaurado, renovado y repetido. Con gran diligencia, y con ese talento de propósito único con que su sexo persigue algo inalcanzable de la misma manera en que persigue algo que es, su búsqueda de la Razón se veía interrumpida siempre por razones. Las cosas ocurrían por razones, por lo que es posible que en su proposición hubiera intervenido simplemente su lógica femenina garantizando una sucesión de hechos que racionalmente podrían no haber ocurrido jamás. O como era una mujer, y la mujer que era, su proposición podía haber sido un momento infinito de esa feminidad que es una de las escasas aproximaciones de la humanidad a la belleza, sin pedir ninguna justificación y sin necesitar ninguna para actuar en un momento de certeza sin nada que temer, que un día se recordaría en un momento de temor amenazado por la certeza.

Mano izquierda, mano derecha: se movían sobre ella con igual aplomo. Aquí elevaban su carne sin distinciones, y Esther se elevaba para reconciliarlas, para proporcionar un terreno común donde cada una pudiera saber lo que hacía la otra.

Un año después llevaban casi un año casados, lo que era impropio de Wyatt. Se había vuelto cada vez más reacio a tomar decisiones, y cuanto más sabía, menos proclive a comprometerse. No es que fuera un estado excepcional: sobre él se han erigido enteros sistemas filosóficos. Por otra parte, cuanto más se resistía a comprometerse, más se sumergía, y más insistente se volvía desde aquellas profundidades la necesidad de hacerlo: una situación difícil que ha formado la piedra angular de enteras escuelas de psicología. De modo que su decisión de casarse bien pudo ser una decisión menos entre las que debía eventualmente afrontar; o también es posible que su decisión de casarse fuera una indecisión cristalizada, en la medida en que no se decidió en contra de ella.

Conociendo esa extraordinaria capacidad de odio celoso que tan a menudo tienen los hombres por el pasado de una mujer, Esther estaba en cierto modo agradecida de que nunca le preguntara por el suyo. Sin embargo, no renegaba de él, aunque por mucho que quisiera ir a todos los lugares en los que no había estado, rechazaba con igual fervor la posibilidad de revisitar cualquier escena de aquel pasado, una frenética concatenación de la que seguía siendo víctima, proyectando sobre él su futuro con todo el resentimiento desafiante del libre albedrío, en un mundo en el que había sido elegida como víctima en cada vuelta de los dados desde que su padre los tiró por primera vez. Dondequiera que hubiera ido la mente de Esther, la habían seguido sus muslos con errante y aplastante sinceridad, en correspondencia civilizada con ese rito caníbal primordial practicado por sobrios camaradas que se comen a sus víctimas a fin de infundirse a sí mismos los poderes con que esas víctimas, como enemigos, habían amenazado convencerles. (No es

simplemente hambre: a aquéllos movidos sólo por el hambre se los ha oído comentar después: «Habría preferido cerdo»).

¿No era hambre? Uno de los más fastidiosos comentarios formulados en su pasado había incluido la expresión *vagina dentata*. Pero aun así no era hambre, sino una insaciabilidad que tomaba esta hambre como cauce, buscando, en su clara exigencia, absorber las cualidades que le habían sido negadas; y encontrando, en su satisfacción temporal y el subsiguiente dolor de la retirada, la insaciabilidad. Año tras año la animosidad emancipada del libre albedrío movía trabajosamente su rueca, hilando ese viscoso fluido de causalidad que se había endurecido rápidamente en filamentos fatales como los de la madriguera forrada de seda de la tarántula aquí en el suelo arenoso de la esperanza innata. Ella no lo cuestionaba, no más que la trampilla que la tarántula deja abierta en lo alto, o las víctimas que caen por ella, afirmando su parte femenina con honda desesperación por la suerte común de su sexo, expresada en un resentimiento hacia los hombres por el éxito de sus despreocupadas fortunas que ella seguía devorando, pero no por amor.

A Esther no la cogían nunca desprevenida las tentativas que hacían las vidas que la rodeaban para acabar en tragedia; sin embargo, cuando al fin lo lograban, ya lo habían superado, y a través de su ascendiente había llegado más bien a verse como la figura trágica por acumulación, pues siempre era ella la abandonada. Eso confirmaba algo. Esther había pasado poco tiempo con mujeres. Sus problemas le parecían meros plagios atenuados y distorsionados de la monstruosa imagen de los suyos. Por eso resultó muy extraño a muchos que la conocían que eligiera como psicoanalista a una mujer. De ahí nació un profundo apego, de tal modo anterior a cualquier conclusión del análisis que resultaba evidente para ambas quién tenía el mando. Cuando Esther conoció a Wyatt, preguntó si debía casarse, y se lo prohibieron. Lo exigió, y le suplicaron que no lo hiciese. Se casó, y su psicoanalista se suicidó. Así solían salirle las cosas a Esther. Confirmaba algo.

¡Llamadlo más fuerte! ¡Llamadlo más fuerte! Sonaron las trompetas, y redoblaron los tambores.

—¿Y por qué te gusta Haendel? —preguntó en voz baja Esther después de su discusión, o para continuarla. Estaba resfriada, lo que le enronquecía la voz con aparente emoción.

—¿Haendel?

¿No es su voz como un martillo…?

—Mozart —tosió.

Como un martillo que rompe la piedra.

Esther tragó saliva. Tenía una revista abierta en las manos, como él tenía un libro en las suyas; pero ella lo estaba observando, para ver si la absorta tirantez de su cara la provocaba su lectura o la tensa suspensión con que esperaba, pendiente de los acordes de la música, el siguiente sonido de constricción y liberación en su garganta. Él no se movió. La garganta de Esther se estrechó, sus paredes se juntaron, y tragó saliva con dificultad. Entonces, como si fuera una señal para aflojar la tensión, él alzó una mano para ocultar el ángulo absorto de su perfil. «¡Y *Tosca*!», murmuró ella, mientras se le formaba otro nudo en la garganta, que tragó rápidamente. Él no se movió. Su libro era grande, pero ella no distinguía el título. Podía ser cualquier cosa, lo mismo que su tensión debía de ser por su presencia, pues parecía leerlo todo con la misma despreocupada concentración. Cuando lo interrumpía, no había forma de saber si apartaba la vista de Diógenes Laercio o de *No hay orquídeas para Miss Blandish.* Sus palabras podían hacerlo perder el hilo de la *Nueva teoría de la visión* de Berkeley, unirse a una lluvia de objetos de la geografía supraceleste de Charles Fort, o sólo hacer eco a una voz de alguna novela barata como *Les Damnés de la terre.* El *Elías* de Mendelssohn seguía sonando en la radio. Tragó saliva. Inmediatamente, él se aclaró la garganta, una medida vicaria que no la alivió. Si le preguntaba, quizá levantaría la vista y diría: «Dice Fort: “Cuando digo condenados, me refiero a los excluidos”»; pero ella tendría que preguntar: «¿Excluidos de qué?». «“Cuando digo prostitución, creo referirme a la utilidad…”».

Ahora lo contemplaba como si no estuviese leyendo en modo alguno, sino mirándola furtivamente por entre los dedos de la mano con que se tapaba el ojo. Se aclaró la garganta. A medida que el *Elías* se acercaba a su fin no veía forma de reanudar su discusión, a menos que la siguiente composición fuese algo de Beethoven o de Mozart. Si la voz del locutor anunciase la Sinfonía número 37 de Mozart, Köchel 444… Él volvió una página. Como sus discusiones no solían durar mucho, ella las prolongaba a menudo en su mente; ahora estaba reconsiderando (y desde luego veía el destello de su ojo entre los dedos) su sometimiento a la perfección de Mozart, obra genial sin un instante de duda o esfuerzo, genio al que él contraponía el heroico esfuerzo que revelaba constantemente la música de Beethoven, esfuerzo que nunca se resolvía triunfalmente hasta el fin. «El genio en sí carece esencialmente de interés». «Pero la obra genial…». «Es difícil compartir la perfección». «¿Compartir, tú?», había empezado ella, pero eso fue todo. Él estaba leyendo. Ella tragó saliva, y captó el brillo de un ojo. El *Elías* había terminado. Teniendo aún en

mente «cuando digo prostitución, creo referirme a la utilidad», Esther dijo:

—¿Qué estás leyendo?

—¿Eh? —Su sorpresa era una expresión (reflexionaría ella un día, recordando, o tratando de recordar) ingénita a su cara, tanto aquella inmediata sorpresa anticipatoria que reflejaba un repentino preludio de algo pasado (como cuando le había preguntado cuándo había estado en España: «¿Yo? Nunca he estado en España») como la expresión que tenía ahora, la sorpresa de alguien interrumpido. Y año tras año, en el curso de su matrimonio, la primera aparecería menos y la otra más a menudo, hasta que un día, recordándolo o tratando de recordarlo, sería ésta la que acudiría a su memoria, esta cara de confusión, de alguien interrumpido, una expresión inquieta—. Nada.

—¿Nada? No puedes estar leyendo nada.

—Es un libro sobre momias.

—¿Momias?

—Momias egipcias.

—¿Por qué estás leyendo un libro sobre momias egipcias?

Se aclaró la garganta, pero no dijo nada.

—Pero eso mío que te di, el cuento que estoy escribiendo, todavía no lo has leído.

—Sí, lo leí.

—Y… ¿bien? ¿Qué te pareció?

—Era… pareces muy aficionada a la palabra «atávico».

—Bueno, ¿eso es todo?

—Bueno, Esther, el… y los adjetivos dobles, «ira roja, cruel»; «labios firmes, delgados»; «dolor secreto, oscuro…».

—Pero…

—Pero lo que escriben las mujeres parece tener una especie de… «Caras afiladas, ansiosas»; «olor agrio, desagradable…», escucha.

Se volvió hacia la radio, donde un poeta cuya obra les gustaba a ambos iba a empezar a leer. Ella se le quedó mirando un instante, contemplando el libro que había cerrado entre sus manos en el preciso momento en que le había dirigido la palabra. Había ocurrido de modo tan directo como la vez en que le dijo: «Tienes unos ojos maravillosos», y los apartó de ella. ¿Qué era? Como para proteger lo que fuera que hubiera tras ellos hasta que él pudiera resolverlo, delatando el temor de que en un momento de descuido sus ojos pudieran servirle a ella de entrada. Hasta cuando empezaba un libro que ella había leído (Esther admiraba a Henry James, pero confiaba en D.
H. Lawrence
) lo hacía con inquietud, como si esperase encontrar las páginas en blanco, las palabras devoradas por aquel hambre.

—¿Quieres seguirlo? —le preguntó, acercándose a él con los *Poemas completos* abiertos en la mano. Sacudió la cabeza, escuchando, pero no alzó la vista, y ella se sentó más cerca de él.

El poeta leía con tonos modulados a los que la radio daba una resonancia hueca. El pulgar de Esther iba recorriendo la página, siguiendo un verso tras otro, inclinada sobre el libro, y sus labios se movían, formando las palabras del poeta a medida que las pronunciaba, sílabas claras y distintas que sus labios, juntándose y separándose, humedecidos por la lengua, espirando aire en las vocales, produciendo húmedos chasquidos contra el velo del paladar en las *des,* ponían en viscosa consonancia con su concentración, sin que los labios firmemente apretados a su lado la frenaran, hasta que él se aclaró la garganta y se puso de pronto en pie. Antes de que ella pudiera hablar ya había llegado a la puerta.

—Pero ¿qué…?

—Tengo trabajo —dijo rápidamente, y la dejó allí sentada, encorvada sobre las páginas, mirando fijamente el lugar por donde había desaparecido, mientras la voz del poeta seguía articulando sílabas claras y distintas. Se sonó la nariz y volvió a la página que tenía delante, pero sus labios no se movieron, pues no oyó una palabra más de la lectura. Tampoco sus ojos, pues se había quedado mirando el dorso de sus manos.

La habitación en la que había entrado Wyatt era tan grande como el dormitorio, pero sólo tenía una ventana que se habría abierto a un pozo de ventilación si alguien se hubiera molestado en abrirla. Durante el primer año, más o menos, aquella habitación había tenido varios usos indefinidos. Aunque entre ambos no tenían un gran número de libros, es decir, no lo bastante grande para justificar una biblioteca (pues para Esther una biblioteca era una habitación repleta de libros), durante una temporada había servido como tal. Sin embargo, esto no resultaba práctico, por razones de cuya no aceptación por el otro se echaban

mutuamente la culpa en privado. A Esther le gustaba tener los libros donde todo el mundo pudiera verlos, una especie de índice gráfico del intrincado laberinto de su mente exhibido para impresionar al más fortuito de los invitados, método de presentación inmediata que al parecer había descubierto en varios mugrientos hogares intelectuales del Greenwich Village. Por otra parte, a su marido no parecía importarle dónde estaban sus libros, siempre y cuando estuvieran donde los había dejado. Es decir, separados. Sin duda, *El químico escéptico* de Boyle, *La Iglesia y el papado* de Jallard, *el Libro dell'arte* de Cennino Cennini o *La chimie au Moyen Âge* habrían engalanado las estanterías de Esther; sin duda, a los lomos del *Grimorium Verum* y de la *Turba Philosophorum* se les habría quitado el polvo de modo regular. Sin duda, éstas se contaban entre las razones por las que él los tenía guardados, o esparcidos por el revoltijo de papeles que poco a poco había ido llenando la habitación indefinida hasta que le perteneció a él. Clavados de cualquier modo en las paredes se veían un grabado en madera de la *Fábrica* de Vesalio, que representaba un brazo diseccionado; otra ilustración del siglo XVI, sacada de la *Cirugía* de Paré; una tabla de primeros auxilios llamada «el hombre herido»; una fotografía de un cementerio italiano inundado por el Po; un calendario válido para cualquier día de 1753 a 2059; una reproducción de un dibujo de la cabeza de Cristo de Melozzo da Forli; un plano de la ciudad romana de Leptis Magna; un espejo; y rollos de papel y lienzos sobre bastidores apoyados en los rincones.

Cuando empezó a restaurar cuadros, además de su trabajo habitual, la habitación llena de papeles cambió muy poco. Siempre había habido en ella montones de papel de dibujo y lienzos enmarcados, preparados y en blanco o con la composición iniciada con líneas negras sin terminar. El más llamativo entre ellos, o el más familiar, era el retrato esbozado de Camilla. La superficie de gesso se había craquelado en algunos puntos y ensuciado desigualmente, pero las líneas de la composición seguían siendo nítidas, inalteradas desde que las había trazado unos quince años antes. De vez en cuando este lienzo pendía de una de las paredes, como si lo estuviera estudiando con intención de terminarlo. Otras veces aparecía amontonado contra una pared con los demás lienzos en blanco y mancillados. Había un ancho tablero de dibujo, y un pesado caballete erecto en medio de la habitación bajo la bombilla desnuda. Pero el cambio más notable no podía verse: flotaba pesadamente en el aire, el olor del barniz, los óleos y la trementina, avivados por la penetrante delicadeza de la lavanda, el aceite de lavanda, que a veces usaba como medio.

Esther había admirado el dibujo iniciado en aquella amplia superficie craquelada y sucia, la cara de huesos finos (tan diferente de la suya) cuya descarnada cualidad angulosa se veía realzada por los pesados pendientes, arcaicos aros de oro que había visto en una caja de cuero donde su marido guardaba baratijas; había admirado el dibujo no por lo que era, sino, como dijo, por lo que podía ser. Él se quedó mirándolo, y guardaron silencio, pues sabía que ella lo miraba a él. Las únicas obras que había terminado, aquellos cuadros expuestos en París años antes, habían acabado en un almacén de Nueva Jersey. Esther no los había visto nunca. No solían discutir de pintura, pues como ocurría con tantas otras cosas en las que habrían podido estar de acuerdo, nunca conseguían ponerse de acuerdo al mismo tiempo; y a medida que se repetían las conversaciones en los primeros meses de su matrimonio, sus ideas y opiniones sólo parecían encontrarse al cruzarse, cada una en sentido contrario, sin detenerse más que para respetar la educada pausa del reconocimiento.

Las claras inflexiones del poeta habían dado paso al insinuante pillaje del locutor, y ella se levantó, roto el hechizo, sin retener en la cabeza ninguna palabra del poeta, sino, sin razón aparente, «cuando digo prostitución, creo referirme a la utilidad». Cogió *Las momias reales* y se sonó la nariz mientras cruzaba la habitación hacia la puerta entreabierta, por la que asomó la cabeza y el libro, diciendo:

—¿Quieres tener esto ahí?

—¿Qué? Oh, eso, gracias.

—¿Qué estás haciendo?

—Nada, sólo… este trabajo.

Señaló los planos sujetos al tablero de dibujo.

—¿No te dan suficiente tiempo allí abajo para hacer tu trabajo? —Pero él bajó la mirada, apartándola de ella, se encogió de hombros y se volvió hacia el tablero—. Si fuera algo real, pero eso, seguir yendo a ese estúpido trabajo cada día, año tras año.

—No es un trabajo estúpido, Esther —replicó sobriamente, sin volverse.

—Copiar líneas, copiar planos, un puente tras otro. Oh, de acuerdo, no es estúpido, pero podrías hacer algo mejor, podrías hacer más. En serio, Wyatt, la forma en que sigues día tras día con tu trabajo y tus lecturas y tus… tonterías, cuando podrías hacer más. No es… no estás esperando a descubrir algo, no. Esperando a que te descubran, ¿no? Oh, odio seguir con esto, diciendo estas cosas… —Se interrumpió,

observando su enjuta figura vestida con un traje negro mientras trazaba una línea vertical sobre el papel—. Es este… verte como eres a veces ahora —siguió lentamente—. Te veo con la cabeza baja y no sé, pero me molesta, me hace infeliz verte así.

—¿Por qué? —preguntó con una voz cercana a un susurro, con la cara pegada al papel.

—Porque pareces tan solo y eso es lo que no puedo soportar —exclamó ella a su espalda. Luego, al ver que no se volvía, bajó la vista al suelo y se llevó el pañuelo húmedo a la nariz—. ¿No quieres algo… alguna de las cosas que quieren los demás?

—¿Los demás? —preguntó, volviéndose.

—Oh… —se le hizo un nudo en la garganta—. Da igual. Mira. Te dejo en compañía.

—¿Eso? ¿El espejo?

—Me encanta eso, que tengas aquí un espejo.

—Pero eso… es para corregir los trazos erróneos…

—Buenas noches, en cuanto lave los platos me acuesto.

—Los lavaré yo, si estás cansada —se ofreció—. Tu resfriado…

—No seas tonto. Los lavaré yo.

Lo dejó allí, anudando un trozo de cordel que tenía en la mano. Minutos después, cuando ya había apagado las luces del cuarto de estar, la luz procedente de la puerta entreabierta atrajo sus ojos y lo vio de pie, pasándose los dedos de la mano derecha por la áspera barbilla, por una mejilla y luego por la otra, como si despertar por la mañana necesitando un afeitado tuviera sentido, pero encontrar su cara áspera por la barba tras un día de conciencia bien iluminada fuera algo extraño. Luego dijo en voz alta: «¡Qué a salvo estoy de accidentes!».

Una vez le había oído mencionar, con algo más que curiosidad, por gente que ninguno de los dos trataba ahora. Luego, cuando llegó a preguntar más directamente por él, descubrió bastantes anécdotas (alguien que conoció en una fiesta había oído decir que se había tirado desde la Torre Eiffel, y se maravillaba con beoda insistencia de su supervivencia). El errante espectro iba y venía, apareciendo fugazmente en conversaciones que atestiguaban esa desinteresada benevolencia con que los demás hablan de alguien que no les amenaza con hacerles la competencia en ningún terreno que conozcan. Vestido con la ropa de gala de sus cansadas imaginaciones, surgía y desaparecía en una serie de imágenes que, condensadas, habrían configurado un tipo realmente notable; pero en esa diáspora de palabras que es la naturaleza providencial de la conversación, el fugitivo persistía, como aquellos cristianos judíos que resistían entre los paganos, aquí en la figura de un hombre que, parecía al fin, había hecho muchas cosas que envidiar y ninguna que admirar.

—Wyatt, ¿qué es? ¿Qué pasa?

—¿Un sueño…?

—¿Sólo un sueño?

—Pero…

—Está bien, querido, fuese lo que fuese, ya pasó.

—Era…

—¿Qué era?

—En casa, en la cama, aquella rectoría era una casa grande y vacía y yo la conozco al dedillo, me despertaba y oía pasos. Despertaba allí oyendo pasos muy fuertes y regulares y sabía dónde iban, los oía bajando las escaleras y cruzando el pasillo delantero y entrando en el salón, atravesando el salón y cruzando el pasillo trasero, pasando ante el comedor hacia la cocina…

—Pero ¿eso era todo?

—Pero escucha, lo terrible era que yo conozco todas las distancias en pasos de esa casa, sé cuántos pasos hay que dar para bajar las escaleras o para atravesar el salón, no puedo decirte el número pero lo sé, y esos pasos que oía en la oscuridad eran regulares y uniformes, no apresurados, pero lo terrible era que llegaban a los sitios demasiado pronto. Conozco el ruido, sé cómo cambian los ruidos cuando pasas del pasillo delantero al salón, o cuando pasas ante el comedor o ante el último peldaño y… pero esos pasos llegaban siempre demasiado pronto, sin vacilar en ningún lugar y sin apresurarse, pero si das pasos regulares y uniformes, y no eran suficientes…

—Es extraño. Y tu voz, hablas como un niño.

—Ahora no parece tan terrible, claro.

—Hablaremos de ello mañana —susurró ella, y su mano recorrió su cuerpo para encontrarlo y devolverlo dulcemente a la vida—. Debe haber alguna razón…

—¡Razón! Pero, Dios santo, ¿no hemos tenido ya suficiente… razón?

La mano de ella se cerró y sus dedos, unidos, se movieron sólo lo suficiente para hacerse sentir, para hacer de su movimiento no un acto, sino una sensación, para avivar no sólo la sangre que se precipitaba a su encuentro sino, con un toque, algo más allá de ella.

—¿Por qué te lo tomas todo tan a pecho, Wyatt?

—Las mujeres —empezó él, y luego—, los hombres aceptan retos aislados, uno se pasa la vida preparándose para afrontar uno, un solo reto, y cuando vence en él lo llaman heroico, pero tú, sé lo mucho que intentas luchar por mí, las mujeres siguen adelante sin más, siguen adelante, y yo…

—Tienen que hacerlo —dijo Esther a su lado, mientras se encaramaba parcialmente sobre ella en la oscuridad—. Si pudiéramos marcharnos de aquí, tú has estado en todas partes, has estudiado en Alemania y en París, y yo… Wyatt, si pudiéramos viajar… —Sintió cómo se relajaba su pierna sobre las suyas—. Y tú no quieres, tú no quieres viajar.

—Viajar…

—¿Conmigo?

—Charles Fort dice que los seres supracelestes intentan quizá pescarnos…

—Sí, sin mí. Solo.

—Mi abuelo se cayó a un pozo una vez, ¿te lo he contado? Habla de viajes, se orienta por las estrellas. Orientación sideral, el hombre que experimentó con hormigas en el desierto de Marruecos…

Entonces pareció envararse y se apartó de ella bruscamente, y ella preguntó:

—¿Qué te pasa?

—En ese sueño, acabo de recordar que tenía… tenía el pelo ardiendo.

Ella sintió cómo se pasaba la mano por el pelo y por la áspera mejilla en la oscuridad.

—Hablaremos de ello mañana —dijo—, no ahora.

—No en llamas —dijo él, abrazándola de nuevo.

—A ti te gustaría ir a Marruecos…

—Sino simplemente quemándose —susurró, casi maravilladamente, mientras ella se incorporaba para atraer hacia sí la incrédula tensión de su mano derecha, murmurando aún:

—Y ser más… marroquí… que los moros.

A la mañana siguiente Esther se despertó sola, y se dio cuenta de que había pasado sola la mayor parte de la noche. Tragó saliva, y encontró mejor su resfriado. Olió a café y fue a la cocina, donde había medio cazo hirviendo furiosamente sobre el hornillo. Empezó a llamar, sintió una oleada de náusea, y se sentó y decidió comer algo. Sacó pan y mantequilla y buscó un huevo, pero no encontró ninguno. Entonces vertió un poco del café hirviente en una taza fría, y la taza se rajó; a pesar de todo, siguió hasta llenarla y se la llevó al cuarto de estar.

Salía luz del estudio, y oyó ruidos tras la puerta entreabierta. Luego:

—Maldita seas, maldita seas… ¡maldita seas!

—¿Qué? —exclamó ella desde la puerta—. Qué olor.

—Nada.

Estaba frente a ella bajo el desnudo resplandor de la bombilla, como paralizado en medio de algún acto criminal, como el relámpago congela el movimiento.

—¿Qué pasa?

—Nada, estoy… hablando solo.

—¿Estás trabajando? ¿Todavía trabajando?

—Sí, sí, trabajando —contestó. Sus manos vacías se abrieron y cerraron a sus costados, como buscando algo en qué ocuparlas. Luego cogió un cuchillo con una, y señaló con la otra el caballete vertical—. En eso.

—¿Eso?

Miró el lienzo familiar sobre el caballete. Era un cuadro norteamericano de finales del XVIII que necesitaba mucho trabajo, el retrato de una mujer con una cara de grandes huesos pero de nariz poco prominente, un retrato que se parecía mucho a Esther. Así se lo parecía a ella, en todo caso; y aun cuando él había dicho «No es muy buena como pintura, ¿verdad…?», en pie detrás de él no podía ver más allá del retrato, atraída por el parecido como tantas veces le ocurría pero rara vez de forma tan clara, encontrando semejanzas de sí misma en todas partes, como si hubiera empezado desde el principio buscando identidad con la desgracia, reconocimiento en el desastre.

Se había apartado de ella, sosteniendo el cuchillo, como si estuviera protegiendo algo, u ocultándolo, y cuando ella miró hacia la pared a su espalda vio los trazos negros sobre la superficie manchada y craquelada del retrato inacabado.

—Eso —dijo—, ¿es en eso en lo que estabas trabajando?

—En eso.

Señaló a su espalda con un movimiento brusco del cuchillo, y ella se apartó para apoyarse cansadamente contra el marco de la puerta.

—Es una forma de empezar el día —dijo mirándolo—. Me gustaría que dejases de menear ese cuchillo. ¿Empezar el día? Me da la impresión de que llevas aquí toda la noche, como haces siempre, siempre aquí metido, y sea quien sea quien duerme conmigo y me habla en la oscuridad es otro.

—Me desperté —dijo, dejando el cuchillo—. Quería trabajar.

—Pero este… si quieres trabajar en eso, puedes decírmelo, no necesitas fingir… en secreto…

—Tía May, cuando hacía cosas, incluso sus tartas, tenía bajadas las persianas de la despensa cuando escarchaba una tarta, nadie veía nunca nada suyo hasta que estaba hecho.

—¡Tía May! No me interesa tía May, pero tú…, me gustaría que terminaras eso —siguió, mirando las líneas por encima de su hombro—, y te libraras de ella.

—¿Librarme de ella? —repitió él. Había sacado un huevo de alguna parte.

—Termínalo. Entonces quizá haya sitio para mí.

—¿Para ti? ¿Para pintarte a ti?

—Sí, si tu…

—Pero tú estás aquí —exclamó, cascando el huevo sobre una taza, y cogió la yema con la palma—. Tú estás tanto aquí, Esther… Lo siento —dijo dando un paso hacia ella, pasándose de una mano a otra la yema del huevo, que amenazaba con escapársele—. Lo siento —dijo, viendo la expresión que había aparecido en su cara—. Estoy cansado.

—Al menos esto —dijo ella bajando los ojos y paseándolos por el parecido dañado sobre el caballete—. Si al menos terminaras esto.

—No corre prisa —dijo rápidamente—, los dueños se han ido al extranjero, puede que tarden algún tiempo en volver.

—Si estuvieran fuera diez años, tardarías diez años. Podrías hacer ese tipo de trabajo en la mitad del tiempo que empleas, en la décima parte de tiempo, aunque no pintes podrías dedicarte a restaurar y sacar algo de ello. No es extraño que no duermas, que estés nervioso y tengas pesadillas, si no haces lo que quieres hacer.

Estaba inclinado sobre una taza, sosteniendo la yema del huevo entre las puntas alineadas de los dedos de una mano, con un alfiler en la otra, a punto de pincharla, cuando alzó la vista hacia ella.

—Pero lo hago, Esther.

—Si pudieras terminar algo original —dijo ella—. Pareces un viejo. ¿De qué te ríes?

—Justo ahora —dijo enderezándose, con la yema del huevo colgando aún de los dedos— me he sentido como él, por un momento me he sentido como si fuera el viejo Herr Koppel, ya te he contado, el hombre con el que estudié en Múnich. Como si esto fuera aquel estudio que tenía sobre el matadero, donde trabajábamos, él sostenía una yema de huevo así y hablaba: «Esa enfermedad romántica, la originalidad, vemos por todas partes a nuestro alrededor la originalidad de idiotas incompetentes, no saben dibujar nada, no saben pintar nada, y precisamente por eso la porquería que hacen es original… Quién quería ser original hace apenas doscientos años, ser original era admitir que no podías hacer una cosa de la manera adecuada, por lo que sólo podías hacerla a tu manera. Cuando pintas no tratas de ser original, sólo piensas en tu trabajo, en cómo hacerlo mejor, y por eso copias a los maestros, sólo a los maestros, pues con cada copia de una copia la forma degenera… no inventas formas, las conoces, *auswendig wissen Sie,* de memoria…». —La yema de huevo cayó, la mayor parte dentro de la taza—. Maldita sea —dijo mirándola—, pero no importa, estos huevos rancios… «Debes usar huevos de campo, con huevos rancios de ciudad no se puede hacer buen temple…».

—Podría habérmelo comido para desayunar.

—Pero ¿era el último? Yo no… Lo siento, Esther, yo… toma… —Vertió la clara de una taza manchada sobre la yema que quedaba en la otra—. Toma, sólo que… está limpio, sólo que no queda tanta yema…

—¿No vas a ir a la oficina? Será mejor que te afeites si vas a ir —dijo ella, y lo dejó ofreciendo la taza hacia el parecido dañado sobre el caballete.

Su café estaba frío. Lo vertió en el fregadero y bajó a recoger el correo. Leyó una carta en las escaleras, y empezó a llamarlo cuando todavía no había cerrado la puerta a su espalda:

—Wyatt, ha ocurrido algo horrible. ¿Dónde estás? —Entonces estuvo a punto de gritar, al verlo en el umbral del estudio con todo un lado de la cara y el cuello cubiertos de sangre—. ¿Qué te ha pasado?

—¿Qué pasa? —preguntó él—. Qué cosa horrible…

—¿Qué te ha pasado? —chilló corriendo hacia él.

—¿Qué?

Se quedó allí parado, con una navaja de afeitar abierta en la mano.

—¿Qué estás haciendo?

—Afeitándome…

—¿Te has hecho eso… afeitándote? ¿Y por qué te estás afeitando ahí dentro?

—Oh —dijo pasándose la punta de los dedos por la barbilla y mirando la sangre que quedaba en ellos—. Qué asco, lo siento, Esther. El espejo, estaba utilizando ese espejo de ahí, tú tienes tapado el del cuarto de baño…

—¡Tapado! —exclamó impacientemente, arrugando la carta que tenía en la mano.

—Tiene un paño encima, pensé que por alguna razón lo habrías…

—Es un pañuelo secándose, ¿por qué no lo quitaste sin más? Y eso —siguió, tomando aliento—, esa cosa horrible, es peligroso afeitarse con eso, mírala, sólo porque tu padre… Eres como un niño en eso, esa imagen suya…

—¿Qué dice la carta?

—¿La carta? ¿Esta? Sí, ese almacén, el sitio de Nueva Jersey donde tenías tus cosas se ha quemado. Y mira, te mandan un cheque de ciento treinta dólares.

—¿De verdad? Está bien.

—¿Bien? ¿No te disgusta? Cosas como esos cuadros no pueden sustituirse.

—No, no pueden —dijo enseguida, llevándose una mano a la barbilla, donde la sangre ya había empezado a secarse.

—¿Adónde vas?

—A lavarme. Debo darme prisa, tengo… tengo que entregar unos planos.

Volvió a alcanzarlo en la puerta del piso, donde se detuvo con un rollo de papeles bajo el brazo.

—¿No tomas café? ¿Nada?

—Ya tomé antes.

Tiró del picaporte, pero ella tenía una mano sobre su brazo.

—Me gustaría que descansases —dijo, y cuando él se volvió, mirándola como si lo hubieran detenido de repente en una calle atestada—: ¿Estás bien?

—¿Yo? Sí, sí, estoy muy bien, Esther, no… no deberías… Adiós —se interrumpió, y se lanzó hacia las escaleras.

Minutos después, mientras se servía café en la taza rajada, sonó el timbre. Era un repartidor con una docena de huevos. Los dejó en la mesa de la cocina, y luego sacó un pañuelo, se apoyó con una mano en la mesa para sostenerse y se quedó mirando el café, cuya superficie se ondulaba con los latidos regulares de su corazón.

Oscurecía ya cuando entró Esther, llevando en la parte frontal de su mente fragmentos de una conversación que había tenido poco antes (sobre Rilke, no sobre la poesía de Rilke, sino sobre el hombre Rilke, que se negó a que lo psicoanalizaran por miedo a que lo purgaran de su genio); pero por encima de esto, y por el resto de su mente, se deslizaba una imagen mucho más familiar, sumergiéndose y emergiendo, eludiendo la aplicada mano de su memoria, reapareciendo cuando se volvía hacia cualquier otro sitio, repitiéndose entre caras y faroles y proas de barcas, «Intentan quizá pescarnos…», una imagen cuya aparición esperaba todavía. Aunque el estudio estaba a oscuras, abrió la puerta y miró dentro. Luego se quitó el abrigo, encendió la radio y se sentó, ajena a la soprano que cantaba *nel massimo dolore,* «Sempre con fe sincera la mia preghiera…».

Se oyó retemblar la puerta, un murmullo detrás. Siguió sentada sin moverse. Finalmente entró él, en un estado de cierta excitación.

—He tenido problemas con la llave —dijo, y le dirigió una tímida risotada.

Necesitaba tiempo para observarlo antes de hablar, pero no pudo dejarlo escapar al estudio sin preguntar:

—¿Eras tú quien he visto esta tarde? ¿Hace un rato?

—¿Yo? ¿Por qué? ¿Dónde?

—Estabas allí, donde exponen el nuevo cuadro de Picasso…

—*Pesca nocturna en Antibes*, sí, sí…

—¿Y por qué no nos hablaste?

—Hablar ¿a quién? ¿A ti? ¿Estabas allí?

—Estaba allí, con un amigo. Podías habernos hablado, Wyatt, no tenías por qué fingir que… He salido con alguien que…

—¿Quién? No los vi, quiero decir que no os vi.

—Nos miraste directamente. Ya había dicho «Ahí está mi marido», estábamos cerca de la puerta y tú te estabas inclinando…

—Escucha…

—Pasaste junto a nosotros al salir.

—Pues no te vi. Escucha, ese cuadro, estaba mirando el cuadro. ¿Viste cómo era, Esther? ¿El hecho de verlo?

—Lo vi.

—Sí, pero cuando yo lo vi fue uno de esos momentos de realidad, de casi reconocimiento de la realidad. Me he… me he agotado con ese trabajo, y cuando lo acabé quedé libre, libre de repente en el mundo exterior. En la calle todo era desconocido, todas las cosas y personas que veía eran irreales, sentí como si fuera a perder el equilibrio allí fuera, esa sensación se estaba retorciendo como un nudo dentro de mí y entré solo para detenerme un minuto. Y entonces vi eso. Cuando lo vi todo se liberó de pronto en un reconocimiento, realmente se liberó abriéndose a la realidad que nunca vemos, que nunca ves. Nunca la ves en los cuadros porque la mayor parte del tiempo no puedes ver más allá de un cuadro. La mayoría de los cuadros, en el momento en que los ves se vuelven familiares, y entonces ya es demasiado tarde. Escucha, ¿entiendes lo que quiero decir?

—Como dice Don sobre Picasso… —empezó ella.

—Es por eso por lo que la gente no puede seguir mirando a Picasso y esperar sacar algo de sus cuadros, y la gente, no es extraño que tanta gente se ría de él. No puedes verlos en cualquier momento, en cualquier momento sin más, porque uno no puede ver libremente muy a menudo, casi nunca puede, quizá siete veces en una vida.

—Me gustaría —dijo ella—, me gustaría…

Qué realidad puede tener cualquier parte del pasado, cuando todo momento se reevalúa para hacer posible el presente: para llegar a decir un día: «¿Ves? Tenía razón todo el tiempo». O: «Así que estaba equivocado todo el tiempo». La radio sigue ocupada con Puccini, *Tosca* de cabo a rabo; del revoltijo al final del segundo acto Wyatt rescata sus palabras, las repite: «Questo è il bacio di Tosca!». Eso es la realidad, pues. ¿El beso de Tosca, la realidad?

—Me gustaría… —repite ella (pues prefiere *Don Giovanni).*

—Quizá siete veces en una vida.

¡Número mágico! Pero ella está sentada mirándolo, esperando en el espacio poblado por la memoria. Una noche, cuando se estaba haciendo las uñas, entró él. «Wyatt, ¿nunca te han hecho la manicura? ¿Nunca? Déjame hacértela…». Pero él dijo algo en tono de disculpa, alarmado, y apartó las manos, apretándose una con la otra.

—Pero la cosa no puede ser tan simple… —Una discusión: ¿corrompió la invención de la imprenta, poniendo un precio a la autoría, la originalidad?—. Míralo de este modo, entiéndelo como liberación, la primera vez en la historia que un escritor fue independiente de los mecenas, la primera vez que pudo poner precio a su trabajo, convertirlo en algo de valor material, un interés particular en sí mismo por primera vez en la historia…

—¿Y los pintores, y los artistas? La litografía, y las reproducciones en colores…

—Sí, no sé, si lo uno corrompe al artista y lo otro corrompe… esa maldita *Mona Lisa*, nadie la ve, no puedes verla con mil reproducciones descentradas entre tú y ella.

—Pero cómo…

—No sé, yo también he intentado entenderlo. Spinoza…

¿Mozart? El aire está lleno de él, sólo tienes que tener un receptor de radio para formalizar el silencio, darle forma y ponerlo en movimiento: *Paseo en trineo* surge violentamente de la rejilla y la golpea. Sufre el impacto sin sorpresa.

—Sé que nunca has dicho que no quisieras tener niños, pero cada vez que lo menciono pareces… pones una cara. —Él pone allí su mano, se lleva la mano derecha a la frente y se la pasa por la cara con febril aplicación, como para arrancar así los rasgos que llevan tanto tiempo formándose, reevaluándose para este momento; pero por encima de su mano su cara vuelve a cobrar forma, la frente aparece enseguida y recobra sus líneas, luego las cejas, y los ojos vívidamente elusivos que no permiten entrar nada—. Me gustaría que estuviéramos a oscuras, cuando estamos a oscuras puedes hablarme, cuando hay luz me dices cosas como… el cero no existe.

—Pero tú me preguntaste…

—O el dinero malo expulsa al bueno.

Esther lo observaba ahora, en pie en medio de la habitación, pasándose la mano por la cara como para borrar de nuevo algún pasado, ¿remoto, reciente, o todo él? No lo sabía, pero buscaba una zona entre los festivales alemanes, Haendel en Breslau, Shakespeare en Stuttgart, Beethoven en Bonn, todos en mayo; *Egmont* en Altenburg, *Der Fliegende Holländer* en Nuremberg en junio; *Die Ägyptische Helena* en Múnich…

—Múnich —dijo ella—, cuando estuviste en Múnich…

—¿Qué?

—Nunca me has contado mucho sobre eso.

—¿Sobre Múnich?

—Y ese chico que conociste allí, con el que pasaste tanto tiempo.

—¿Han? No pasé mucho tiempo con él.

—Trabajabais juntos, y bebíais juntos y viajabais juntos.

—¿Viajábamos?

—Aquella noche que pasasteis juntos en Interlaken, según me has contado…

—Estuvimos allí casi una semana, esperando a ver la Jungfrau, estaba oculta todos los días, ya te lo he contado. Y el día que me marché a París, a primera hora de la mañana, en el andén de la estación miré hacia arriba y allí estaba, como si hubiera surgido de la nada, y en ese instante llegó el tren y se interpuso entre nosotros, Dios santo, eso lo recuerdo bien, aquella mañana.

—Pero…

Pero se había vuelto y entrado en el estudio, y ella se fue a la cocina, parándose sólo a cambiar de emisora la radio. Estuvieron callados durante la mayor parte de la cena, como por deferencia a una sinfonía de Sibelius que inundaba la habitación para forzarlos a someterse, pues ninguno de los dos habría admitido, ni siquiera en privado, que le gustaba.

Teniendo en mente «Si no me quiere, es incapaz de amar», ella dijo: «Me gustaría…». En momentos como éste (y cada vez eran más frecuentes) tenía la sensación de que él no existía; o volvía a examinarlo, allí sentado mirando hacia otra parte, en términos de sustancia y accidente, la sustancia como la imperceptible realidad subyacente, el accidente como las propiedades inherentes a la sustancia que son percibidas por los sentidos: la sustancia se transforma por consagración, pero los accidentes permanecen como eran. Aparentemente la consagración ha tenido lugar no, como pensaba, a través de ella, sino en algún lugar más allá de ella; y aquí sigue sentada atendiendo a los accidentes.

Sus labios no se movían, ni tampoco las palabras expuestas en la inmovilidad de la página blanca: suspendida la facultad de leer en su mirada apagada y fija, las sílabas permanecían expuestas, coexistentes sin esperanza. Luego una atrajo su mirada, la arrastró hacia otra, y así hasta seis, siete… Cuando su lengua húmeda chasqueó una «t», alzó la vista y el poema murió en la página.

—¿Sabías que era homosexual? —preguntó.

—Ummm.

—Yo no lo sabía basta que Don me lo dijo hoy.

—¿Quién?

—Don Bildow, dirige esa revistilla, la…

—¿Es homosexual?

—Oh, no, no lo es, Don no lo es, ¿es que no escuchas? Me dijo que este… este… —Levantó aquellos *Poemas completos,* rehuyendo pronunciar el nombre del poeta—. ¿Lo sabías?

—¿Qué? Sí, algo he oído decir.

—¿Por qué no me lo dijiste?

Alzó la vista por primera vez.

—¿Decírtelo?

—Podías haberlo mencionado —dijo ella, y dejó el libro a un lado con la cubierta boca abajo.

—Podía… ¿Por qué había de hacerlo? Qué tiene que ver eso con…

—Cuando estábamos aquí sentados, oyéndole leer, no se me ocurrió, es curioso, nunca se me ocurrió pensarlo de él, he visto fotos de él, y sus poemas, las cosas que dice en sus poemas… y quería conocerlo.

Esther había dejado resbalar la mirada hasta el suelo, hasta la sombra que proyectaba allí la silla, sin sentido hasta que se movió.

—¿Te sorprende…? ¿Te molesta eso?

—Quería conocerlo —empezó ella, siguiendo el trazo de la sombra hasta su origen.

—¿Conocerlo? Y ahora una cosa como ésa… No lo entiendo, Esther, tú eres la que siempre sabe esas

cosas de la gente, esas cosas personales sobre escritores y pintores y toda la…

—Sí, pero…

—Analizando, diseccionando, encontrando respuestas, y ahora… ¿Qué querías de él que no pudieses encontrar en su obra?

Los ojos de Esther se alzaron lentamente del suelo hasta la altura de la figura de su marido.

—¿Por qué te has puesto tan nervioso de repente? —le preguntó con calma—. Sólo porque he mencionado a Han…

—¡Han! —repitió, arrebatándole el nombre—. ¡Dios santo, así que es eso! Ese estúpido… Han, pero si… después de todos estos años, una cosa como ésa…

—Y ese cuadro que le diste, a mí nunca me has dado…

—¿Que le di? Desapareció, eso fue lo que te dije. «Dámelo para que te recuerde, porque somos buenos amigos, ese Memlinc que estás haciendo ahora…». Me lo pidió, pero el cuadro desapareció antes de que pudiera acabarlo, cuando detuvieron al viejo Koppel, eso fue lo que te dije.

Se calmó, musitando algo; había cogido un trozo de cordel con el que hacía nudos. Volviendo los ojos hacia la atareada extremidad de la sombra, ella murmuró:

—Me contaste que…

—Ese estúpido… Han —siguió él—, con su uniforme, machacándose el dedo con un pichel de cerveza, «¿Ves?, no me hace daño…». En Interlaken, ¿qué se podía hacer allí aparte de beber? Encerrados por la nieve, esperando. «Hay algo que echo en falta», decía, llevaba tres días sin afeitarse, la cara sin expresión, «si supiera qué es no lo echaría tanto en falta…». Te he contado…

—Oh, me has contado —dijo ella con impaciencia, alzando la vista hacia él por un momento, volviéndola luego hacia la sombra—. No sé cuánto me has contado, o qué poco… Nueva Inglaterra, muy bien, eres el típico puritano, todo ese secretismo, esa culpa, sermoneándome con frases de Fitche sobre la acción moral; no es extraño que una cosa como ésa te ponga nervioso, cuando menciono a un poeta al que quería conocer y resulta que es… ¡No quieres hablar de ello, eh! —lo persiguió hasta donde se había apartado, casi al otro extremo de la habitación, a punto de refugiarse en el estudio.

Pero se detuvo en el umbral y alargando la mano encendió de golpe la luz brillante, que arrojó una sombra más densa sobre el suelo hacia ella.

—Escucha, esa culpa, ese secretismo —exclamó—, no tienen nada que ver con esa… esa pasión por querer conocer al último poeta, estrechar la mano del último novelista, apoderarse del último pintor, devorar… ¿qué es? ¿Qué es lo que quieren de un hombre que no hayan sacado de su obra? ¿Qué es lo que esperan? ¿Qué queda de él cuando ha hecho su obra? ¿Qué es cualquier artista sino las heces de su obra, los escombros humanos que la obra arrastra consigo? ¿Qué queda del hombre cuando la obra está acabada sino escombros de disculpa?

—Wyatt, esas ideas románticas…

—Sí, románticas, escucha… ¡Los románticos! Se casan con una vaca y toda clase de comodidades, y enseguida sus payasadas revelan lo que habría sido fatal en la obra, por obvio, quiero decir. No, aquí, aquí mismo en el mundo es la competencia lo que se recompensa con finales románticos, y los románticos luchan por la competencia, algo que comer y dinero para volver a casa… Fíjate en la mujer del dentista, es una belleza. Quién es el íntimo de una santa, es su confesor jesuita, y los románticos acaban de anacoretas en el desierto.

Esther se levantó, dándole la espalda mientras le hablaba para que no pudiera eludir su pregunta con una mirada, o dándole a su vez la espalda, y tuviera que encararla:

—Entonces, dime, ¿qué estás intentando hacer?

Y cogió una revista, y volvió a sentarse con ella, sin levantar la vista hacia él, que había dado un paso en su dirección desde el umbral brillantemente iluminado.

—Sólo hay una cosa, de algún modo —empezó, titubeando— que… un dilema, demostrar la propia existencia, es… no hay ardid que la gente desdeñe para conseguirlo, y… o Descartes, «retirándose para demostrar su propia existencia», su «cogito ergo sum», bueno… no es extraño que llevara máscara. No es extraño que tuviera una salamandra. Algo se rompe, y… cuando toda solución se convierte en una evasión… da miedo intentar mantenerse despierto.

Aunque había elevado la voz, Esther siguió sin mirarlo, tranquilamente sentada mientras volvía las páginas de la revista, y cuando habló lo hizo con la misma tranquilidad y mesura:

—Me has contado todas tus razones para dejar pasar un año tras otro de este modo mientras… ¿trabajas? E incluso esto, mira. Esta revista que edita tu empresa, mira esta foto, este puente, es algo que hizo tu empresa, diseñado por Ben nosécuantos, no sé pronunciarlo, el puente de carretera del Desfiladero

del Arca Caída.

—¿Te gusta? —preguntó él, deteniéndose de pronto junto a ella, la cara y la voz transidas aún de ansiedad, pero con una inquietud diferente, inmediata.

—Es bonito —dijo ella. Luego se volvió y alzó la vista hacia él—. Wyatt, sabes que podrías hacer más, algo más que proyectos, copiar líneas, perder el tiempo con…

—Míralo —dijo él—, ¿ves cómo parece salir y encontrarse consigo mismo, lo ves? —Levantó las manos formando un nervioso puente, la punta de los dedos tocándose apenas, el trozo de cordel colgado aún de uno de ellos—. ¿Te produce esa impresión? Esa sensación de movimiento en quietud, esa… tensión en descanso y calma… ¿Conoces ese dicho árabe: «El arco nunca duerme»?

—Sí, es dinámico. Wyatt, tú, por qué no puedes tú…

Entonces sus ojos, al encontrarse con los de él, parecieron borrar bruscamente el entusiasmo de su cara y de su voz.

—Es derivativo, el diseño —dijo él.

—¿Derivativo?

—De Maillart.

—No lo conozco.

—Un suizo, hay un libro sobre su obra por aquí, en alguna parte.

Le miró las manos, que volvían a anudar el cordel, y observó cómo se formaba un as de guía.

—Como un nudo —dijo—, tirando de sí mismo.

—Voy a seguir trabajando —dijo él, y se volvió.

Lo siguió hasta el umbral iluminado, y se quedó mirando un momento el cuadro colocado sobre el caballete vertical.

—He llegado a odiar eso —dijo al fin, y sin recibir respuesta, lo dejó raspando las partes corroídas de la cara con el cuchillo afilado.

La mayoría de las noches Esther se iba a dormir sola, llevada su conciencia en aquella dirección por Haendel y Palestrina, William Boyce, Henry Purcell, Vivaldi o Couperin, música que los conectaba a través de la oscuridad en la corriente donde todo lo que una vez los había unido volvía para separarlos, para devolverlos a cada uno al yo del que ya no podían permitirse desconfiar. A veces había un largo intervalo entre los discos; otras veces alguno se repetía incesantemente.

Despertó oyendo la misma contralto exquisitamente mesurada, «Cuando yazca…», que la había sumido en el sueño hacía en apariencia muchas horas. Se quedó tumbada en la oscuridad y se vio como había estado, ¿una semana antes?, sentada con un libro abierto. «¿Wyatt…?». «¿Qué pasa?». Como no dijo nada, alzó la vista hacia ella. «¿Qué pasa, Esther?». Se lo quedó mirando. «Sólo quiero que me hables». Se la quedó mirando; y ella, mientras lo miraba, se oyó diciendo algo que había dicho otra vez y quería repetir pero no veía forma de hacerlo, pues él seguía allí sentado, mirándola, y no le daba pie: «Me gustaría que *perdieras* la paciencia», había dicho, «o *lo que* sea, porque esa contención, esa pose, ese dominio que has cultivado, Wyatt, resultan inhumanos…». Él se la quedó mirando sin más.

La música, se dio cuenta ahora, no era de Purcell, ni tampoco aquella contralto, sino estridentes voces masculinas de un oratorio de Haendel. Los recuerdos se mezclaron, y se incorporó en la cama. Su mera postura, tumbada en la cama, había fundido un recuerdo, una tarde y una conversación, en otro, como arroyos confluyendo en una llanura abierta. Una vez incorporada, todo se detuvo. Aspiró el aire, y olió a lavanda.

Esther se levantó de la cama y se dirigió al cuarto de estar, donde se sentó a oscuras. La puerta del estudio estaba abierta apenas una pulgada. Se quedó sentada, escuchando y recordando, como si él llevara fuera mucho tiempo. ¿Le recordaría siempre la música de Haendel algún acto pecaminoso, la perpetración de algún crimen en una oscuridad iluminada sólo reconocido como criminal por quien lo cometió?: Perséfone escuchaba ahora allí sentada. ¿Y se lo recordaría la fragancia de la lavanda?, como lo hacía ahora, pues sentía que estaba recordando, que aquel momento había pasado hacía mucho tiempo, o que estaba sentada en algún lugar del futuro, sentada en algún otro lugar y de pronto había sentido el olor de la lavanda en el aire, recordando aquel momento sólo en la memoria, que un momento después respiraría profundamente, destruyendo la delicada fragancia, que se levantaría y se iría: reina de las sombras, ¿andaba su madre errante en su busca?, donde esperaba ahora, al otro lado de la puerta que se abría al reino infernal de su marido.

Despertó sentada tiesamente en la silla. La música estaba exactamente donde la había abandonado: ¿repitiéndose?, ¿o sólo se le había escapado una transición de acordes, como se le puede escapar a la conciencia más alerta? Se quedó mirando el haz de luz, e inmediatamente se levantó y abrió la puerta.

Wyatt había modificado su letra hasta convertirla en una perversa versión de la minúscula carolingia, en la que las *s, g* e *y* mayúsculas resultaban indistinguibles, y entre las minúsculas, la *y*, la *g* y la *f*. La T parecía una M, y la *p* una bastarda declinada de la *h.* (Esther escribía en una línea continua, interrumpida por gibas, depresiones, puntos solitarios y rayas fuera de lugar, notablemente legible). Había muestras de su letra esparcidas por toda la habitación; sin embargo, su mano infantil era tan evidente como el padre del niño en el hombre. Al extremo del tablero de dibujo hecho con una puerta, encima de grandes láminas de líneas inacabadas trazadas como orígenes de un diseño que estaban sujetas al tablero, entre libros abiertos y libros con tiras de papel profusamente intercaladas entre sus páginas, *El secreto de la flor dorada, Problemas de misticismo y su simbolismo, Prometeo y Epimeteo, Cantinela Riplaei,* junto a una botella de coñac vacía, aparecía abierto el *Libro de los mártires* de Foxe, y allí, escrita con la escrupulosa letra de la infancia sobre papel rayado, una canción infantil que de repente tuvo ella en la mano, a solas en la habitación.

«Había un hombre de doble obra», empezaba,

Que sembró su jardín de simiente.
Cuando la simiente empezó a crecer,
Fue como un jardín lleno de nieve;
Cuando la nieve se empezó a fundir,
Fue como un barco sin coraza;
Cuando el barco empezó a navegar,
Fue como un pájaro sin cola;
Cuando el pájaro empezó a volar,

—¡Esther!

Fue como un águila en el cielo;
Cuando el cielo empezó a rugir,
Fue como un león en la puerta;

—Esther…

Cuando la puerta se empezó a agrietar,
Fue como un bastonazo en mi espalda;
Cuando mi espalda empezó a escocer…

—Esther, ¿qué pasa? ¿Qué haces ahí?

Fue como un navajazo en mi corazón;
Cuando mi corazón empezó a sangrar,
Fue muerte y muerte y muerte su obra.

—Esther…

—No podía dejar de leerlo.

La tenía agarrada, sosteniéndola con un brazo.

—Pero qué… por qué…

—¿Estás ahora aquí? —dijo ella, mirándolo a los ojos.

La música se detuvo, y el brazo automático se levantó, hizo una pausa y volvió a los surcos que acababa de abandonar. Él alargó la mano y lo apagó.

—¿Wyatt…?

—Creí que estabas dormida, sólo he salido a por esto —dijo, tendiendo una botella de coñac. Miró rápidamente hacia su mesa, hacia los planos sin desordenar y los libros—. Creí que estabas dormida —repitió, mirándola. Entonces vio lo que tenía en la mano—. Eso —dijo quitándoselo—, por qué lo estás leyendo, sólo… sólo es algo que encontré aquí, en este viejo libro de tía May. No es nada, sólo es algo… — Dejó la botella de coñac en la mesa—. Algo que me mandó copiar.

Iba sin abrigo, vestido con un traje negro. Los huesos de su cara eran más pequeños que los de la de Esther. Llevaba el pelo corto, y su cráneo parecía casi cuadrado.

—¿Esther…? —Ella lo abrazó y dijo—: Ven a la cama.

El sueño se repite.

—Cariño… ¿el mismo?

—Sí. El mismo. Exactamente el mismo.

Entonces ella piensa: «Quizá…».

—En realidad no duele, no hay ni dolor ni llamas, sólo que el pelo se me quema…

Quizá la consagración no ha tenido lugar aún, después de todo, y la sustancia sigue todavía ahí, atrapada en los accidentes, esperando. Tumbada en la oscuridad lo atrajo hacia sí, y él actuó sudando, y se tendió de espaldas, callado, inerte, distante.

—Hay cigarrillos en la cómoda —dijo ella.

Se acercó allí a oscuras, los encontró, encendió uno y, sentándose en el borde de la cama, fumó.

—¿Wyatt?

—Qué.

—¿Qué tal estás?

—Bien.

—Quiero decir, ¿cómo te sientes?

—Vacío —contestó.

Ella no dijo nada, y fingió que dormía. Tras quedarse unos minutos allí sentado, abandonado, apartó las sábanas revueltas y se quedó dormido antes que ella, estrechamente alojado contra su espalda desnuda.

Pasada la lujuria del verano, el sol hacía más cortas e inciertas sus visitas, mostrándose a la ciudad con esa desconcertada reserva, ese sentido del deber del amante que ya no ama.

Luego, como dijo alguien en una habitación agobiante de calor (era una mujer llamada Agnes) mientras mezclaba ginebra con vermut dulce: «Tenemos ya la Navidad casi atragantada».

En otro apartamento, una mujer alta colgó el teléfono y dijo a su marido: «Una fiesta. Esperaba que este año fuéramos al Festival del Narciso. El de Hawai».

En Madison Avenue había dos ciervos colgados de las patas traseras ante una tienda, con los vientres rajados y rosetones de papel bajo los rabos.

En la Segunda Avenida, una chica montada en un autobús que se dirigía al sur (su apellido aparecía 963 veces en la guía telefónica del Bronx) dijo: «Pero ni siquiera sabe cómo me llamo». «¿Quién?». «El hombre del lápiz de labios, estuvo hoy. Averigüé que es soltero». «¿Es guapo?». «No es realmente guapo, es más bien lo que uno llamaría interesante. Dice que con mi pelo y mi cutis debería usar rojo cereza. Mi estrella de cine favorita…».

En la Primera Avenida, una chica montada en un autobús que se dirigía al norte (que usaba el mismo lápiz de labios que su estrella de cine favorita) dijo: «El médico me dijo que cogiera este autobús, dice que a lo mejor eso me lo baja».

En un bar de Lexington Avenue, un hombre vestido de Santa Claus dijo: «Eh, Barney, vamos a tomar una aquí, la primera del día». El camarero estaba diciendo: «Es exactamente igual que en Brooklyn, al margen de que…». «Es lo que yo digo, si sirves comida debes tener un servicio de señoras además del de caballeros». Una mujer dijo: «¿De dónde eres tú?». «De Long Island, Jamaica». «Judemaica, querrás decir». «¿Sí? ¿Y tú de dónde eres?». «Da igual». «Sí, da igual, yo sé de dónde, allí no hay más que un hatajo de portugueses y sirianos».

—Eh, Barney, vamos a tomar otra aquí.

—Muy bien, Pollyotch —llamó la mujer a Santa Claus.

—Eh, Barney…

—Eh, Pollyotch, no empieces a cantar tu «ladonnamobilei» aquí dentro.

—Necesito esta copa como necesito un agujero en la cabeza —dijo Santa Claus interrumpiendo al joven que tenía al lado, que estaba mirando un billete de un dólar clavado en la pared con un letrero que decía «Si lleva a su padre a la bebida, tráigalo aquí», y a su propia imagen en el espejo. Se volvió e hizo un gesto de asentimiento—. ¿Entiendes lo que te digo? ¿Cómo te llamas?

—Otto.

—¿Entiendes lo que te digo, Otto? —Otto alzó su vaso de cerveza, medio vacío, y asintió—. ¿Puedo invitarte a un trago, Otto?

—Ya me advirtió que se iba a emborrachar —dijo la mujer.

—¿Quién engaña a quién?

—Los hay que nunca aprenden.

—Si escuchas a este tipo te volverás loco.

—¿Puedo invitarte a un trago?

—No, gracias, de verdad. Me siento igual que usted. Estoy simplemente esperando.

—¿No quieres beber conmigo, eh? ¿No quieres beber conmigo…?

—Eh, Pollyotch…

—Como digo, es exactamente igual que en Brooklyn, al margen de que…

La *jukebox* despertó, y empezó a tocar «The World is Waiting for the Sunrise».

Las fruterías estaban llenas. Los taxis iban llenos. Los trenes iban atestados, en ambos sentidos. Las salas de urgencia estaban desbordadas. Los psicoanalistas recibían temblorosas visitas de viejos clientes. Los reporteros descubrían y escribían con compasiva extensión sucesos sobre habitaciones llenas de gas, incendios de árboles de Navidad y efusión de sangre bajo el muérdago, perritos colgados de medias y gatos colgados de cables telefónicos: lo que llamaban historias de interés humano.

—¿Que si lo conozco? Vivimos como marido y mujer durante cuatro meses —dijo una chica en la Tercera Avenida—. Este año le voy a hacer un regalo, simplemente por despecho.

Llovía; luego nevó, y la nieve permaneció sobre el pavimento el tiempo suficiente para ennegrecerse uniformemente con hollín y pavesas, salvo en islas amarillas dejadas por perros de los barrios altos. Luego volvió a llover, y la entera creación se convirtió en una papilla fría, que hacía bastante arriesgado andar por la calle. Luego heló; y cada esquina ofreció oportunidades de entretenimiento, el espectáculo enormemente divertido de gente bien vestida suspendida en las indecorosas posturas que preceden a una fractura de cráneo.

—¿Quién hizo la primera? ¿Me lo puede decir alguien? —dijo El Jefe en una fiesta de empresa en una *suite* del hotel Astor. Su pechera postiza sobresalía como un foque mientras volaba ante los vientos de la Primera Causa—. Puede que no se os haya ocurrido que soy un tipo muy religioso, pero sólo haré esa única pregunta. *¿Quién hizo la primera?* —y dejó caer su vaso sobre la alfombra.

En una gran casa particular de la calle Setenta y Cuatro Este, las chicas agasajaban a sus nobles amigos con un desayuno con champán. Los caballeros estaban lejos de casa, ocupados en sus negocios: en casa, sus chicos crecidos abrían regalos comprados por eficientes secretarias, hacían preguntas embarazosas y quedaban confusos al recibir respuestas que el sentido común les había indicado durante todo el tiempo; miraban fijamente sus regalos y aceptaban incómodamente esta liberación de la infancia, iniciados en los engaños recíprocos que de niños les habían enseñado a llamar mentiras. A muchas millas de allí, Papá sonreía munificamente mientras la chica con la bata nueva («¿Quién te ha regalado eso?») decía: «Y con mi nombre grabado y todo. ¿Son diamantes auténticos?».

Cientos de miles de puertas se cerraban sobre otras tantas jóvenes solteras en habitaciones individuales: en ellas, amuebladas con la cama individual, la lámpara, la silla, la estantería llena de incentivos, la radio y el teléfono, la vida entraba tácitamente y la llevaba adonde nunca veía el sol. ¿Quién enviaría flores? ¡No él! ¿Y otra vez los parientes? Un pañuelo de una tía acatarrada. Telefoneó a su madre en Grand Rapids, y se sorprendió al notar que mamá había estado llorando antes incluso de contestar al teléfono. La radio, a la que no atendía, emitía *El origen del diseño.* Y aún tenía que arreglarse el pelo. Flu-flu-flu, se lavó la faja en el lavabo, acompañando con voz de contralto los villancicos de otra emisora. A las horas en punto su conciencia se quedaba en blanco, mientras la voz incorpórea hablaba con respetuoso desinterés de accidentes de trenes, bajas en una guerra lejana, andanzas de un presidente, una actriz, un asesino; y luego, súbitamente cálida, humana, confidencial (aunque aún incorpórea), de olor axilar. «¡Escuchad, los ángeles heraldos cantan!», cantaba (contralto) acompañando la canción del olor corporal que tenía una melodía muy parecida. Flu-flu-flu, seguía haciendo la faja en el lavabo mientras cantaba, no demasiado alto, por miedo a perderse algo, a no oír el timbre del teléfono. «¡Gloria al rey recién nacido!», cantaba, esperando al hombre del lápiz de labios.

Como ha sucedido, y aparentemente siempre sucederá, los dioses sustituidos se convierten en diablos en el sistema que suplanta su reinado, y se quedan para causar problemas a sus sucesores, asequibles, como son, a los pocos para los que la magia no ha perdido la esperanza y ha sido sustituida por la religión.

Las cosas sagradas y los lugares sagrados, alejados de la mente bajo el brillo cauterizador del sol estival, surgían ahora mientras el sol invernal llegaba desde el sur, arrojando fríamente sombras sobre las avenidas donde la gente iba y venía, llevando corazones invernales en las mangas para que se los arrancaran. Levemente ofendidas por Bach y Palestrina, las flacas memorias retrocedían al pasado, debatiéndose hacia Orígenes, aquel notabilísimo Padre de la Iglesia cuyo entusiasmo del siglo III lo llevó a castrarse para poder repetir el *hoc est corpus meum, Dominus* sin la molesta intromisión de la encabritada sombra de la carne. Miraban, pero no lo veían por ninguna parte, tan bien había hecho su trabajo, y las iglesias estaban tan atestadas que muchos se veían obligados a sobrellevar el Nacimiento en coctelerías y bares. Tanto éxito

había tenido Orígenes, sembrando su campo sin simiente, que la conspiración, concebida en la luz, nacida y criada en la oscuridad, y acosada hasta la madurez en muerte dudosa y extático martirio, continuaba aún. *Miserere nobis*, decían los labios mitrales. *Vae victis*, el corazón estadístico.

La tragedia estaba proscrita, en negación ritual del conocimiento maduro de que nos estamos alejando unos de otros, de que sólo compartimos una cosa, el miedo a pertenecer a otro, o a otros, o a Dios; amor o dinero, oferta equiparada en los anuncios y el mundo, donde sólo el dinero es moneda de cambio, y bajo árboles muertos y frágiles adornos manos prensiles intercambian falsificaciones de lo que el corazón no se atreve a entregar.

—Eh, Barney, vamos a tomar otra aquí. La primera del día.

—Eh, Pollyotch —llamó la mujer—. Eh, san Colás.

—¿Por qué no te caes muerta?

—No me vengas con tus trucos.

—Ssí…

—¿Y con quién vais a estar tristes la noche de Fin de Año? —preguntó la señora Bildow por teléfono. Esther, al otro extremo del hilo, aceptó esta amable invitación para ella y su marido.

La señora Bildow dejó el aparato en su soporte y miró por la ventana del apartamento al nivel de la acera. Vio cuatro piernas. «Don», llamó. «¿Crees que la niña estará bien con él? ¿Cómo se llama, Anselm?». Fuera, las cuatro piernas se alejaron, desapareciendo de su vista.

Era una tarde oscura. Al norte, el cielo estaba casi negro. Anselm dobló la esquina con la niñita cogida de la mano. Allí se detuvo, al encontrarse con un amigo.

—Eh, Anselm, me sé uno que te va a gustar, viejo.

—¿Un qué?

—¿Está bien besar a una monja?

—¿Qué quieres decir, por el amor de Dios?

—Claro que está bien, siempre y cuando no caigas en el hábito.

—Ja, jajajaja… —Inclinó su cara delgada hacia la niñita, que alzó la vista. La cara de Anselm estaba cubierta de acné—. Jajajajaja…

—Sabía que te iba a gustar.

Anselm meneó la cabeza y volvió a ponerse serio, como estaba cuando dobló la esquina. Parecía melancólico.

—Pero bueno, ¿qué te pasa?

—Las tardes como ésta —empezó Anselm, mirando hacia el cielo negro entre los edificios, al norte—, las tardes como ésta —repitió— pienso en chicas.

—Feliz Año Nuevo, si me perdonáis la expresión.

—Adiós, Esther, di a tu marido…

—Buenas noches, yo…

—Feliz Año Nuevo, ¿estáis seguros de que no podéis venir?

—No —la voz de Esther volvió sobre el humo con las suyas—, hemos decidido ir a un sitio español que conoce Wyatt, los dos solos, buenas noches y gracias, feliz Año Nuevo.

—Buenas noches…

—Y feliz Año Nuevo, yo…

Luego el humo de la habitación dejó de moverse, la puerta se cerró sobre la corriente de aire y la habitación quedó en silencio; hasta que Esther volvió a entrar, moviendo el humo a su alrededor y diciendo:

—Bueno, se acabó.

Se quedó en pie con aire inseguro.

—Si querías ir a su fiesta, Esther…

—¿Fiesta…? «Es siempre tan espantoso que este año decidimos simplemente escondernos en casa», eso fue lo que dijo ella. Si llamas a eso una fiesta…

—No me habría importado quedarme aquí, si querías…

—¿Ir sola?

—Bueno, yo… quería terminar un trabajo.

—Trabajo —repitió ella con voz apagada.

—Llamó la mujer preguntando por ese cuadro, ya está acabado, sólo necesita una capa de barniz.

—Lo estabas barnizando cuando llegamos.

—Sí, hice un poco… en realidad está acabado —admitió.

Esther se sentó lentamente en el borde de una mesa. El brillo de sus ojos fluctuó de trémulo a apagado mientras los clavaba en él y los apartaba. Finalmente dijo:

—Fue como si estuvieras intentando… huir. —Él inició un movimiento con la mano, pero no hizo ningún ruido ni alzó la vista de la silla donde estaba sentado—. Pensé que no te importaría, no son… son una pareja agradable, y el chico que han traído…

—¿Quién era?

—No lo conocía, se llama Otto nosécuantos. Se presentó sin más, dijo que había estado en una fiesta en la parte alta, en casa de un dramaturgo, se fue cuando se volvió demasiado ruidosa y una mujer empezó a llamarlo Plagiacci… Te ha caído bien, ¿verdad?

—Sí, es… es bastante joven, ¿no?

—Podías haber ofrecido coñac a algún otro, aparte de él. Y de ti —añadió. Alargó perezosamente la mano hacia la máquina de escribir nueva que había en la mesa, un regalo de Navidad (ella le había regalado una maquinilla de afeitar eléctrica), y su dedo pulsó especulativamente una tecla que nunca utilizaría: miró el papel, donde había impreso *ã*—. Pobre Don, podías haber sido un poco más agradable…

—¿Agradable? Hablé con él, intenté hablar con él.

—Te oí, te oí decir…

—¿Lo oíste a él…? «Toda sociedad necesita un ocio amplio para desarrollar un amplio ritual religioso»… ¿oíste todo eso…? «Descubrirás que los racionalistas asumían el estado de Platón *qua* estado, lo que por supuesto no dejaba lugar para el artista: como figura creativa es siempre un elemento perturbador que amenaza el status *quo*…». Dios santo, Esther. ¿Nos oíste discutir sobre la esencia? ¿Y sobre la *Especulación transcendental sobre la aparente intencionalidad en el destino del individuo,* de Schopenhauer? Y de ahí a los escépticos griegos…

—Y te oí hablar de esto —elevó la voz, cogiendo una pequeña revista de tapas duras—. Y no pude creerlo, pensé que debías de estar borracho o… no sé qué, nunca te había oído hablar de ese modo, tan… ofensivo. Ahora sonríes como si siguieras creyendo que fue gracioso, fingiendo que no sabías que era el director de esta revista, que escribió el artículo sobre Juan Gris que viene aquí…

—Esther, por favor…

—Y que organizó todo ese simposio que hicieron sobre religión. Wyatt, fue indigno de ti.

—¿Indigno? Ese tipo de gente…

—Todo eso sobre las momias, sabes muy bien a qué me refiero, cuando dijiste que las ideas que hay en estas páginas no sólo están muertas, sino embalsamadas con cuidado, respetando la santidad del cadáver, lo oí todo. «Alguna persona atrevida aparece en un artículo para hacer la primera incisión», dijiste, «y luego sale corriendo para huir de la lapidación por su ofensa contra el muerto, y entonces se hacen cargo los embalsamadores. El plantel de embalsamadores, una camarilla en la que es muy difícil introducirse». ¿Crees que no sabía que te referías a él cuando dijiste eso? «Como buenos sacerdotes dictando cánones de vida feliz que desdeñan para sí mismos». En realidad te estabas refiriendo a su artículo sobre Juan Gris, ¿no?, cuando dijiste que desangraban el cuerpo, guardaban los órganos vitales en vasijas de alabastro, sacaban el cerebro por las ventanas de la nariz con un gancho de hierro, lo oí todo… las cavidades vacías se rellenaban con especias, el cuerpo entero se remojaba en salmuera, se cubría de cola, se vendaba bien y se metía en un ataúd con forma humana. —Esther blandió el duro rollo de papel y luego lo dejó caer sobre la mesa, buscando un cigarrillo—. ¿Por qué la tomaste con él?

—No lo sé, Esther, hay algo en ese aspecto translúcido que tiene, esa barbilla redonda y el pelo fino y esas gafas con montura de plástico, ese traje marrón…

—No puede evitar su aspecto.

—¿No tiene un espejo? Y esa corbata amarilla con palmeras. Simplemente hay algo en esos tontos complacientes de manos blandas que pontifican sobre…

—No es complaciente: Don sufre mucho.

—Supongo que te habrá contado todo tipo de detalles desgarradores.

—Me habla. Me habla más que…

Se interrumpió para sorber por la nariz, y encendió su cigarrillo.

—¿Más que qué?

—No importa. ¿Sabes lo que parecía?

—Lo que parecía qué.

—De repente parecía que estabas tratando de impresionar a ese chico, a Otto.

—¿Impresionarlo?

—Estabas siendo… de verdad, estabas siendo demasiado inteligente y… coqueto.

—¡Esther, Dios santo! Esther.

Se puso en pie.

—¿Crees que también es homosexual? —preguntó ella con calma.

—¿Otto? En nombre del cielo, cómo voy… ¿Qué quieres decir con «también»?

—Nada —dijo, bajando la vista.

—¿«También»? Escucha… Dios santo.

Dejó caer las manos a los lados.

—Bueno, ¿por qué ibas a ser tan agradable con un chico engreído y pretencioso e intentar poner en ridículo a una persona agradable como Don cuando quiere hablarte de cosas que te interesan, y su esposa…

—Bueno, maldita sea, eso es, su esposa. ¡Esa mujer! ¿La conoces? ¿La has oído…? Como dice Don en su artículo del simposio sobre religión, él también tiene una religión, aunque tal vez no lo sospechabais, porque es tan filosófico…

—De acuerdo, olvidémoslo.

—¿Olvidarlo? ¿Olvidarla a ella? Mirándome con esos ojillos entre sus párpados granulados… «Esther nos ha contado que eres tan original», «Tienes que contarme más cosas sobre tu trabajo», «Debes conocer todos los trucos…». ¡Los trucos!

—Bueno, lo intenta, Wyatt, no deberías ser tan desagradable, también ella intenta pintar.

—Puede pintarse de rojo y colgarse de la pared y silbar, me da igual, pero no aquí… «Esther nos ha contado…», «Esther dice…». ¡Dios santo! ¿Qué les has contado?

—¿Qué te pasa? Nunca te he visto así, Wyatt —dijo, dejándose caer en una silla.

—Bueno, ¿qué les has contado? Sobre mí, ¿que necesitaba psicoanalizarme?

—Tenía que hablar con alguien.

—Bueno… tú… escucha —se plantó ante ella agitando las manos en el aire—. Maldita sea, si crees que necesito un psicoanalista…

—Por favor, no maldigas delante de mí.

—Escucha, ¿la viste… leyéndome las manos…? «Vaya, son fuertes, ¿eh?, pero debes darme también la izquierda, espero que haga algo para justificar *esto…*». ¿La viste, pasándome sus sucios dedillos por la palma…? «Bueno, la izquierda es mucho mejor, pero jamás he visto una dicotomía tan completa», dijo… «ésa es una de las palabras de Don, significa dos cosas que se describen mutuamente como negro y no negro, y tu mano derecha es tan áspera…». Siguió hablando hasta cuando me aparté de ella, ¿la oíste…? «Tu mano izquierda es tan dulce, tan suave: entiende; y tu mano derecha es tan áspera. Eso significa que tu juicio es mucho mejor que tu voluntad, ¿por qué tratas de seguir tu voluntad como si dirigiera tu vida? Lo hace tu mano izquierda, pero tú luchas contra ti mismo, ¿verdad?, tan testarudo, no feliz, no feliz, tu mano izquierda tiene amor, qué persona más solitaria eres. ¡Dios santo!».

—Wyatt…

—Y luego… ¿es posible?, ¿puede un hombre estar celoso de sí mismo? Maldita sea, escucha, Esther, ¿viste lo que intentó hacer? Estuvo apunto de besarme para despedirse. Bueno, está loca. Pero sale a la calle y nadie se sorprende al verla, habla y nadie se sorprende al oírla. Es asfixiante. En este mismo instante está hablando. En este mismo instante están ahí abajo y esa mujer de párpados granulados está hablando. Levantas la vista y ahí está ella, la gente… en el momento en que los miras empiezan a hablar, automáticamente, dan por supuesto que los entiendes, que los reconoces, que tienen algo que decirte, y tienes que esperar, tienes que fingir que escuchas, fingir que no sabes lo que va a venir a continuación mientras siguen hablando sin tener ni idea de lo que están diciendo, ni siquiera lo saben pero siguen hablando, intentando explicar quiénes son porque dan por supuesto que quieres saberlo, y no es que ellos mismos tengan la más maldita idea al respecto, sólo quieren saber qué clase de receptáculo serás para sus confidencias. Cómo saben que soy la misma persona que… Quiénes son ellos para dar por supuesta tal intimidad, para… seguir hablando. ¡Y creen realmente que me están hablando a mí!

—Cariño, no deberías haber dejado que te trastornara de ese modo —le dijo Esther.

—¡Que me trastornara! ¿La oíste hablando del análisis que hace con su marido? ¿Su análisis lego…? «Don se está analizando, pero no podemos permitírnoslo los dos, así que él me analiza a mí. Mis cuadros ayudan, son puros símbolos en el proceso de individuación, dice Don…». ¡Análisis lego! Y suelta una risita, una de esas… mentes mezquinas en las que lo escabroso crea intimidad, como cuando te dijo «He estado tratando de hacer salir de su concha a tu marido, pero no se deja *meter* mano…» y suelta una risita. Estaba ahí sentada…

—Basta ya, Wyatt, de verdad.

—No, escucha, estaba ahí sentada observándoos a los dos, a ti y a Don, ahí sentada con las rodillas separadas y Otto mirando fijamente sus portaligas. Ahora debería tener una aventura, dijo, Don necesita una ahora.

—Wyatt, por favor…

—«Conoció a Esther antes de que se casara», me dijo… «Don conoció a Esther antes de que se casara».

—¿Adónde vas? —preguntó Esther cuando se volvió. No contestó, sino que siguió hacia la puerta del estudio—. Wyatt —dijo, levantándose para seguirlo—, por favor…

—No pasa nada —dijo él, cruzando el umbral, y la luz brillante se encendió sobre su cabeza.

Minutos después apareció Esther en la puerta con el maquillaje retocado y el pelo recogido hasta donde creía que debía estar. Había una lámpara secadora enfocada sobre el retrato, y se lo quedó mirando. Wyatt había hecho un trabajo excelente y ella, que acababa de verse en el espejo, contempló la carne de la cara en el caballete, tan clara como la suya.

—Lo echaré de menos —dijo—. Me alegrará que se lo lleven, pero… pero lo echaré de menos. —Algo se movió. Se volvió, pero no era él. Vio su imagen en el espejo («para corregir los trazos erróneos…»), y se dio cuenta de que estaba detrás de la mesa—. Lo siento, esas cosas pasan, pero ahora ya no estás enfadado, ¿verdad?

—No, no, es sólo que… el resto de nosotros… —Bebió un trago de coñac, y se quedó mirando unos papeles que tenía delante en la mesa—. No sé, hay cosas que tenemos que hacer, de modo que las hacemos juntos. Tenemos que comer, de modo que comemos juntos. Tenemos que dormir y dormimos juntos, pero… ¿todo eso?, ¿es que todo eso nos acerca más?

—Pero tú… no puedes… no…

—Pero se han ido —siguió con más calma, volviendo la vista hacia los papeles—. Gracias a Dios se te ocurrió algo, esa excusa de ir a algún otro sitio juntos, para librarnos de ellos.

—Pero yo… quería ir realmente.

—Esther… —Se levantó rápidamente y se acercó a ella—. No, no, lo siento. Claro que iremos, si tú quieres, no te entendí, Esther, pero no llores.

(Por primera vez en varios meses) la rodeó con su brazo; pero al llegar al hombro su mano no se cerró, sólo se posó allí. Se tambalearon un poco, de pie en el umbral, sujetándose aún entre sí a fin de retenerse mutuamente: todavía esperaban, arrastrados por la superficie del tiempo como dos olas por el mar, tan cerca una de la otra que ninguna de ellas puede elevarse y romper, hasta que ambas, sin realizarse, se destrozan al mismo tiempo sobre la costa.

Hacía más frío fuera, donde los ciervos seguían colgados de los talones, y los rosetones seguían en flor donde los habían plantado. Un pequeño ejército de hombres avanzaba por las calles recogiendo veinticinco mil toneladas de cajas y papeles de colores, desechos deshuesados de la Navidad.

Esther dio un respingo.

—¿Qué te pasa?

—Sólo un escalofrío, por la espalda. Hace frío aquí. —Se quedó mirando el techo de latón prensado—. No es la clase de sitio que esperaba.

—¿Qué, qué esperabas?

—Dijiste gitano.

—¿Algún húngaro grasiento metiéndote el arco del violín en la sopa?

—No quería decir… por favor. No quería decir que no me guste, me gusta. ¿Cuándo estuviste en España?

—¿España? —Alzó la vista con sorpresa—. Nunca he estado en España.

—Pero tú me dijiste…

—Mi padre, mi padre…

—Y tu madre. Pensar que no me lo dijiste.

—¿Qué?

—Tu madre, enterrada en España. ¿Por qué sonríes?

—La música.

—Es excitante, ¿verdad? Música excitante. Me pregunto por qué el local está casi vacío. No… —le sujetó la mano para que no inclinara la botella sobre su vaso—, no puedo beber más de eso, ¿qué es? —Inclinó la cabeza para leer la etiqueta—. ¿La Guita?

—Manzanilla.

—No me siento muy bien, no debería haber bebido tanto antes, primero martinis y ahora este vino. No estoy acostumbrada a beber tanto vino sin moverme de la mesa. ¿Wyatt?

—¿Eh?

—Casi te has acabado la botella tú solo.

—Sí, vamos a pedir otra.

—Yo que tú no bebería más de eso, ¿eh, Wyatt?

—¿Ah?

—Digo que… ¿no me has oído?

—Estaba escuchando la música.

—¿La entiendes?

—¿La música?

—La letra.

—*Sangre negra en mi corazón*… [21] No hablo español.

—Wyatt, ¿no podríamos ir?

—¿Quieres irte ahora?

—Quiero decir a España, ¿no podríamos ir juntos?

—¿Qué?

—Oh, no… da igual, no. No podrías llevarme allí de viaje, con tu madre allí. No, tú… Marruecos, seguir a las hormigas por el desierto para ver si se guían por las estrellas, más marroquí que… No sé, me gustaría… ¿Adónde vas?

—Al servicio.

Lo observó mientras atravesaba el local con aire inseguro. Se detuvo en la barra. Tras ella había un hombre mayor de amplias facciones; se les unió el camarero, y luego salió de la cocina una chica fornida y muy guapa. Esther los observó a todos hablar y reír, observó a su marido invitarlos a una copa, los vio alzar los vasos, lo vio golpear el suelo con los tacones siguiendo el taconeo de la música del disco que sonaba en la oscura *jukebox;* y minutos después el camarero se acercó a la mesa abriendo otra botella. Antes había estado inclinado sobre ellos refiriendo con todo pormenor el argumento de una película que había visto aquella tarde. Su inglés era muy inconexo, y antes de que se dieran cuenta estaba contando la película que había visto el día anterior. Eran descripciones muy entusiásticas, como si fueran detalles sacados de su propia vida. Dijo que se llamaba Esteban, y que era de Murcia.

—Pero… ¿hemos pedido otra? —preguntó Esther, mientras el camarero descorchaba la botella.

—Oh, sí. *El señor*, su marido. Es muy *flamenco*, el señor.

—¿Qué?

—Es muy *flamenco,* su marido.

Se lo quedaron mirando, ahora inclinado sobre la oscura *jukebox* junto a la chica fuerte y guapa de la cocina; lo vieron enderezarse, reír, y golpear de nuevo el suelo con su tacón.

—¿Entiende lo que significa *flamenco*?

—Sí —murmuró, observándolo mientras atravesaba el local hacia ella con la cabeza alta. Se detuvo a decir algo a Esteban, y luego se acercó mirando al suelo. Un escalofrío recorrió la espalda de Esther, y se extinguió. Cuando se sentó, sin levantar la voz por encima de la música, dijo—: Qué guapo estabas hace un momento.

—¿Qué quieres decir? —preguntó, dejando de llenar su copa.

—La forma en que estabas ahí de pie, golpeando el suelo con los tacones, con la cabeza alta. ¿La ponías a propósito, esa pose tan arrogante?

—Tú… haces que parezca teatral.

—No, pero es así, no era eso, como en un escenario, no sólo esa pose arrogante, no era sólo tu expresión, era… tenías la cabeza echada hacia atrás y como hacia arriba, pero con la cara en alto y abierta a… no sé, pero no como ahora eres a veces. —Miró cómo temblaba la copa en su mano cuando empezó a levantarla, y cómo la volvía a dejar en la mesa—. Wyatt, es… a veces, cuando entro y te veo con la cabeza baja y un aspecto tan solitario y… pero hace un momento era el hombre entero siendo arrogante, como elevándose, era… en ese momento estaban todas las cosas maravillosas, todas las cosas que, no sé… todas las cosas que nos han enseñado que puede ser un hombre. —Él no dijo nada, ni alzó la vista, sino que sacó un paquete de cigarrillos—. Heroico —dijo ella en voz baja, mirando cómo encendía un cigarrillo, y luego, en el mismo tono—: ¿Me das uno?

—¿Qué? —preguntó, alzando rápidamente la vista, y sus ardientes ojos verdes la sobresaltaron.

—Un cigarrillo. —Le dio uno, y le llenó la copa mientras ella lo encendía. Se quedó mirando sus fuertes

dedos, que agarraban el delgado pie de la copa, y un momento después preguntó—: ¿Qué significa *flamenco?*

—Flamenco.

—¿Flamenco? No veo…

—Por los trajes con que volvieron los soldados españoles, tras la invasión de las Tierras Bajas en el siglo XVII. —Su voz sonaba impaciente y nerviosa mientras contestaba—. Ropa extraña… los gitanos la adoptaron, así que… la llamaron *flamenca.*

Esther se inclinó hacia él en la mesa, con una sonrisa de íntima confianza, y alargando su mano hacia la suya dijo:

—¿Sabes, Wyatt? Ni siquiera sabía que España hubiera invadido alguna vez…

—Escucha… —dijo él. Había retirado automáticamente la mano de la mesa—. De eso se trata, esa arrogancia, esa misma arrogancia del sufrimiento en la música *flamenca,* escucha. Es su fuerza lo que resulta tan arrollador, la suficiencia que es tan delicada y tierna sin un instante de sentimentalismo. Con infinita compasión pero rechazando la compasión, es una precisión del sufrimiento —siguió, agitando bruscamente la mano en el aire como para plasmarlo allí—, la tremenda tensión de la violencia totalmente encerrada en un marco… en un modelo que no pretende tener otro nivel que el suyo, ¿entiendes lo que quiero decir? —Apenas le echó una ojeada para comprobarlo—. Es la intimidad, el exquisito sentido de la intimidad que tiene —dijo, hablando con más rapidez—, es el sentido de la intimidad que la mayor parte de las expresiones populares de sufrimiento no tiene, no se atreve a tener, eso es lo que la hace arrogante. Eso es lo que el sentimentalismo invade y corrompe, eso es lo que hemos perdido en todas partes, sobre todo aquí, donde asaltan de todas las formas posibles tus sentimientos y tu intimidad. Estas cosas, el sufrimiento y la violencia, tienen su propio modelo, y eso es… el sentido de la violencia dentro de su propio modelo, el modelo que corresponde a la violencia, como en el toreo, por eso el toreo es un arte, porque respeta su propio modelo…

Dejó de hablar, y un momento después Esther, que ahora también tenía la mirada baja, repitió la palabra:

—Sufrimiento… ¿sufrimiento? ¿Porque… no piensas nunca en la felicidad?

—Sí, ¿oíste lo que dijo esa mujer…? «Creo que el artista es la única persona que posee realmente la capacidad de ser *feliz*, quizá no *todo* el tiempo, pero *a veces.* ¿No lo *crees* así? ¿No lo crees *tú* así?…».

—¿Y tú qué dijiste?

Dejó la copa vacía en la mesa.

—Dije: «Hay momentos de exaltación».

—¿Exaltación?

—Momentos completamente consumidos, cuando estás trabajando y pierdes toda conciencia de ti mismo… Oh, dijo ella… ¿Llamas a eso felicidad? ¡Dios santo! Luego dijo: «Fue terrible lo de la psicoanalista de Esther, ¿verdad? Quiero decir para Esther… No, Dios santo, no, la gente como ésa…».

Del otro extremo del local llegó el lamento *flamenco,* «Sangre negra en mi corazón».

—¿Conoces ese verso español: «Vida sin amigo, muerte sin testigo»?

—¿Qué significa? —preguntó en voz baja, los ojos todavía apartados de él.

—Vida sin amigo, muerte sin testigo.

—No me gusta —dijo en voz baja; luego le cogió la mano antes de que pudiera retirarla: la sintió tirar un instante, luego ponerse rígida en la suya—. Siento que te fastidiaran —dijo—, pero han sido muy amables conmigo, los dos, cuando… necesitaba amigos. Les he hablado de ti, les he hablado de muchas cosas, cosas de las que no puedo hablar contigo porque tú no quieres hablarme.

—¿Qué cosas? —musitó él cuando se interrumpió, como obligado a hacerlo.

—Bueno, por ejemplo, lo que escribo, ya sé que no es nada para ti, pero para mí es importante, y ¿qué dices tú…? Aficionada a la palabra «atávico…».

—Muy bien, Esther —dijo, y de repente soltó su mano de la suya.

—Si lo único que sabes decir es…

—Muy bien, escucha, tengo ideas, pero ¿por qué habría de agobiarte con ellas? Es tu trabajo, y algo como escribir es muy íntimo, ¿no? Qué… qué frágiles son las situaciones. Pero no tenues. Delicadas, pero no endebles, no indulgentes. Delicadas, por eso se rompen, deben romperse y uno debe juntar los trozos y mostrarlo todo antes de que vuelva a romperse, o dejar esos pedazos a un lado durante un momento cuando se rompe alguna otra cosa y uno se vuelve hacia ella, y todo sigue ocurriendo. Por eso, casi todo lo que ahora se escribe, cuando uno lo lee van uno dos tres cuatro y te cuentan lo que ocurrió como reportajes periodísticos, sin adjetivos, sin frases largas, sin truco alguno en apariencia, y finalmente creen que creen

realmente que la forma en que lo vieron es la forma en que ocurrió, cuando en realidad… Bueno, ¿qué ocurrió cuando abrieron el féretro de María Estuardo? Descubrieron que había recibido dos tajos de espada, uno le rasgó la nuca y el segundo le cortó la cabeza. Pero ¿acaso se mencionan dos tajos en alguna de las crónicas de testigos oculares? No… uno nunca se queda sin aliento cuando le cuentan cosas que ya sabe, cuando lo exponen todo linealmente, como si los términos y el tiempo, y la naturaleza y el movimiento de todo fueran secretos de la misma magnitud. Escriben para gente que lee con la superficie de su mente, gente con hábitos de lectura que les exigen lo mínimo, gente enseñada a leer en busca de hechos, que sabe lo que va a venir a continuación y quiere saber lo que viene a continuación, y se enfada con las sorpresas. La claridad es esencial, y el detalle, nada de falsos misticismos, los hechos son ya bastante malos. Pero nos desconcierta la gente que cuenta demasiado, y que lo cuenta sin sorprenderse. ¿Cómo sabe lo que ocurrió?, a menos que se trate de un hombre sin afeitar que está solo en una barca, cambiando yo por él, y cuántas veces tienes a un hombre solo en una barca, en todo este… todo este… Escucha, hay tantas cosas delicadas que se mueven hacia ti, verás. Como un hombre que al entrar en un cuarto oscuro se protege las partes con las manos por miedo a chocarse con el pico de una mesa y… Bueno, todo lo que nos rodea es para gente que sólo puede mantener el equilibrio a la luz, donde se mueven como si nada fuera frágil, nada estuviera mitigado por la posibilidad, y de repente, ¡bang!, algo se rompe. Entonces tienes que pararte y volver a juntar los pedazos. Pero nunca puedes volver a juntarlos exactamente del mismo modo. Te paras cuando puedes y expones las cosas, y las dejas a mano, y vienen otras por sí solas, y se rompen, y aun entonces puedes dejar los pedazos a un lado, a trasmano, hasta poder cogerlos de nuevo y mostrarlos juntos de un modo ligeramente diferente, quizá un poco más duradero, hasta que lo hayas roto y hayas recompuesto los pedazos suficientes veces y tengas la cosa entera en todas sus dimensiones. Pero la disciplina, el detalle, es tan… A veces la acumulación es excesiva, no se soporta.

Esther había estado estudiando su cara mientras hablaba, y ahora siguió haciéndolo, y nada se movió hasta que dijo claramente:

—¡Qué ambicioso eres!

Se la quedó mirando con una expresión que no era un ceño fruncido, sino que había aparecido como una brusca ruptura de sus rasgos, que un momento antes parecían modelados para siempre tal como eran pero que aun ahora, en esta nueva constricción, reiteraban una impresión de permanencia, como metales fundidos que al verterse se endurecen instantáneamente en formas de rotura imprevisibles. Y Esther se lo quedó mirando con la cara de quien mira una herida.

Poco después se marcharon.

—Me parece que dejas demasiado dinero —le dijo Esther.

—Por la música.

—Bueno, si yo fuera tú no dejaría tanta propina —dijo en la puerta.

—Pero no lo eres —susurró roncamente, mientras la mantenía abierta.

Es una ciudad desnuda. No se mima la fe ni se alienta la esperanza, no hay lugar para tender el propio agotamiento: en vez de ello los pináculos lo atraviesan sin disimular contra la vacuidad. A esa hora se les cedía a los que la heredan entre los espasmos de su vida, los que viven bajo tierra y salen a la superficie, los que no salen y los que no llevan llaves, los que miran con interés pequeños objetos en el suelo, los que miran sin interés, los que no saben la hora de la oscuridad, los que buscan con aprensión relojes luminosos, los que miran con pavor las puntas de los zapatos que pasan, los que miran a las caras que pasan desde la altura de la cintura, los que miran en direcciones opuestas, los que miran con los ojos en blanco, los que llevan anteojos oscuros, los que están tatuados, los que caminan como molinos de viento, los que propagan enfermedades, los que reciben la extremaunción con cacahuetes salados en el aliento.

La luna no había salido aún al cielo, pues esperaba para salir más tarde, esperaba cada noche casi hasta el último minuto posible antes del día, para aparecer más ajada y torcida, y ascender con aire inseguro como frenada por la vergüenza de que la vieran en tal estado.

—Odias el invierno, ¿verdad? —No se veía ningún taxi, y caminaban deprisa—. Siempre pareces tener más frío que los demás.

—¡Los demás! —murmuró mientras se dirigían hacia el este. El cielo estaba ya iluminado—. ¡Mírala! —dijo de repente, cogiéndola del brazo—. ¿No puedes imaginar que intentan pescarnos? Caminando por el fondo de un gran mar celestial, ¿te acuerdas del hombre que bajó por la cuerda para soltar el ancla enganchada en la lápida?

Entonces ella oyó que gritaban el nombre de Wyatt. Parecía venir de muy lejos, como un grito en un sueño, o bajo el agua: quizá lo había imaginado; pero se repitió. Luego apareció ante ellos el sacerdote, con abrigo y sombrero negros y cuello redondo, cargado con una maleta, «corriendo para coger un tren», lo oyó

decir. Lo oyó, oyó la voz de su marido, la suya durante un instante sonando especialmente alta, sus saludos, la apresurada y levemente azorada renovación de su relación, todo como si se hubieran encontrado de repente en un paisaje submarino donde sólo los otros estaban en su casa, y ella luchando desesperadamente por alcanzar la superficie, como lo había hecho en aquel momento en que su voz exclamó: «¿Cómo está usted…». Se llamaba John. Lo oyó decir: «Ya entonces había en ti un aire de leyenda y misterio, Wyatt…».

Se tambaleó. Y pareció pasar mucho tiempo antes de que se viera de nuevo caminando y oyera su propia voz, antes de que volviera a respirar y a dominarla al hablar.

—¿Un viejo amigo? ¿Estudiaste con él? ¿Tú? ¿Tú estudiaste para cura?

—Para pastor, Esther. Es… es anglicano.

—¿Tú estudiaste para cura?

—Es… sí, no hay ningún… misterio en ello.

No se oía más ruido que el de sus tacones sobre la acera y los sonidos de constricción de la garganta de Esther. Una manzana más adelante la calle estaba iluminada por el resplandor de un árbol de Navidad que ardía junto al bordillo.

—No hace suficiente frío para que nieve —dijo él.

Siguieron andando hacia el fuego.

—Pero eso parecía un trueno. —Se volvió para sujetarla con ambas manos—. Esther, Esther… —Ambos se tambalearon—. Tienes que *andar*.

Se apoyó en un portal, y la luz del fuego le iluminó la cara. Era un árbol grande.

—¿Ningún misterio? —dijo—. ¿Ningún misterio? Durante todo el rato que ha estado hablando te he visto ahí con toda la cara roja. Durante todo el rato que ha estado hablando te he visto agitándote como un lunático, cerrado como un… cerrojo… —Consiguió detener sus ojos en su cara—. Esta noche puedo creer todo lo que siempre he pensado de ti. Lo que nunca me has contado.

—Para ya, Esther. Nunca se me ocurrió.

—¿Por qué te casaste conmigo? —preguntó perentoriamente.

—Esther, no quiero ser desagradable…

Se lo quedó mirando de lleno a la cara, en la que nada se movía para delatar al hombre que había amado; luego, moviéndose rápidamente, sus ojos lo buscaron, lo perdieron, lo encontraron y volvieron a perderlo.

—Pero lo eres —susurró—. Lo eres todo el tiempo. —Su voz se elevó sordamente, y luego se quebró—. No deberías conocer a la gente si no tienes nada que compartir con ella. No deberías *conocerla* siquiera —chilló. Y sollozó—: Nunca… has compartido nada conmigo… No quieres ayudarme a hacer las cosas, las haces por mí pero no quieres ayudarme… Te ofreces a lavar los platos, pero no me ayudarías a lavarlos, sé que los lavarías si te dijera que sí pero no me ayudarías…

—Esther… —A lo lejos gimió una sirena.

—Esas… obras de Dante que tenías no podíamos tenerlas *nosotros,* era como si no pudieran existir sin ser tuyas o mías, de modo que me las regalaste, pero no podían ser nuestras. Tú… ni siquiera cuando me haces el amor lo compartes, lo haces como si… para poder hacer algo pecaminoso. Y nunca me lo has dicho… —Levantó la cabeza, que había dejado caer mientras sollozaba, y el resplandor volvió a iluminarla mientras las sirenas, ahora claramente perceptibles y puntuadas de campanadas, se acercaban cada vez más—. ¿Por qué no eres cura? ¡Eres un cura! Por qué no lo eres en vez de… a mí… ellos no comparten nada.

—¿Los curas no comparten nada? —repitió, sosteniéndola.

—¡Nada! Nada, no más de lo que tú compartes conmigo el amor. Ofrecen algo, lo ofrendan. Incluso lo dan, pero nunca lo comparten, nunca comparten nada… —Su áspero pelo despeinado se mantenía apartado de su cara mientras miraba el perfil de Wyatt a la luz del fuego, del que brotaron llamaradas desiguales cuando una rama se prendió y otra cayó ardiendo, lo que hizo parecer que sus rasgos se movían, aunque nada se movía salvo sus manos, sujetándola con más fuerza mientras ella se retorcía—. Precisión del sufrimiento… intimidad del sufrimiento… Si se trata de eso, de sufrir, entonces… compártelo. —Miraba hacia abajo y meneó lentamente la cabeza—. Si no puedes compartirlo… no puedes entenderlo en los demás, y si no puedes entenderlo no puedes respetarlo… y si no puedes respetarlo, si no puedes respetar el sufrimiento…

El resplandor del fuego había sido súbitamente horadado por las hirientes luces blancas de un coche, que se detuvo junto al bordillo, con la sirena zumbando en un tono demasiado bajo para ser oída. Más allá, otras sirenas y el estrépito de las campanas violaban la noche casi encima de ellos.

—Muy bien, hombre. ¿Qué me dices de esto?

—Yo… nosotros… No es nada, agente.

—¿Es vuestro fuego de campamento?

—Yo no sé nada del fuego —dijo Wyatt, volviéndose para encararlo, sosteniendo aún a Esther—. ¿Es que tengo pinta de…?

—De acuerdo, hombre, no te pongas nervioso. ¿Quién es la damita?

—Es mi mujer.

—¿Vivís aquí?

—No, vivimos en la parte alta. Mi mujer ha bebido un poco de más.

—Los dos tenéis pinta de haber bebido unas cuantas de más. ¿Es su marido, señora?

—No.

—Esther…

—*¿No es su marido?*

—Mírelo —dijo Esther, alzando los ojos—. ¿Es que no lo ve? Mírelo a los ojos. ¿No ve que es un cura?

—Esther…

De repente la noche desapareció a su alrededor en una llamarada de luces rojas y blancas y en la armónica explosión de las sirenas y campanas, cuando llegaron un camión cisterna, un vehículo de auxilio y un camión escala, según pareció al mismo tiempo. El policía les dio la espalda en el portal.

—No es más que un jodio árbol de Navidad —gritó.

—¿Son ésos los que lo han prendido? —llegó una voz desde detrás de un foco rojo.

—Será mejor que os vayáis a casa a acostaros —dijo el policía, volviéndose hacia Wyatt.

—No hay ningún taxi…

—Vamos. Os llevaré yo, padre.

Se dirigieron hacia los barrios altos en un silencio sólo perturbado por la constante voz parasitaria de la radio, que repetía junto a sus rodillas sus mensajes esotéricos, «señal treinta, señal treinta… coche número uno tres siete, señal treinta…».

Cuando se apearon, Wyatt tendió al policía un billete de cinco dólares, y el policía dijo:

—Feliz Año Nuevo, padre.

Mientras él metía la llave en la cerradura, Esther murmuró:

—Me siento tan vieja. —La dejó entrar en la oscuridad y en el aroma de lavanda. Ella se sentó y dijo—: No enciendas la luz.

Y mientras él se acercaba al brillante haz de luz procedente de la lámpara secadora, enfocada sobre el retrato en el estudio, ella le dijo:

—Wyatt, ¿no puedes decirme algo…? ¿Aunque no lo creas?

Pareció no haber oído, inclinado sobre el retrato. Apagó la lámpara caliente, cogió una lamparita manual de rayos ultravioleta y se quedó allí parado, dando golpecitos con el pie, esperando a que se calentara. Se oyeron los ruidos que hacía Esther en la habitación oscura, y luego sus pasos. La luz violeta aumentó poco a poco hasta alcanzar su lívida intensidad máxima, y mostró su cara cansada y sus ojos fijos, sin el menor parpadeo, en el retrato. Bajo aquella luz violeta, la superficie lisa había desaparecido: en la cara de la mujer, los fragmentos que había restaurado brillaban apagadamente en negro, una cara tocada por la mano irregular y claroscurecedora de la infección y la peste, con los tejidos ulcerados bajo la superficie, que reaparecieron con complaciente continencia en el preciso instante en que apartó de ella la luz violeta y la dirigió hacia la figura de Esther, que acababa de entrar mirando por encima de su hombro, y que de pronto cayó al suelo sin decir palabra.

Wyatt la levantó y, cruzando la habitación oscura, la llevó al dormitorio. «No intentes llevarme», susurró mientras la metía allí y la dejaba en la cama, perdiendo el equilibrio y cayendo casi encima de ella, donde de repente le retuvo. Luego, Esther alargó la mano y encendió la luz suave de la lamparita de noche. Él sostenía su cara entre las manos, con los pulgares tocándose por encima de los ojos de ella, y se los pasaba por las cejas. Ella abrió los ojos, inyectados en sangre y con el blanco casi oculto por la carne que los rodeaba: encima, los ojos fijos y duros miraban hacia abajo sin parpadear. Ella levantó una mano para aferrar la derecha de él y detenerla, por lo que sólo siguió pasándole el pulgar izquierdo por la ceja.

—Pareces un criminal —dijo ella dulcemente. La sonrisa de él pareció juntarle a ella los labios, el superior prendido bajo el inferior—. ¿Por qué? —susurró—. ¿Por qué te lo tomas todo tan a pecho?

—Todavía queda… tanto por hacer —contestó él, mientras la sonrisa abandonaba su cara.

—¿Tanto qué? Si… no puedes compartir tu trabajo conmigo… ¿pero eso significa que no puedes compartir nada? —Se movió debajo de él y acercó una mano a su áspera mejilla. Él no contestó—. Parecías un chiquillo, con la luz de las llamas cayendo de lleno en tu cara —susurró.

—Ha sido terrible —empezó él—, ¡y esa mujer…!

—Un chiquillo solitario, trastornado por unos tontos.

—Pero Esther… cuando me he dado cuenta de lo mucho que les habías dicho, contado sobre mí, sobre mi padre y… mi madre, y complejos de culpa, y ese sueño que tuve y se repite, y diciendo que necesitaba urgentemente un psicoanálisis, y toda clase de…

Se interrumpió. Ella no estaba llorando.

—Tenía que hablar con alguien —dijo. Empezó a rascarle con las uñas la palma de la mano derecha—. Me gustaría… —dijo, moviéndose bajo su cuerpo. La mano derecha de él se cerró sobre sus dedos, y se pararon.

Le acarició el pelo.

Luego ella se movió con tanta brusquedad, alzándose sobre los codos, que se le rasgó el vestido. «¿Crees que esto puede seguir *así?*», dijo en voz alta. La ajustada chaqueta negra de Wyatt, arrugada y sin forro, le estorbaba el movimiento de los brazos, pero no se paró a quitársela; y entonces le cerró los ojos, pasándole los pulgares por los párpados, y compartieron la única intimidad que conocían.

—¿Qué piensas de ello? —le preguntó luego, mientras se desnudaban.

—¿De ello? —repitió él, alzando la vista con aire confuso.

—De… hace un momento —dijo ella.

—Ni idea. No *pienso* en nada, sino… —Dio una calada a su cigarrillo, que se había consumido hasta la mitad—. Era extraño. Había zafiros. Veía zafiros esparcidos, de diferentes tamaños y diferentes brillos, y con diferentes engastes. Aunque algunos no estaban engastados. Y entonces pensé, sí que lo pensé, «si puedo al menos seguir pensando en estos zafiros, y no perderlos, no perder ninguno de ellos, todo irá bien».

Ella apagó la luz.

—Eso debe querer decir algo. Como tu sueño. Tu sueño no es difícil de entender. Desde luego que no… después de esta noche.

—Siempre se tiene la sensación —siguió él—, la sensación de recordar algo, de alcanzarlo casi, y tocarlo… —Ella se inclinó sobre él, su mano le estrechó la muñeca y la brasa del tabaco brilló, quemándole los dedos. En la oscuridad, ella no se dio cuenta—. Y luego se… vuelve a escapar. Se vuelve a escapar, y sólo queda una sensación de desilusión, de algo irremediablemente perdido.

Levantó la cabeza.

—Un cigarrillo —dijo ella—. ¿Por qué me dejas siempre tan deprisa después? ¿Por qué necesitas siempre un cigarrillo inmediatamente después?

—Realidad —contestó.

—¿Realidad? —repitió Otto—. Bueno, para mí significa siempre las cosas respecto a las cuales no puedes hacer nada. —Era un argumento que muchas mujeres habrían podido aprobar, y a juzgar por la forma en que levantó una ceja, podía parecer que muchas lo habían hecho. Sin embargo, Esther siguió mirando fijamente la taza que tenía ante sí—. Quiero decir… —empezó Otto.

—Creo que para él significa…

—¿Sí? —preguntó, tras esperar educadamente.

—Nada —dijo ella—. Una gran nada vacía.

Antes de que Otto pudiera poner una expresión (o tratar de no ponerla) tan incómoda como la sensación que aquello le produjo, se sobresaltó al ver que ella le miraba directamente a la cara por encima de la mesa, para preguntar:

—¿Te cae bien?

—Bueno, sí —contestó, bajando la vista, en un tono que ella habría podido tomar por poco sincero si no hubiera sido capaz de notar su embarazo—. Quiero decir, en realidad no lo conozco —siguió, mientras ella volvía a clavar la mirada en su taza de café vacía—, pero… es bastante difícil llegar a conocerlo, ¿no?

Esther asintió con la cabeza.

—Sí —dijo, y alzó la vista para ver qué decía a continuación.

—Quiero decir que no puedo imaginarme que nadie realmente lo conozca realmente bien. Excepto tú, por supuesto —añadió enseguida, ofreciéndole un cigarrillo.

—Preferiría no tener que dedicarle tanto tiempo —dijo ella.

—Y quiero decir —dijo Otto, encendiendo un cigarrillo— que creo que puedes aprender mucho de él. Es decir, creo que yo puedo. Quiero decir, esas cosas que uno no aprende en Harvard. Como lo que decía el otro día del san Jerónimo del cuadro del Greco, que es el verdadero san Jerónimo, el cuello y el pecho como vaciados de podredumbre, y esa especie de firmeza solitaria de la insania. Ese tipo de cosas. Y no me

habla con aire de superioridad, simplemente… habla, como… bueno, estábamos hablando de filosofía alemana y él estaba hablando de Vainiger, y de algo sobre cómo tenemos que vivir a oscuras y sólo suponer como verdaderos postulados que si fueran verdaderos justificarían…

—Romántico, alemán… —murmuró Esther.

—Sí, pero, y luego Fichte diciendo que tenemos que actuar porque es la única forma en que podemos saber que somos reales, y que tiene que ser una acción moral porque es la única forma en que podemos saber que lo son los demás. Reales, quiero decir. Pero mira, hay una cosa, quiero decir, ¿crees que le importa que… te haya llevado a comer hoy? —Esther alzó la vista y por primera vez en varios minutos sonrió por encima de la mesa—. Porque, sabes, no querría…

—Creo que estará agradecido —dijo ella.

Otto se volvió en busca del camarero, cuya atención le había sido difícil llamar desde que se sentaron. La había llevado a un pequeño restaurante, que, con exceso de ajo en todo menos en el postre y el café (aunque incluso allí persistía) y martinis muy secos servidos por camareros desdeñosamente serviles, todos los cuales necesitaban un afeitado, mantenía un aire Continental que se habría evaporado por completo sin los gastos de representación del mundo editorial. «Antes de que me casara con él dependía para todo de su madre», dijo la mujer de la mesa de al lado, que estaba sentada más cerca de Otto que Esther. «Trabaja fregando la cocina y el baño…».

Otto estudió la cuenta.

—Y gracias por el libro —dijo Esther mientras se pintaba los labios—. Ha sido muy amable por tu parte que me lo trajeras, sólo porque me oíste mencionarlo la otra noche. ¿Te gustó?

—En realidad —dijo él, incapaz de interrumpirse, de modo que pagó sin rechistar el treinta por ciento de más que le cobraban—, todavía no he tenido ocasión de leerlo.

—Bueno, entonces te lo devuelvo.

Lo empujó hacia él.

—No, no, lo traje para ti. Pero quizá podría acercarme a pedírtelo cuando lo hayas acabado, ¿no? Quiero decir si a ninguno de los dos os importa.

—Espero que vengas —dijo ella—. A él también le gustará. Sé que le gustará, porque le… porque tú puedes hablar con él. Y debes hacerlo —dijo, cogiendo la mano de Otto entre las suyas mientras salían a la calle. Sus ojos le acribillaron la cara, mirando de uno de los suyos al otro—. Y no… no debes desanimarte por la forma en que parece retraerse. Le caes bien, de verdad. Y me alegro de que él te caiga bien. Me alegro de que me lo dijeras hace un momento, porque anoche le dije que era así.

—¿Qué dijo él? —preguntó Otto ansiosamente.

Esther sonrió.

—Fue gracioso —dijo—. Dijo que así parecía que estuviéramos tres en la habitación cuando sólo deberíamos estar dos. Dijo que yo no debería intentar hacer explícitas las cosas que deberían estar implícitas. —Mientras decía esto miraba con aire inquisitivo más allá de él, hacia la multitud que pasaba por la Quinta Avenida. Luego volvió a mirarlo rápidamente a la cara—. Pero tú lo entiendes, ¿verdad?

—Sí, yo…

—Tú… es como si lo devolvieras a la vida.

Otto se volvió para verla alejarse. Después, moviendo una mano en el bolsillo, contó su dinero de memoria. Después miró su reloj. Después se sacó del bolsillo un trozo de papel.

—Cris-sto. Otto. Quiero decir, ¿qué haces parado en medio de la calle escribiendo una nota?

—Oh, Ed, es… es sólo una cosa que se me acaba de ocurrir para esa obra de teatro en la que estoy trabajando.

—¿Qué obra? Crissto, qué innecesario. ¿Quién sale en ella? —preguntó Ed, que aunque no lo sabía, salía en la obra con el improbable nombre de Max.

—Bueno, todavía nadie —dijo Otto, volviendo a meterse en el bolsillo el trozo de papel en el que acababa de escribir: «Gordon dce no hcer explícts ls csas q debn estr implícts ie amstad»—. No la he terminado. Todavía tengo que pulir un poco la trama. —Con esto quería decir Otto que todavía tenía que inventarse algún tipo de trama para motivar la serie de monólogos en los que Gordon, un personaje que recordaba a Otto en sus mejores momentos, y al que Otto admiraba mucho, decía cosas que Otto había cazado al vuelo o que se le habían ocurrido demasiado tarde para decirlas—. La trama entera está esbozada…

—Crissto, qué tiempo más asqueroso, quiero decir, que he estado en todas partes y vayas adonde vayas sólo te encuentras con que hace un calor infernal en verano y un frío infernal en invierno. ¿Tienes tiempo para tomar una copa?

—Bueno, sí, sí, vale, yo…

—Quiero decir, Crissto, ¿qué otra cosa esperan que haga uno? —dijo, mientras se dirigían hacia el sur.

—¿Vas a ir a la reunión?

—¿Qué reunión?

—Nuestra clase, la reunión de la clase, va a ser…

—Crissto, quiero decir ¿quién quiere ir a una cosa como ésa? Quiero decir, Crissto, lo único que haces es emborracharte con los mismos tipos estúpidos con los que estuviste emborrachándote durante cuatro años, sólo que cada año se las arreglan de alguna puñetera forma para volverse un poco más estúpidos y perder el pelo y traer en su lugar a sus esposas, ¿y por qué hay que ir hasta allí para emborracharse? Quiero decir, Crissto, es como si no te hubieras hecho adulto.

—Oye, ya que estamos cerca quiero pasarme un minuto por Brooks —dijo Otto—. Tengo que comprar…

—Oh, Crissto, yo también debería pasarme. Tengo que comprar calzoncillos. Quiero decir que me caso la semana que viene y tengo que comprar calzoncillos. Podríamos ir en mi coche…

—Pero si sólo está a cuatro manzanas.

—Lo sé, y de todas formas he perdido el puñetero coche.

—¿Lo has perdido?

—Anoche, lo dejé en algún sitio. Creo que fue en la parte alta, pero quiero decir, Crissto, no se puede esperar de mí que lo recuerde todo.

Azotado en el diafragma por un viento frío (pues la moda exigía que se abrochase sólo el botón inferior de la chaqueta, herencia híbrida de los Guardias, que prohibían el abrigo), Otto llegó al portal de la casa. Allí se detuvo para mirar hacia atrás calle arriba, y luego se sacó un trozo de papel del bolsillo. Los parlamentos de Gordon se estaban volviendo cada vez más profundos. Dentro de poco, Gordon sólo se encontraría a gusto en un drama, y aunque su autor no lo había decidido aún, posiblemente sería un drama para ser leído. Otto desaparecía a menudo a ratos perdidos, como hacen algunos niños cuando se les da una palabra nueva, o una idea nueva, o un regalo, y luego se los encuentra a solas en algún rincón secreto, moviendo los labios, buscando el lugar que corresponde a aquella cosa nueva, para asentarla firmemente en su lugar como parte de sí mismos antes de volver a los asaltos de los adultos, y a la increíble posibilidad de que algún día puedan ser ellos los cazadores. Al igual que sus labios se movía su lápiz, registrando la cosa antes de que se perdiera, no para él, sino para su obra; pues una vez escrita sólo hacía falta reconsiderarla para decidir el tono y el personaje, así como la escena en la que encajaría mejor, mientras él volvía a los asaltos y posibilidades que sólo el cazador conoce. En los últimos meses, Gordon había empezado a perder su aire desenvuelto y a tener inclinaciones más serias; ya no soltaba epigramas con tanta facilidad, sino que a menudo se detenía y hacía gestos bruscos con las manos, como para plasmar su sabiduría a plena vista del numeroso público, interrumpiéndose entre frase y frase para indicar el esfuerzo que le costaban; era capaz de guardar silencio donde antes había charlado afablemente, y donde se había detenido al fondo del escenario, pensativamente callado, era capaz de no aparecer en absoluto. «Grdn: Odiams ls csas slo pq vems en ells elemnts q odiams secretmt en nstros», escribió el creador de Gordon al pie de una hoja casi cubierta de anotaciones (una de las cuales cubría media página, y sólo dos de las cuales no eran de Gordon). Se detuvo un momento, dándose golpecitos en el labio con el lápiz; luego, «Grdn: Orginldad no invnción sino snsción d rcuerdo, recnocmiento, modlos ya vstos, cit. No pdes invntar l frma d una piedra. N. ¿Hcer Grdn pntor?, ¿escltor?». A estas alturas Gordon era ya tres o cuatro pulgadas más bajo de lo que había sido, y considerablemente menos elegante. Tras escribir aquella nota que dejaba aún abierta al cambio la profesión de Gordon, Otto empujó la puerta del portal y la encontró abierta. Entró y subió las escaleras. Estaba empezando a envidiar a Gordon.

Tardaron un minuto entero en abrir la puerta. Después Esther volvió rápidamente a su máquina de escribir y se sentó, inclinada sobre ella, mordiéndose la uña del pulgar mientras él atravesaba la habitación para detenerse a mirar por la ventana, se volvía para echar un vistazo al estudio vacío y finalmente se sentaba en el sofá y abría un libro. Era una colección de láminas de cuadros de primitivos flamencos. Un chasquido único de la máquina de escribir le hizo enderezarse.

—¿Qué ha sido eso? —preguntó.

—Una coma. —Miró con pesar la página que tenía ante sí—. A veces resulta muy diferente según pongas un punto o una coma. —De repente miró a su alrededor—. ¿Dónde está, no está contigo?

—Acabo de separarme de él, hemos estado en el Metropolitan. Dijo que quería dar un paseo.

—Sabía que no estaba contigo —dijo, reclinándose en su asiento y hablando más despacio—, y eso que

ahora hay veces que no lo sé, no sé siquiera si está aquí conmigo o no.

Otto levantó la vista, para verla mirando fijamente al suelo, y se aclaró la garganta.

—¿Es suyo esto, este libro sobre los pintores flamencos?

—No, es mío —dijo ella, alzando distraídamente la vista—. Él tiene algo en contra de las reproducciones.

—Sí —convino Otto, con el libro abierto por un Dierick Bouts—, pero éstas son especialmente buenas, ¿no? Esta especie de rigor del sufrimiento, esta severa continencia del sufrimiento que parece casi apacible, casi indiferente. Pero en cierto modo es lo mismo, esta severa calidad del trazo, esta severa delicadeza y ternura. —Ella lo miraba fijamente, pero él no levantó la vista. Volvió las páginas y siguió hablando con despreocupada y premiosa seguridad—. Se ve lo bien que estos hombres conocían sus materiales, que utilizaban el color como un escultor utiliza el mármol, no simplemente rellenando espacios como en los dibujos animados, sino respetándolo, utilizándolo como un sirviente del dibujo, los valores táctiles… este, este Van Eyck, la toca blanca de la esposa de Arnolfini, qué nítidos son los trazos, mira qué suavemente fluyen, es perfecta pintura al óleo, ¿verdad? No es difícil entender por qué decía Cicerón… ¿qué pasa?

Al levantar la vista, se había encontrado sus ojos clavados en él.

—Nada, sigue —dijo ella, fascinada.

—Nada, sólo iba a decir… ese pasaje de la *Paradoxa* de Cicerón, donde Cicerón niega a Praxiteles todo mérito personal por su trabajo, y sólo se lo reconoce por quitar el mármol sobrante hasta alcanzar la forma real que estaba allí todo el tiempo. Sí, los, ejem… maestros que no tenían que intentar inventar, que sabían qué… ah… apariencia tenían las formas, el, ejem… El discípulo no está por encima de su maestro, pero todo el que sea perfecto será como su maestro.

—¿Quién dijo eso? —preguntó tras una pausa, los ojos todavía clavados en él.

—Sí, san Lucas. Era el patrón de los pintores.

—¿Era?

—Bueno, supongo que lo sigue siendo, ¿no?

Otto cerró el libro y se puso en pie, buscando un sitio para dejarlo.

—¿Eso es todo? —preguntó ella finalmente.

—¿Todo qué?

—Sobre los pintores flamencos.

—Bueno, Esther, a mí me gustan, y la… quiero decir, la disciplina, la atención al detalle, las conciencias separadas en esos cuadros, esa especie de… Supongo que es tanto la fuerza como el defecto de esos cuadros, la minuciosidad con que recrean la atmósfera y la… quiero decir, un pintor como Memling, que no se entretiene mucho en sugerencias e inferencias, sino que acumula perfección capa a capa. Pero bueno, es como un escritor que no puede evitar dedicar tanta atención a un momento como a una hora.

—Otto…

Se levantó y se acercó a él.

—Pero Dios dedica tanto tiempo a un momento como a una hora —dijo Otto precipitadamente, como defendiéndose o defendiendo a alguien muy cercano.

Ella se detuvo ante él, mirándolo a la cara con aire lastimero.

—Esther…

—¿Tienes un cigarrillo? —preguntó, retrocediendo un paso.

Lo buscó torpemente y se lo dio, se lo encendió y luego volvió a sacar el paquete y cogió otro para él.

—Oye, Esther, ¿algo va mal? —preguntó, mientras ella se sentaba en el sofá y empezaba a volver las páginas de un libro sin mirar el texto.

—Nada, sólo que… no sé —dijo, y empezó a mirar las páginas, recorriendo las líneas con el pulgar como si buscara allí una respuesta. Él se inclinó sobre ella, exhalando humo como si el cigarrillo fuese una ocupación en sí misma, hasta que ella dijo—: Aquí hay un pasaje precioso, es una cosa de Katherine Mansfield, una reseña que escribió. —Lo sostuvo en alto y él lo cogió como si también fuera a encontrar allí una solución—. Es una pena, una cosa tan preciosa escondida en una vieja reseña.

—Sí —dijo codiciosamente, y lo volvió a leer.

Sacó el lápiz. Ella vio el libro en su bolsillo y le preguntó qué era.

—Spinoza —contestó Otto, sacándolo—. Me alegro de que me lo bayas recordado, me lo prestó hace tiempo, y acaba de pedirme que lo deje aquí.

Esther volvió las páginas.

—¿Te lo has leído entero?

—Bueno, entero no, en realidad. Estuvimos hablando una vez sobre la esencia, y él…

—¿Sobre qué?

—La esencia, lo que la cosa es, la cosa en sí, y él dijo que Kant dice que nunca podemos conocer…

—¿Es lo único de lo que habláis? De la esencia, los filósofos…

—Pero Esther…

—¿No te habla de sí mismo?

—Bueno, en cierto modo siempre está hablando de sí mismo, pero él, ya sabes, por ejemplo cuando dijo: «Pero ¿no estamos todos intentando ver en la oscuridad?». Quiero decir… ya sabes.

—Ya sé —dijo ella, contemplándose las manos—. Pero debe de decir algo de mí, ¿no?

Otto se quedó mirando su pelo, sus hombros y la curva de carne de su cuello. Se echó a reír, un sonido débil, nervioso y confidencial; y cuando habló, su voz reveló una despreocupación más forzada que antes.

—En realidad, hoy ha dicho que a veces se sentía como el homúnculo que hizo, ah, lo he olvidado, el dios del fuego griego, y que luego criticó, ejem, otro dios porque no le había puesto una ventanita por donde pudieran ver sus pensamientos secretos. —Ella no se movió, y como siguió callada, Otto repitió su risita nerviosa—. Quiero decir, no quería decir nada, ya sabes… ¿Qué?

—Ya sé —repitió ella con un susurro.

—No quería decir…

—¿Tú sabes lo que es esto?

—Lo que…

—¿Tú sabes lo que es esto? Vivir con alguien como él, vivir con él, ¿sabes lo que es esto? ¿Sabes lo que es esto, ser una mujer y vivir con él?

—Pero Esther…

—Entrar en la habitación y verlo mirando fijamente, sin parpadear, sólo mirando fijamente, no con una mirada de loco, sino sólo mirando, ahí sentado. Anoche estaba ahí sentado, de ese modo, y la música de la radio, aún me parece oír la voz del locutor después, porque fue un verdadero alivio, era la Suite número uno en do mayor de Bach, y después lo único que dijo fue «qué precisión». «Qué precisión».

—Pero es verdad, es…

Otto se dejó caer a su lado en el sofá.

—Sí, pero no es humano… —Otto puso una mano sobre la suya—. No es forma de vivir —dijo ella en el mismo tono apagado, su mano inmóvil bajo la suya—. No es… ¿es extraño que le zumben los oídos? ¿Es extraño ese sueño suyo, ese maldito sueño que tiene? Que después de una hora de silencio diga: «Lo único que no puedo soportar es la humedad…». Eso es todo, tardó una hora en descubrir eso. ¿Extraño que pueda beberse medio litro de coñac y estar exactamente igual que antes? No pasa nada. No pasa nada, salvo que parpadea menos aún. Sí, un… hombre de doble obra, siembro mi campo sin simiente…

—Esther, no debes ponerte tan…

—«Cuando la simiente empezó a estallar / Fue como un jardín lleno de nieve».

—Mira, no durará —dijo, cogiéndole las dos manos—. No puede seguir así, de ese modo.

—Lo sé —dijo, moviendo las manos en las suyas—. Durmiendo, agarrándose la garganta con las dos manos. Así lo encontré cuando me levanté la otra noche, durmiendo boca abajo con las manos en la garganta. Se las separé, y cuando volví, cuando volví del cuarto de baño, estaba igual otra vez. O salta de la cama en plena noche, descalzo, y vuelve murmurando algo en griego, disculpándose, había ido a buscar la palabra acusativo. No, no, ¿discutir? Ni siquiera podemos discutir, se mete en su estudio y termina la discusión a solas, lo oigo detrás de la puerta, contestándome. «Maldito sea todo este asunto, estas formas y olores», lo oí decir una noche, «y una esposa», dijo, «temblando ante todo lo que no ocurre, gimiendo por todo lo que nunca perderemos. ¿Se conocen realmente el uno al otro, se dan realmente algo el uno al otro? ¿O lo único que pueden compartir es esta… misma conspiración contra la realidad que intentan compartir conmigo?».

—Y… luego, ¿qué? —preguntó Otto cuando hizo una pausa, y sus manos se quedaron quietas.

—Dijo: «Puedes cambiar una línea sin tocarla». —Guardó silencio hasta que Otto hizo ademán de interrumpirla, y luego—: «¿Se sorprende?», lo oí decir. «Por qué, tengo que decirle por qué, Dios santo, ¿es que siempre tengo que utilizar palabras cuando hablo con ella? ¿Se sorprende al verme cuando entra, cuando se despierta por la mañana y me ve aquí? Nunca se ha sorprendido». En todas partes —dijo Esther, alzando lentamente la vista—, en todo —mientras sus ojos descubrían una revista satinada en la mesa baja —, hasta en eso. En esa revista hay una historia sobre una chica que viaja a España durante la Semana Santa, y se encuentra con la madre de un hombre del que estuvo enamorada; luego, una noche, después de ver una de esas procesiones religiosas con la Virgen pasando bañada en lágrimas, encuentra a su antiguo amante con su mujer, la chica que se lo quitó, y la perdona.

—Sí, pero eso suena…

—Pero lo único que se le ocurrió decir fue: «Qué… qué asqueroso sentimentalismo», todavía me parece oír su voz. «Qué vulgarización de algo tan tremendo como la Pasión, eso es lo que pasa con las grandes emociones, ésa es la forma en que se corrompen, rebajándolas al nivel más ínfimo, donde las emociones son baratas e intercambiables. ¿Ha habido alguna vez en la historia algo tan exquisitamente íntimo como la Virgen llorando la muerte de su Hijo?».

—Pero Esther, ¿no entiendes eso? ¿No te das cuenta de que es así… de que nos están corrompiendo a todos, por medio de…?

—¿No sabes que lo quiero? —gritó—. ¿No se te ha ocurrido que no hay nada más… exquisitamente íntimo que… eso para mí?

Otto se encontró con su cabeza en su regazo, y bajando la mirada hacia ella, le acarició el pelo.

—Esther —susurró—, Esther…

—Oírlo decir —empezó otra vez, incorporándose de repente—, si algo, si yo… si hablamos sobre tener niños, y ver cómo se sorprende, y luego… una vez, una vez dijo: «Una hija, ¿una hija?», dijo, «¡una hija!», y dijo… no recuerdo, y luego desapareció, el asunto del que estábamos hablando desapareció sin más, se… Estudió para cura. ¿Sabías eso? Para pastor, ¿te lo ha dicho alguna vez? Él, y entonces, es lo que yo digo, digo eso y le pregunto: «¿Entonces por qué no lo eres? ¡Por qué no eres cura, si lo eres!», porque, porque quiero que él… quiero que él…

—Esther…

Otto alargó las manos para abrazarla, pero ella se echó hacia atrás.

—Y luego, como si fuese la cosa más natural del mundo, dice: «Porque debería rebe… en ese caso debería creer en la redención, debería creer que soy el hombre por quien murió Cristo».

Otto sacó un cigarrillo. Lo encendió y, quitándoselo rápidamente de los labios, dijo:

—Lo siento.

Si no la oía con una blasfemia, la palabra «Cristo» lo turbaba. Ella se lo cogió de los dedos extendidos.

—No tienes por qué disculparte —dijo—. Al menos podrías fingir que lo has encendido para mí.

Otto sonrió y se inclinó hacia ella. Pero su sonrisa hizo de pronto menos real la de ella, menos sonrisa mientras se apagaba su vivacidad y la sonrisa quedaba fija en sus labios; luego sus labios volvieron a abrirse y desapareció. Esther se levantó y se alejó fumando, y él sacó otro cigarrillo.

—Para una mujer —dijo ella—, ¿crees que es fácil para una mujer? —Estaba vuelta hacia la puerta entreabierta del estudio—. ¡La realidad! Habla de la realidad, la desesperación. ¿No se le ocurre que yo me desespero? «Las mujeres se desesperan, pero no entienden la desesperación. La desesperación como punto de partida», me dijo. Y eso. Y eso. —Se volvió bruscamente hacia Otto, que puso una expresión incómoda y se llevó el cigarrillo a los labios con la misma brusquedad. El suyo pendía olvidado de su mano, corriéndole el humo muñeca arriba—. Simplemente ser una mujer, ¿sabes por lo que tiene que pasar una mujer? No lo sabes, pero ¿lo sabes? ¿Te lo puedes imaginar? Simplemente intentar que las cosas sigan adelante, simplemente… Un hombre puede hacer lo que le dé la gana. ¡Oh, sí, un hombre! Pero una mujer ni siquiera puede entrar sola en un bar, no puede levantarse y dejarlo todo sin más, comprar un pasaje de barco y marcharse a París si quiere, no puede…

—¿Por qué no? —preguntó Otto, poniéndose en pie.

—Porque no puede, porque la sociedad… y además, físicamente, ¿crees que es fácil ser una mujer?

—No, no, no lo creo.

Otto dio un paso hacia atrás, como amenazado con ello.

—¿Y sabes lo peor? —siguió ella—. ¿Sabes lo más duro de todo? La espera. Una mujer siempre está esperando. Siempre… está esperando.

Dio un paso hacia ella, cuando Esther se alejaba hacia la puerta del estudio.

—¿Recuerdas una vez, cuando acabábamos de conocernos? —preguntó—, habías salido con… él, y habíais visto un cuadro, el retrato de una dama; dijiste que era muy bonito, una mujer que miraba más allá de ti, con las manos cruzadas delante como para excluirte, sostenía un anillo…

—Sí, lo recuerdo —dijo, aliviado por la calma de su voz—. Un… ejem, Lorenzo di Credi, aunque dijo que como pintura…

—¿Quieres ver el retrato de su madre? —preguntó perentoriamente.

—Recuerdo que dijo que aquel cuadro le recordaba a su madre, en las manos o algo así.

—¿Quieres verlo? —lo retó—. Sí, debió de ser una mujer muy guapa.

—¿De verdad? Quiero decir, ¿hay un retrato suyo?

Esther se quedó con la mano en el tirador de la puerta, pero no la movió.

—Tiene uno que empezó hace quince años. Está colgado ahí dentro —añadió en voz baja.

—Bueno… —Otto retrocedió—. No te molestes, no es importante.

—¡Que no es importante! No puede pintarme a mí, por culpa de ella no podemos ir a España, porque ella está allí. —Se volvió hacia el umbral oscuro—. Por la noche, noche tras noche trabaja ahí dentro. ¿Trabaja? —repitió—. Está ahí dentro, noche tras noche. Esa música, noche tras noche. —Miró dentro—. Y oírlo: «¡Maldita seas! ¡Maldita seas!». Oh, dijo que hablando solo. Sí. Está ahí dentro ahora.

Otto se le acercó por detrás y la agarró por los hombros.

—Esther —dijo, sujetándola. Entonces ella tosió, porque tenía su cigarrillo junto a la cara—. Yo también trabajo de noche —dijo, tratando de recuperarla razonablemente.

—Es ese chiflado secretismo calvinista, el pecado…

—No es tanto el secretismo, Esther, la oscuridad en todas partes, como lo tardío de la hora. Quiero decir, que yo me acostumbro a mí mismo por la noche, a veces hace falta todo ese tiempo. A primera hora de la mañana me siento como indefinido, pero a medianoche ya has hecho todo lo que tienes que hacer, quiero decir, todas esas cosas como ver a la gente y, ya sabes, y pagar cuentas, y por la noche esas cosas están hechas porque si no están hechas para entonces no puedes hacer nada por ellas, de modo que estás a solas y tienes las cosas que importan, al final del día puedes volver sobre todo lo que ha ocurrido y repasarlo a solas. Quiero decir, que nunca estoy realmente seguro de quién soy hasta por la noche —añadió.

—¡A solas!

Se movió lo suficiente para que la soltara.

—Ese olor tan curioso —dijo él, quedándose allí parado con aire indeciso, y luego dio un paso para entrar en el estudio, como si la hubiera soltado por su propia voluntad, vio un papel en el suelo y lo recogió, como si aquello fuera lo que había estado buscando durante todo el rato—. Y quiero decir, cosas como esta —dijo sosteniéndolo en alto—, esta especie de diagramas y caracteres mágicos y las cosas que hace…

—Eso —dijo ella mirándolo— no es más que un estudio de perspectiva.

—Sí, pero, cuando miras esto, ¿no se te ocurren cosas como…?

—No es nada, no es más que un estudio de perspectiva. La *x* minúscula es el punto de fuga.

—Sí, pero quiero decir, hoy estábamos hablando sobre la alquimia, y los misterios que, sobre la redención de la materia, y que no se trataba sólo de hacer oro, de intentar hacer verdadero oro, sino que la materia… La materia, dijo que la materia era un lujo, que era nuestro gran lujo, y que la materia, quiero decir, la redención…

Lo hizo girar en redondo.

—¡La redención!

—Esther… —Ella le había echado los brazos al cuello. La cogió de la cintura, tan deprisa que apartó el pulgar, que había tocado su pecho, y se quedó con las manos paralizadas, sin atreverse a posarlo de nuevo —. Ese olor tan curioso… —murmuró un momento después.

—Es lavanda —le dijo. Luego preguntó—: ¿Y tú, tú también quieres estar solo?

La miró a la cara, que tenía muy cerca, quizá demasiado cerca para que ella pudiera apreciar el leve alzamiento de su ceja y la cortesía complementaria de su vaga sonrisa.

—Es bastante difícil despojarnos de nuestra naturaleza humana —dijo. Ella se apartó de él, y se quedó mirándolo desde el centro de la habitación—. Esther, ¿qué pasa?

—¡Eso también, eso también lo has sacado de él! ¿No?

—Bueno, yo… más o menos, quiero decir…

—¿Qué? Sigue.

—Bueno, estábamos hablando de un filósofo —dijo Otto con aire desvalido—, Pirrón, Pirrón de Elis, que decía que una condición era tan buena como cualquier otra, y un día sus discípulos lo encontraron subido a un árbol, acosado por un perro, y dijo eso: «Es difícil despojarnos de nuestra naturaleza humana».

Lo dejó terminar, y luego dijo:

—No hace falta que repitas todas esas cosas para impresionarme, Otto, se las he oído todas a él.

—Pero…

—Sobre la pintura flamenca, y el rigor del sufrimiento, que Dios dedica tanta atención a un momento como a una hora, se lo he oído decir todo a él. —Se interrumpió, mirando hacia Otto, y luego dijo—: ¿Sabes lo que me preguntó una vez, cuando acabábamos de conocerte?

—¿Qué? —preguntó Otto, acercándose a ella.

—Me preguntó si creía que eras homosexual.

Otto se detuvo.

—Pero… ¿qué? Qué le… ¿y qué dijiste tú?

—Dije que no lo sabía, que tal vez lo fueras.

—Pero Esther, por qué diría él, quiero decir tú, tú no, tú no crees eso, ¿verdad? Quiero decir, ¿por qué ibas a creer…?

Se detuvo ante ella, junto al sofá.

—Nunca has intentado besarme —dijo ella.

—Pero yo, él… quiero decir Esther, Esther. Te quiero, Esther. —Con esto, Otto inició un silencio que él mismo rompió minutos después—. Esther, no podemos, quiero decir que no… ¿Y si aparece de pronto?

Ella echó la cabeza hacia atrás, apoyándola en el brazo del sofá, y se lo quedó mirando.

—¿Y si aparece, qué? —dijo.

Más tarde, aquella noche, Gordon estaba plantado a la entrada de una casa de campo, a punto de hablar. (En realidad, Gordon llevaba ya cerca de una semana manteniendo abierta aquella puerta de rejilla, esforzándose, mientras daba forma al aire con una mano, por conquistar a Priscilla con alguna dolorida profundidad). De repente, con un tecleo impetuoso de la máquina de escribir, habló. «GORDON: El sufrimiento, mi querida Priscilla, es un lujo mezquino de la gente mediocre. Ya descubrirás que la felicidad es un estado mucho más noble e infinitamente más refinado». Priscilla sollozó, y alguien golpeó en el suelo desde el piso de abajo, advirtiendo a Gordon que ya había dicho suficiente. No obstante, era poco probable que Gordon fuera a seguir disertando aquella noche. Gordon había recuperado de golpe su antigua seguridad, así como su antigua estatura. Había adquirido nuevos hábitos (podía, por ejemplo, trasegar medio litro de coñac sin que se le notara), pero, pese a todas sus intenciones y propósitos corteses, seguía diciendo sus profundidades con el mismo ingenio mordaz y detestable que antes, soltándolas con su antigua desenvoltura, como seguía vistiendo con su antigua elegancia. Y lo que es más: Gordon había descubierto el Arte.

La puerta de rejilla se cerró ~~de un golpe~~ tras él, y Otto se levantó a mirarse en el espejo. Luego le cambió la expresión, mientras apartaba los ojos de su reflejo, y cogiendo precipitadamente un lápiz garabateó: «Ds dedca tnta atción momto cmo hra; ¿q sigfca?».

Zósimo, Alberto Magno, Geber, Bernardo Trevisano, Basilio Valentino, Ramón Llul, Khalid benYezid, Hermes Trismegisto, ¿han sido superados por nuestros logros? Pues hoy día (a un precio de coste de
10 000
dólares la onza) se puede transmutar metal ordinario en oro.

Para Otto, el alquimista era probablemente un hombre sencillo de cierta edad que participaba en una apestosa alucinación ante un hornillo de atanor, intentando alterar el origen de los absolutos, tal como pintan a Bernardo de Tréveris y un franciscano anónimo en el siglo XV buscando el disolvente universal con una mezcla de mercurio, sal, plomo fundido y excremento humano. Otto era lo bastante joven como para encontrar respuestas antes de habérselas arreglado siquiera para formular las preguntas; sin embargo, si alguien lo hubiera detenido en aquel preciso instante, mientras subía apresuradamente por Madison Avenue, y le hubiera preguntado en qué estaba pensando, Otto (para quien el pensamiento consistía en una serie de imágenes que nadaban libremente y de cuando en cuando se sumergían y salían a la superficie juntas) habría contestado sin vacilar: «¡En la alquimia!». Es cierto que, como cualquiera, jamás había visto un ejemplar de la *Chemá*, aquel libro en el que los ángeles caídos transcribieron los secretos de sus artes que habían enseñado a las mujeres con las que se casaron. Tan turbado por la mención de Cristo como encantado por la imagen del oro, lo único que le impedía despachar la alquimia como la madre chapucera de la química moderna (pues unas gafas de plástico o una camisa blanca hecha con derivados de alquitrán mineral resultaban, obviamente, más extraordinarias y desde luego más útiles que cualquier hallazgo de Bernardo Trevisano) era precisamente esta imagen del oro. Le venía a la cabeza acuñada en monedas o pesados lingotes, o en forma de polvo exquisito, para transformarse en aquel atareado taller en menos de lo que se tarda en contarlo (pues más que una manufactura era una cadena de montaje) en gemelos, pitilleras y otros artículos fabricados en serie del mundo en que vivía, recuerdos de aquel mundo en el que las cosas dignas de ser se cambiaban tan fácilmente por cosas dignas de ser poseídas. Sepultados en soledad, tan solos como habían estado en vida, estaban los accidentes de Bernardo y su socio franciscano; y sepultado estaba Michael Majer, que había visto en el oro la imagen del sol, reflejada en la tierra por sus incontables revoluciones, entonces, cuando todavía podía tomarse al sol por la imagen de Dios.

Todo esto podía haberse interpuesto en el camino de la revelación progresiva, esa doctrina que considera al hombre incapaz de recibir la Verdad de golpe, y sólo se la ofrece en una serie de fragmentos

deformados, cualesquiera de los cuales, esgrimido por sí solo, puede ser refutado por alguien incapaz de admitir que a fin de cuentas persigue lo mismo. Así, el buen dominico Alberto Magno decía que había analizado oro hecho por alquimistas y descubierto que no resistía siete exposiciones al fuego; al referir la increíble historia de aquellos hombres no abandonó los senderos apenas menos extraordinarios de la suya, sino que aportó un libro sobre el cuidado de las parturientas, poniendo tanta atención en un caso como en el otro para abjurar del accidente (pues su preocupación no era el sufrimiento o la posible muerte de la mujer, sino mantener con vida al niño el tiempo suficiente para que fuera bautizado). Pero la época de la ilustración dejó muy atrás a aquellos hombres solitarios, para que discutieran en la oscuridad sobre los destellos de luz que habían captado, y a los que se habían aferrado con tan sofocante deseo.

Antihistamina, estreptomicina, penicilina y 606: pocos pueden poner en duda que Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim («más conocido como Paracelso») tenía razón. Fue Paracelso quien surgió del siglo XV (castrado por un cerdo, según decían, en su niñez) para proclamar que el objeto de la alquimia no era en modo alguno la transmutación de metales ordinarios en oro, sino la preparación de medicinas, abriendo así el camino de la perpetuación hospitalizada del accidente que triunfalmente prolongamos, glosamos, financiamos, respetamos y disfrutamos hoy. Dihidrocloruro de
3,3
'-diamino-
4,4
' -dihidroxiarsenobenceno, escribe el doctor Ehrlich (después de 605 ensayos), descartando así que la sífilis fuera un castigo por ese placer que, en su perenne variedad, había permitido hasta entonces la gratificación que sólo puede proporcionar el pecado. Porque a diferencia de la revelación progresiva, la ilustración del materialismo total estalló con tal vigor que apenas hubo suficientes manos para recoger los añicos. Hasta Paracelso quedó atrás (muerto por heridas recibidas en una reyerta de borrachos); y una vez se hubo consolidado la química como legítimo hijo y heredero, se echó a la calle a la alquimia como a un padre borracho, que se alejó tambaleándose, farfullando sus fantasías a oídos cada vez más escasos, a desechos de soledad cada vez menos imponentes, mientras el hijo crecía serio, todo digno y sumamente satisfecho de sus propias limitaciones, tolerando aquella memoria paterna pero sin dudar un instante de que había encontrado lo que el viejo tonto y sus compinches andaban buscando durante todo el tiempo.

Por eso a Otto le costó cierto esfuerzo apartar los ojos del cubo de oro del escaparate de Madison Avenue, un cubo capaz de producir una llama al ser apretado con el pulgar, quizá no el *ignis noster* de los alquimistas, pero sí una llama lo bastante competente como para encender un cigarrillo. Miró su reloj de muñeca de acero inoxidable y echó a andar a buen paso. Estaba acostumbrado a tener citas, siempre concertadas a horas o medias horas en punto, señaladas, mientras se apresuraba para acudir a ellas, por su reloj; por eso lo miró ahora, como si pudiera así confirmar una cita que no tenía. No reparó en la hora, volvió a mirar, y estuvo a punto de tropezar con Esther, que salía del portal. Era a media tarde.

—¡Otto!

—¿Sales justo ahora?

—Sí, pero volveré dentro de una hora o así. ¿Quieres esperar?

—¿Está arriba?

—Está dormido. No llegó hasta la madrugada.

—¿Está…? Quiero decir, ¿va todo bien?

—Sí. Supongo que sí. Toma, coge la llave y sube, puedes entrar sin despertarlo. Tengo que salir pitando.

Otto entró y cerró la puerta sin hacer ruido antes de oír nada; aun entonces apenas pudo distinguir las palabras. Se quedó parado mirando incómodamente a su alrededor, mirando hacia la puerta entreabierta del estudio y apartando la vista. «Como los ojos en los pétalos de la flor que sostiene santa Lucía en aquel cuadro de Ferrara…», oyó con bastante claridad, y miró su reloj. Volvió a levantar la vista hacia la puerta entreabierta. «Como el búho hinchado… mirando a san Jerónimo…».

Otto se volvió para irse, pero apenas había dado un paso cuando la puerta del estudio se cerró de golpe a su espalda. «Ese maldito agujero en la pared», oyó, y se volvió.

—Oh, acabo… quiero decir que acabo de…

—No te he oído entrar.

—Lo siento, quiero decir… acabo de entrar ahora mismo.

—Yo voy… iba a salir ahora mismo. A dar un paseo, iba a salir a dar un paseo.

—Va a… bueno, quiero decir que vengo de la calle y parece que va a llover.

—Sí. Bueno… quédate y lee, si quieres. Ahí hay algunos… libros —dijo señalando—. Toma. Lees francés, ¿no?

—Pues… pues sí —dijo Otto—, por supuesto, yo…

—Toma. Coge éste. Quédatelo. Léelo.

Lo sacó como por ensalmo, un librito cuyo lomo tenía marcadas dos dobleces, encuadernado en piel fina desgastada en los bordes, por donde asomaba el cartón, piel verde oliva casi enteramente cubierta de volutas y flores de lis estampadas en oro.

—*Adolphe* —leyó Otto en la cubierta—. No creo haber…

—Es una novela —dijo—, es una buena novela. Léela.

—Bueno, gracias, yo…

—Ahora… me voy a dar ese paseo.

—¿Te importa que vaya contigo? —preguntó Otto.

No había parecido sorprenderse cuando vio a Otto, pero ahora sí. Se quedó parado, con las manos caídas a los costados, abriéndose y cerrándose sobre nada.

—No quiero… quiero decir que no querría… bueno, ya sabes, no… —Otto se guardó *Adolphe* en la chaqueta mientras hablaba—. No…

—Bueno, entonces vamos.

Mientras caminaban hacia el parque, Otto dijo:

—Pareces cansado.

—¿Cansado?

Otto se volvió a mirarlo, como si su respuesta lo invitara a hacerlo, o se lo permitiera, ya que durante dos manzanas había estado mirándolo con el rabillo del ojo, esperando algún cambio en la cara que tenía al lado, aunque incluso ahora, mientras aquella única palabra salía de sus labios, volvió a adoptar la expresión de absorta vacuidad que no había perdido ni siquiera con la interrupción de la sorpresa, una perentoria confusión que durante aquel instante había parecido vaciarla más aún.

—Sí —dijo Otto—, ya sé. Quiero decir que cuando estoy metido de ese modo en mi trabajo, quiero decir, encerrado, trabajando en esa obra, se vuelve… quiero decir me vuelvo… quiero decir que al cabo de un rato parece que no suena bien.

—Sí, sí. Supongo que no.

Aunque el tono de su respuesta era distraído, Otto se sintió animado a seguir, apartando la vista en aquel preciso instante de algo que nunca olvidaría, un detalle, se diría más tarde, sin ningún significado ni importancia; y aun así Otto lo recordaría con aquella cara nada sorprendida, el labio inferior fruncido, enseñando los dientes inferiores, mientras él hablaba y dejaba de hablar.

—Quiero decir que intentar que todo encaje en el lugar adecuado, cuando hay tantas cosas que… bueno, ya sabes lo que quiero decir, quiero decir que ya me has hablado de esas cosas, pero… bueno, realmente me has enseñado mucho.

—¿Yo?

—Sí, pero quiero decir que saber tanto como tú debe ser… quiero decir que ahora puedes ya hacer realmente lo que quieras, quiero decir, ya no te sientes como totalmente cercado por las partes de las que no sabes nada, como yo. —Otto dejó de hablar y esperó ansiosamente una respuesta; no hubo ninguna, sino un sonido que daba a entender que no hacía falta que repitiese lo que había dicho. Siguieron andando en silencio, pero cualquier silencio era una situación difícil para Otto, sobre todo cuando estaba con otra persona parecía una presencia antinatural que había que atacar y romper en pedazos, o al menos sacudir hasta que sonara. Finalmente dijo—: Me preguntaba si, quiero decir, ¿estás ahora de vacaciones? ¿O sólo te estás tomando algún tiempo libre?

—¿De qué?

—Bueno, quiero decir, de tu trabajo, los planos…

—Oh, eso. Eso. Ya he dejado eso.

—¿De verdad? Eso es estupendo. Quiero decir, lo es, ¿no? Por lo que dice Esther, ahora podrás… dedicarte a lo que quieres.

Siguieron andando, atentos sólo a los charcos, los bordillos y las brillantes placas de hielo. Antes de que llegaran a la manzana de la que habían partido, Otto había mirado la hora media docena de veces, y sólo había arrancado una respuesta a la que dio vueltas en la cabeza, no para tratar de entenderla inmediatamente, considerándola cara a cara, por sí misma, ni para entender la fuente de la que procedía, sino para encajarla en los labios de Gordon, de donde algún día, aunque no lo sabía, ni lo planeaba, la tomaría para sí. Mientras caminaban imaginó a Gordon en una escena tras otra, diciendo a uno tras otro de los personajes que sólo se distinguían por el sexo: «Y si no puedo enseñar a nadie a ser mejor, entonces ¿qué he aprendido?».

—Parece como si esa perra nos fuera siguiendo —dijo Otto, mirando hacia atrás. Chasqueó los dedos. La caniche negra se alejó de un salto—. Quiero decir que no suelen verse perras como ésa sueltas por la calle. —Otto alzó la vista. Era la primera vez que su acompañante había mostrado algún interés por algo que no fuera el suelo que tenían ante sí—. Quiero decir que alguien ha debido perderla.

—Sí, es rara. Corriendo en círculo a nuestro alrededor, acercándose un poco más cada vez.

—Probablemente anda buscando a su dueño, y lo único que ve es a dos desconocidos —dijo Otto—. Pero con todo lo acicalada que va, con ese peinado de lujo y ese collar rojo, mírala, no es más que una perra como cualquier otra, agazapándose sobre el vientre.

—Ven. Ven aquí.

—Aunque he oído que son terriblemente listos.

La perra había vuelto a alejarse. Pero cuando terminaron de subir las escaleras se encontraron al volverse con aquella caniche negra, que los había seguido.

Cuando entraron, Esther se estaba poniendo el sombrero.

—¿Qué… dónde habéis…? —dijo mientras la perra pasaba a su lado, entrando como si conociera la casa mejor y tuviera más derecho a estar allí que ella.

—Creía que estarías a punto de volver —le dijo Otto.

—Y acabo de volver, pero los Bildows acaban de llamar para invitarnos a tomar una copa. ¿Quieres venir?

—Bueno, sí, quiero decir, si…

—Bueno, desde luego *él* no va a venir —dijo ella jovialmente—. Nunca le perdonará a ella que intentara besarlo la noche de Fin de Año.

Ambos se volvieron para incluirlo en ello, pero ya se había metido en el estudio, donde se le oía poniendo en marcha el tocadiscos.

—Esther, yo…

—Él…

—Sólo tardaré un minuto —dijo ella, yendo hacia el dormitorio.

Otto se quedó parado, mirándose las uñas. Luego miró la hora, y la música irrumpió en el cuarto.

—¿Qué es eso? —preguntó, acercándose a la puerta del estudio.

—¿Esto? Una cosa de Haendel, un oratorio. *Judas Macabeo.*

—Oh. Es… es espléndido, ¿verdad? —siguió Otto, incapaz de mostrar su aprecio escuchando. «He aquí el conquistador», cantaba el bajo.

—Siempre parece una pena cuando tienen que traducir estas cosas. Quiero decir, que debe sonar mucho más impresionante en el original.

—¿El *original?*

—Quiero decir… en alemán —dijo mientras entraba Esther, vaciando sin examinarlo el revoltijo de un bolso en otro.

Se le cayó un lápiz de labios. Cuando se inclinó a recogerlo, la falda se le ciñó estrechamente a la larga línea del muslo. Había empezado a oscurecer. La caniche los miraba sin interés.

—Por favor, no dejes que el perro revuelva la casa.

—Adiós, yo…

—Adiós.

En el primer descansillo de la escalera, Esther revolvió en su bolso y sacó un trozo de papel.

—¿Puedes leerlo? —Se lo tendió—. Es su dirección, nunca la recuerdo.

—¿Qué es esto?

—No. En la otra cara. Dios sabe lo que es, algo suyo.

—La ecuación de x_n más y_n no tiene ninguna solución significativa en números enteros cuando n es mayor que 2.

—En la otra cara. —Abrió la puerta del portal.

—Está tan… raro últimamente, Esther —dijo Otto alcanzándola—. Apenas puede uno… quiero decir que durante todo el paseo no he podido sacarle una palabra.

—Apenas lo reconozco últimamente. Es curioso. —Alzó la vista hacia Otto mientras andaban—. Sabes, los dos tenéis algo en común.

—Sí, pero… con su talento…

—Con su talento y tu ambición —dijo cogiendo a Otto del brazo, y desviando la mirada demasiado pronto para ver la expresión que provocó en su cara—, tendría un hombre de lo más notable.

La caniche, tumbada en el suelo con las patas delanteras extendidas, contempló cómo se bebía de un trago una copa de coñac.

—¡El original! Dios santo, ¿cómo puede seguir confiando en su cabeza alguien que se aferra a esas sandeces? —Se acercó a la ventana y se detuvo ante ella, dando la espalda a la habitación. Fuera había empezado a llover. La habitación estaba caldeada, el agua golpeaba ruidosamente contra el cristal. A medida que pasaban los minutos, el lugar tomaba el aspecto de cualquier habitación tranquila en una lluviosa tarde invernal, separada de todo lo que permiten el sol y las ventanas abiertas, y hasta la música parecía allí un amplio accesorio que servía para ordenar el silencio, más que para romperlo, creando la impresión de que la habitación no volvería a formar parte del mundo hasta que no hubiera albergado una cita amorosa—. Un chico frágil como una idea preconcebida, supongo que debería estarle agradecido, debería estarle agradecido por librarme de esa maldita sensación que…

La perra estiró las patas delanteras, y clavando las uñas en el suelo se acercó a él, con la cabeza ligeramente ladeada mientras escuchaba. Él se volvió, y se quedaron mirando fijamente el uno al otro, el hombre y la perra: y la perra vio un hombre cuyo aspecto no tenía nada de extraordinario, aunque vestido de tal modo que confirmaba el hecho de que aparentaba varios años más de los que tenía. La perra levantó los cuartos delanteros y se sentó, sin apartar la vista de él, observando cómo cruzaba la habitación y bajaba el volumen del tocadiscos hasta que resultó casi inaudible. Se quedó un momento allí, y luego cogió un libro. Al abrirlo cayó un trozo de papel, que cogió entre los dedos. Mientras se sentaba a leer, los ojos de la perra volvieron a cruzarse con los suyos, y ambos se contemplaron mutuamente de soslayo; él como para reprobar la presencia de la perra, la caniche negra para insinuar que el libro era una distracción en la que no valía la pena fijarse.

«El primer descubrimiento», era un relato del oráculo de Delfos, «según cuentan, lo provocaron unas cabras que estaban pastando en el monte Parnaso, cerca de una caverna amplia y profunda con una entrada angosta. Al observar el cabrero, Coretas, que las cabras brincaban y retozaban de un modo extraño, y prorrumpían en ruidos poco comunes nada más acercarse a la boca de la caverna, sintió curiosidad por examinarla, y se vio arrebatado por un ataque de locura semejante, brincando, bailando y prediciendo cosas venideras…».

—¡Maldita seas! —exclamó mientras la perra ladraba—. Si tengo que compartir esta habitación contigo —empezó, bajando el tono, aunque el negro animal no parecía en absoluto molesto por su maldición—. Maldita seas —repitió, confirmándola con más calma, y tiró el libro al suelo—, brincando, bailando y prediciendo cosas venideras… —Se levantó y se sirvió otra copa de coñac. La perra observó cómo miraba a su alrededor. La música seguía sonando, y de pronto cruzó la habitación para detenerla, de un modo tan repentino que la perra retrocedió como preparándose para saltar a su espalda. Se quedó junto al silencioso tocadiscos, mirando el trozo de papel que tenía entre los dedos—.

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—leyó, copiado con una fina letra semigótica italiana que en tiempos había ensayado. Ante él, en la pared y a la vista desde la otra habitación, donde estaba sentada la perra en actitud recelosa, colgaba el sucio esbozo sobre gesso de Camilla. Se lo quedó mirando; luego algo se movió. Se volvió en redondo. Era el reflejo de la perra en el espejo. Pero la perra estaba inmóvil, sentada junto a la puerta—. Maldita seas —le dijo directamente a la cara—, ¿qué es lo que tienes, o no tienes, que estás ahí sentada, completamente autosuficiente, que puedes sentarte y saber… y saber exactamente dónde tienes las patas? Sí, eso es lo que hace increíbles a los gatos, porque uno sabe que son conscientes en cada instante de dónde tienen las patas, y saben cuánto tienen que compartir con los demás gatos, no tratan de… fingir… —Salió murmurando, y se bebió de un trago la tercera copa mirando la lluvia por la ventana. La caniche negra lo había seguido y estaba sentada bastante cerca de él, con los ojos clavados en su nunca. No se había dado cuenta, y al volverse se le cayó la copa y se rompió en el suelo entre ambos. La perra no se movió—. ¿Qué haces aquí? —le espetó—. ¿Qué es lo que quieres? ¿Qué estás… qué quieres de mí?

Se tambaleó un poco, se enjugó la mejilla con la mano y descubrió que estaba sudando a chorros. Entonces volvió a enjugarse bruscamente la mejilla. La perra observó cómo dejaba caer la mano lentamente, clavó sus ojos en los suyos y no se movió.

—¡Muévete! —ordenó—. ¡Apártate de mi camino, apártate! —La perra siguió sentada con la copa rota a los pies, con la vista alzada hacia él. Entonces, en vez de apartarla, se volvió y rodeó el sofá. Había empezado a acercarse a la botella de coñac, que estaba sobre la mesa, donde la perra le bloqueaba el paso; pero volvió a detenerse junto a la puerta del estudio y se puso a buscar en un montón de discos que había en el suelo. La perra se acercó y se quedó olfateando el umbral. Puso un disco en el plato, y dejó una uña entre los surcos mientras giraba. Entonces la perra se sobresaltó por primera vez, cuando puso la aguja

sobre el disco y elevó el volumen. La música era árabe. La perra torció la cabeza hacia un lado, luego hacia el otro, observándolo—. Hay formas —murmuró, elevando la mano derecha para moverla en el aire, como dando forma a la línea de la flauta desde la disonancia. La perra había echado hacia atrás las orejas, tenía la boca cerrada, ya no jadeaba, ya no enseñaba los dientes—. Hay formas, y… fuerza exquisita… —Los dos contemplaron su mano moviéndose lentamente entre ambos—. Cambiar una línea sin tocarla… eso es delicadeza. —La perra levantó levemente la cabeza para mirarlo a la cara, a la frente sudorosa, como buscando allí algún indicio que explicara o revelara los signos que hacía en el aire entre ambos—. Ni una palabra. Ni un instante de adulterio. «¡Ahora puedes ya hacer realmente lo que quieras!». —Ante su áspera risa, la perra enseñó los dientes, y observó cómo caía su mano hasta coger bruscamente el trozo de papel que había dejado caer minutos antes—,

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, en el nombre del padre y de nuestro Señor Jesucristo y el espíritu santo, *iriterli estather, nochthai brasax salolam*… sí, muy bueno para las vacas en Egipto… *opsakion aklana thalila*

I A O, I A E

…

La perra le gruñó. Hizo una bola con el papel y se lo tiró, pero cayó lentamente a los pies del animal. La perra se levantó al momento y retrocedió a la otra habitación, que estaba empezando ya a oscurecerse, aunque todavía no estaba tan oscura como el estudio, donde se había sentado agarrándose al borde de la mesa y revolvía febrilmente los libros y papeles desparramados ante él. Cogió la *Demonolatría* de Remigius y la apartó, levantó la cubierta del *Libro*

dell'arte

y lo tiró de un manotazo al suelo, luego encontró papel y pluma, y el tintero ya abierto, y escribió lentamente, con gran cuidado y esmero:

Emperador.

Sus labios se movían formando las letras mientras la flauta desaparecía y la música se extinguía, se recuperaba, se elevaba entre colisiones, caía con estruendo, y en la otra habitación la perra empezaba a corretear en círculos irregulares, olfateando el aire que el calor parecía haber saturado más densamente aún de lavanda.

… por el poder del gran ADONAI…, sus labios se movían formando letras, luego palabras,

… que aparezca *ipso facto*, y por ELOIM, por ARIEL, por JEHOVAM, por AQUA, TAGLA, MATHON, OARIOS, ALMOAZIN, ARIOS, MEMBROT, VARIOS, PITHONA, MAJODS, SULPHÆ, GABOTS, SALAMANDRÆ, TABOTS, GINGUA, JANNA, ETITNAMUS, ZARIATNATMIX…

Se detuvo y escuchó. Luego:

A. E. A. J. A. T. M. O. A. A. M. V. P. M. S…

La música cesó, dejando oír el ruido de las uñas de la perra sobre el entarimado. Luego, de modo igualmente repentino, cesó también aquel ruido, y la pluma quedó colgando de su mano sobre las húmedas letras negras escritas en el papel. Captó un movimiento con el rabillo del ojo; volvió rápidamente la cabeza, vio el brazo del tocadiscos levantarse por sí solo, detenerse. Miró por la puerta, sin lograr ver a la caniche negra. «Perro», susurró roncamente. «¡Perro! ¡Perro! ¡Perro!». Ningún sonido respondió a su reto, ningún reconocimiento de hombres encarcelados en el pasado por pronunciar el Nombre de Dios al revés, [22] ninguna respuesta a Dios, sino el Nombre, invertido tres veces en su susurro.

Se puso en pie de un salto, tropezó con la mesa, vertiendo la tinta sobre los papeles, y en tres pasos cruzó la puerta y se plantó en la otra habitación. La perra estaba tumbada en el oscuro vestíbulo de la entrada, de cara a la puerta y aparentemente inmóvil.

—¡Maldita seas! —dijo—. Te voy a…

La perra se volvió a mirarlo, mientras extendía bruscamente los brazos.

—Maldito… animal salido del infierno, eso eres…

La perra, sólo parcialmente visible en la oscuridad, se levantó, y el pelo del lomo se le erizó mientras él se acercaba dos pasos y se detenía. Ambos escucharon los pasos en la escalera inferior, él con las manos aún en el aire, como contándolos, pesados y uniformes, ni tranquilos ni precipitados, llegando al descansillo, al pie de las escaleras, y subiendo los peldaños sin mayor esfuerzo aparente que de uno en uno, aunque demasiado pronto *toc toc toc*.

La lluvia, silenciada por falta de atención, reanudó su repiqueteo contra el cristal; entonces la perra gañó y arañó la puerta con las patas, movimiento que rompió la disposición inmóvil en la que cada objeto parecía tenso en suspensión. Se acercó a la puerta, y cuando ponía la mano en el picaporte, la mano del otro lado, como respondiendo, se movió también: *toc toc toc*. Y se echó hacia atrás, como amenazado.

La perra arañó la puerta, y cuando la abrió saltó tan deprisa que no tuvo oportunidad de agarrarla. Pero al parecer, el visitante que esperaba a oscuras había previsto el ataque, pues cogió el collar rojo y sujetó a la caniche.

—Hola. Hola —dijo aquella voz en la penumbra, una voz alegre y desagradable a un tiempo—. Unos crío s de la calle lo vieron traerla aquí.

Abrió un poco más la puerta.

—Pase —dijo, con un tono que pareció calmarlo, pues lo repitió—. Pase… ¿Quién es usted?

El visitante tendió la mano mientras entraba, una mano gruesa y fuerte, con dos diamantes engastados en oro en un dedo.

—Me llamo Recktall Brown.

Estrechó la mano y dijo a su vez su nombre con aire distante, como repitiendo el nombre de un amigo olvidado, en un esfuerzo por recordarlo.

Recktall Brown entró y se dirigió resueltamente al centro de la habitación, mirando a su alrededor a través de unas gruesas gafas que difundían las pupilas de sus ojos en formas descentradas.

—Ha hecho bien en traerla —dijo, señalando vagamente con los diamantes a la perra, que estaba tumbada en el suelo, lamiéndose—. Odia la lluvia.

Entonces se volvió, una extraña fealdad, quizá sólo porque parecía que una sonrisa sería imposible en aquella cara.

—¿Le apetece… beber algo?

—No. Ahora no. Ahora no.

—Sí, pero… ahí, sí, siéntese.

Recktall Brown se dejó caer en un pesado sillón orientado hacia la puerta abierta del estudio. Se puso a dar golpecitos con los diamantes sobre el brazo del sillón mientras seguía examinando la habitación, con la cabeza echada hacia atrás, la cara muy roja por haber subido aquellos tramos de escalera; sin embargo, respiraba silenciosamente, casi imperceptiblemente, pues su corpulencia absorbía toda señal de aliento antes de que alcanzara la superficie de su pecho, cubierto con una chaqueta cruzada.

—Conozco su nombre.

Sonrió, algo aun peor que el original, volviéndose por un momento hacia el hombre que estaba de pie, observándolo mientras servía coñac en una copa, y decía:

—Sí, yo también… creo que me suena su nombre, pero no recuerdo a quién se lo he oído…

—¿A un editor? ¿Un coleccionista? ¿Un marchante? —La voz de Recktall Brown mostraba sólo un leve interés—. La gente que no me conoce dice un montón de cosas de mí. —Entonces se echó a reír, pero la risa no abandonó su garganta—. Un montón de cosas. Podría pensarse que soy más malo que el diablo, aunque lo que hago por ellos sea bueno. Soy un hombre de negocios.

—Pero… ¿cómo es que conoce mi nombre?

—¿A qué se dedica?

—Soy delineante.

—¿Y artista?

Recktall Brown miraba más allá de él, hacia el estudio, y luego lo miró mientras se acercaba y se sentaba en el sofá.

—Yo… hago algunas restauraciones.

—Lo sé.

—¿Lo sabe?

Se echó hacia adelante en el sofá, sosteniendo el vaso entre las rodillas, y clavó la mirada en su visitante y volvió a apartarla, como si hubiese alguna dificultad que no podía descubrir.

—Hizo un trabajo para mí.

—¿Para usted?

—Un cuadro holandés, un paisaje, antiguo.

—Flamenco. Sí, lo recuerdo. Ese cuadro podría estar colgado en cualquier museo…

—Lo está. —La mano de los diamantes estaba cruzada sobre la otra ante él—. Nadie podría adivinar que ha sido retocado. Ni siquiera un experto, sin todos esos análisis químicos y rayos x; me lo dijo precisamente un experto.

—Bueno, por supuesto intenté…

—¡Intentó! Hizo un trabajo condenadamente bueno.

Examinó la habitación con un aire de curiosidad imparcial, y finalmente preguntó qué era aquel olor tan curioso. Como las gafas velaban cualquier atisbo de sus ojos, era difícil adivinar adonde estaba mirando,

pero parecía consciente de que era observado con una expresión de inquietud, casi desconfianza, no hacia él, sino con ansiedad por explicar cualquier cosa que pudiera entenderse mal. Sus preguntas eran perentorias.

—Lavanda. La uso a veces como medio. El olor parece quedarse agarrado.

—¿Como medio?

—Para disolver los colores, para pintar.

—Trabaja mucho aquí, ¿no?

—Bueno, he… he estado haciendo parte de mi trabajo en casa. Esos planos, planos de puentes.

—No. La pintura, la pintura —dijo con impaciencia Recktall Brown.

—Oh, esas restauraciones, esos… remiendos del pasado que hago.

—¿No pinta? ¿No pinta cuadros propios?

—Yo… No.

—¿Por qué no?

—Simplemente… no pinto.

Recktall Brown observó cómo se enjugaba la sudorosa frente, y bebía rápidamente un trago de coñac.

—Todo ese esfuerzo, todos esos libros, ¿se toma todo ese trabajo solamente para remendar las obras de otros? ¿Cómo es que nunca ha llegado a pintar obras propias?

—Bueno, lo he hecho, lo he hecho.

—¿Qué ocurrió, no pudo venderlas?

—Bueno, no, pero…

—¿Por qué no?

—Bueno, la gente… los críticos… Entonces era joven, aún era joven.

—¿Qué edad tiene ahora, cuarenta años?

—¿Cuarenta? ¿Cuarenta, yo?

—Por qué no, los aparenta. —Se sacó un puro del bolsillo, y siguió mirando fijamente al hombre que tenía ante sí—. Así que no les gustaron sus cuadros. ¿Qué ocurrió, los críticos no le tomaron en serio?

—Bueno, se…

—Y usted se amargó porque nadie reconocía su genio.

—No, yo…

—Y como no podía ganar dinero con eso, lo dejó, ¿no?

—No, lo que…

—Y decidió que lo único que podía hacer era remendar los cuadros de otros.

—No, maldita sea, yo…

—No se enfade, sólo estoy preguntando. —Había desenvuelto el puro, y se lo acercó al oído, haciéndolo rodar entre unos dedos del mismo grosor—. ¿No quiere que le pregunte?

—Claro, sí, sí. Y no estoy enfadado, pero maldita sea…

—Bueno, lo que me quiere decir es que puede hacer algo más que remendar cuadros antiguos, ¿no?

El puro no sonó a seco mientras lo hacia rodar; luego le cortó la punta con un cortaplumas de oro y se lo metió entre unos dientes desiguales.

—Por supuesto que puedo.

—Pero no quiere, porque no se levantan todos y le aplauden y le pagan altos precios.

—No es eso, no se trata de eso. Ellos no importan…

—¿Qué no importan? No me diga que no importan, hijito. Eso es lo que quiere todo el mundo —dijo Recktall Brown, encendiendo el puro—. Que todos se levanten y aplaudan. No hay nada raro en ello, qué demonios.

—Pero todo es… ahora no es tan simple.

—¿Ahora?

—En la pintura, en el arte actual…

—¿El arte actual? —Los dientes desiguales mostraron una sonrisa burlona a través del humo—. El arte actual se escribe con *f*.[23] Usted lo sabe. Todo el mundo lo sabe —añadió pacientemente y esperó, ofreciendo un silencio opresivo que exigía una respuesta.

—Es como si ahora… no hay ninguna dirección en la que actuar.

—Eso es un disparate. Lee usted demasiado. Hay mucho que hacer, si se tiene lo que usted tiene.

—No es tan simple.

El humo de un cigarrillo se mezcló con el de su puro, y preguntó:

—¿Por qué no? —y sonrió pacientemente.

—La gente reacciona. Eso es lo único que hacen ahora, reaccionar, han reaccionado hasta que eso se ha convertido en lo único que pueden hacer, y es… al final nadie puede hacer nada más que reaccionar.

—Y aquí está usted sentado con todas las piezas. ¿Es que no puede reaccionar y seguir siendo listo?

—De acuerdo, pues, aquí estoy yo con todas las piezas y todas encajan, todo encaja perfectamente, ¿y qué se puede hacer con ello, cuando se tiene todo junto? Usted mismo acaba de decirlo, el arte actual…

—¿Actual? Quizá haya juntado las piezas mal.

—¿Qué quiere decir?

Mientras el humo se elevaba ante él, se hizo patente qué era lo que estaba mal. Eran las orejas. Apenas tenían forma de oreja, sus circunvoluciones se perdían casi en gruesos trozos de carne colgados de los lados de la cabeza, cada uno un peso por sí solo.

—Aparenta usted cuarenta años y habla como si hubiera nacido ayer —dijo Recktall Brown.

Se quedó mirando fijamente a través de sus gafas, y la voz que oyó era más distante, apenas dirigida a él en sus primeras palabras:

—En cierto modo, un artista siempre ha nacido ayer.

—Vamos, vamos, muchacho.

—Maldita sea, ¿es que soy el único que piensa así? ¿Es que me he inventado yo solo todo esto? Si uno puede hacer algo que los demás no pueden, creen que uno debe querer hacerlo sólo porque ellos no pueden.

Recktall Brown hizo un gesto con el puro, y un trozo de ceniza cayó de él como un excremento gris de pájaro.

—Así que va a quedarse aquí, dibujando puentes y remendando…

—Esos puentes, esos malditos puentes.

—Qué hay de malo en ellos.

—Quién es toda esa gente, todos los que conducen por esos puentes como si hubieran crecido allí. No… no…

—No reconocen su mérito.

—No, no es tan simple.

—Me temo que sí, hijo mío.

—Maldita sea, no lo es, no lo es. Es cuestión de… es estar rodeado de gente que no tiene ningún sentido de… que no se da cuenta de que lo que está haciendo significa algo. ¿No entiende eso? Que hay un sentido de necesidad en su trabajo, que tiene que hacerse, que es suyo. Y si piensan así, ¿cómo van a ver algo necesario en el de los demás? Y eso… toda obra de arte es una obra de perfecta necesidad.

—¿Dónde ha leído eso?

—No lo he leído. Es lo que… tiene que ser, eso es todo. Y si todas las vidas ajenas, todos los trabajos ajenos pueden intercambiarse y nadie puede detenerse y decir: Esto es lo mío, esto es lo que debo hacer, este es mi trabajo… entonces, ¿cómo van a verlo en el mío, ese sentido de inevitabilidad, de que así es como debe ser? Cómo puedo creer en medio de todo esto que… maldita sea, cuando uno pinta no pinta sin más, no traza las líneas simplemente donde quiere, uno tiene que saber, tiene que saber que toda línea que trace no puede ir en ningún otro sitio, no puede ser en absoluto diferente… Pero en medio de todo este… desarraigo, cómo puede uno… maldita sea, ¿habla usted con la gente? ¿La escucha?

—Yo hablo de negocios con la gente.

Recktall Brown dio una profunda calada a su puro, y observó cómo el cigarrillo era violentamente apagado, y cómo desaparecía el coñac.

—Pero… está hablando conmigo. Me está escuchando.

—Estamos hablando de negocios —dijo tranquilamente Recktall Brown.

—Pero…

—La gente trabaja por dinero, hijo mío.

—Pero yo…

—El dinero da sentido a todo.

—Sí. Eso cree la gente, ¿no? Eso cree la gente.

Recktall Brown lo observó pacientemente, como alguien esperando que un niño resuelva un problema sencillo que tiene una única solución. El cigarrillo, encendido ante él, les unió en las diferentes texturas del humo.

—¿Sabe…? San Pablo nos exhorta a redimir el tiempo.

—¿Ah, sí? —El tono de Recktall Brown era benévolo, alentador.

—Una obra de arte redime el tiempo.

—Y comprarla redime el dinero —dijo Recktall Brown.

—Sí, sí, poseerla…

—Y por eso está usted aquí remendando el pasado —Recktall Brown se echó hacia adelante y apoyó los codos en sus anchas rodillas—. Por eso el arte antiguo alcanza altos precios —dijo—. Todo el mundo está de acuerdo en eso, todo el mundo las considera obras maestras. Las copian en todas partes. Usted mismo habrá hecho copias probablemente.

—Desde que terminé los estudios, no. ¿Y quién las quiere? Quién quiere copias.

Recktall Brown miró cómo se levantaba de repente y se acercaba a la ventana, donde la lluvia resbalaba por el cristal, devolviéndole a rayas su transparencia.

—Nadie quiere copias. —Aplastó el puro en un cenicero—. Los que pueden pagar quieren originales. Pueden pagar originales. Esperan pagar. —Se detuvo, y luego elevó el tono—. Mientras un artista esté vivo, puede pintar más cuadros. Cuando están muertos, están acabados. Pongamos por caso los antiguos pintores holandeses. Ni siquiera los mejores. Algún pintor de poca monta, no un gran pintor, pero conocido. Exclusivo, como… como…

—El Maestro de la Leyenda de la Magdalena —llegó su voz desde el otro extremo de la habitación, empañada contra la ventana.

—Imposible que no se venda. Supongamos que algunos cuadros suyos, algunos cuadros suyos desconocidos, aparezcan aquí y allá. Quizá parezcan un poco retocados, como el tipo de trabajo que hace usted. Mire ese lienzo que está ahí, ¿qué es?

No miró al lienzo que señalaba, en el estudio, sino a la cara sudorosa que se volvió hacia él.

—Nada. Un lienzo que preparé hace dos o tres años. Nunca…

—Bueno, supongamos nada más —siguió Recktall Brown, sin dejar que le interrumpiera—, supongamos que lo restaurase un poco. Si trabajase en él algún tiempo, puede que encontrase una pintura desconocida del Maestro quienquiera-que-fuese. Podría valer diez mil. Podría valer cincuenta —se levantó y se acercó silenciosamente a la espalda vuelta hacia él—. No me querrá decir que nunca se le ha ocurrido, ¿no?

—Por supuesto que sí. —De repente estaban cara a cara—. Sería mucho trabajo.

—¡Trabajo! ¿Le preocupa el trabajo? —Recktall Brown alargó sus gruesas manos y agarró los brazos que tenía ante sí—. ¿Tiene alguna objeción contra este trabajo, alguna de las que ha puesto durante todo el tiempo a todo el trabajo que ha hecho, y que ya no puede hacer?

—Ninguna, salvo…

—¿Salvo qué?

—Ninguna.

Recktall Brown lo soltó, y se sacó otro puro del bolsillo. Su boca parecía hecha a medida para sostenerlo, mientras lo desenvolvía, le cortaba la punta y se lo embutía en ella.

—Los críticos se alegrarán mucho de su decisión.

—Los críticos.

—¡Los críticos! No hay nada que ansíen tanto como descubrir antiguos maestros. Los críticos que se dejan comprar pueden ayudarte. Los que no se dejan son un hatajo de pobres cretinos que nunca han podido hacer nada propio y que se pasan la vida vengándose de los que pueden, a menos que sea un antiguo maestro que lleva quinientos años muerto. Son como una pandilla de solteronas jugando a tula en un sembrado de espárragos.

Su risa brotó entre vaharadas de humo de su boca y de su nariz. Luego se quitó las gafas, mirando a la cara sudorosa que tenía ante sí, y ocurrió algo extraño. Sus ojos, que durante todo el tiempo habían parecido oscilar desenfocados tras los gruesos cristales, se contrajeron hasta convertirse en nítidos puntos negros, y como armas súbitamente desenvainadas penetraban al instante allí donde los clavaba.

Cuando Esther llegó sola, se detuvo a la entrada del cuarto de estar, no a escuchar la música, sino a olfatear el aire. Luego dio un respingo, sobresaltada.

—No te había visto, no te había visto ahí parado… —Volvió a olfatear—. Qué olor más extraño —dijo. El olor de la perra, mezclado con el humo del puro, había penetrado en todos los rincones—. ¿Ha estado alguien aquí? —Encendió una luz—. ¿Qué pasa, quién era? —Se estaba quitando el sombrero mojado, y se detuvo con las manos en alto—. ¿Recktall Brown? —repitió—. Sí, he oído algo sobre él. Qué era. Algo muy feo. —Tosió, y terminó de quitarse el sombrero—. Me alegro de no acordarme. —Mientras cruzaba la habitación, dijo—: ¿Qué *es* esa música?

Se detuvo a la entrada del dormitorio.

—¿Te acuerdas de aquella noche? —preguntó—. ¿En aquel sitio español…? —Se quedó mirando su

espalda, y finalmente dijo—: Oh, nada. —Se llevó una mano al pelo—. Nada —repitió, volviéndose hacia el dormitorio—, pero te prefería *flamenco*.

«La mayoría de los pintores tiene por costumbre dorar las paredes con pan de estaño esmaltado de amarillo a imitación de oro. Pero yo os doy este consejo apremiante: que hagáis un esfuerzo por trabajar siempre con oro fino y buenos colores, sobre todo en la figura de Nuestra Señora. Y si me decís que un pobre no puede permitirse el gasto, os contestaré que si hacéis bien vuestro trabajo, y dedicáis tiempo a vuestras pinturas, y os servís de buenos colores, alcanzaréis tal reputación que algún rico vendrá a compensaros por vuestros clientes pobres; y vuestra nombradía como pintor que utiliza buenos colores será tan alta que si un maestro recibe un ducado por una figura, a vosotros os ofrecerán dos, y terminaréis por ganar lo que ambicionáis. Como dice el viejo refrán, "A buen trabajo, buena paga". Y aunque no os pagaran como es debido, Dios y Nuestra Señora os recompensarán por ello con creces».

—¿Qué es eso que estás leyendo?

—No lo sé —dijo Otto cerrando el *Libro, dell'arte* contemplando su lomo raído antes de dejarlo—. Era algo suyo.

Sonó el teléfono, y mientras ella iba a contestarlo, se acercó al espejo, colgado en el cuarto de estar por sugerencia suya. Oyó la voz de Esther desde el dormitorio, adonde había trasladado el teléfono.

—Sí, sí, pero… no lo sé. La verdad es que hace… tiempo que tampoco yo le veo. Pero… ¿qué? Bueno, creo que ha alquilado una especie de estudio en el centro, en el West Side. Creo que está en Horatio Street. ¿Qué? Oh. No lo sé. La verdad es que no lo sé, en serio.

—¿Quién era? —preguntó Otto, apartándose del espejo al verla volver.

—Un tal Benny, es alguien de su oficina que lleva meses intentando ponerse en contacto con él.

—Es curioso, ¿no? —dijo Otto mirando al suelo—. Quiero decir que es extraño que no esté, que no vaya a ningún sitio.

—¿Quieres salir esta noche? Los Munk nos han invitado a tomar una copa.

—¿Quieres salir tú?

—Si tú quieres.

—Bueno, debería quedarme a trabajar un poco.

—Creía que tu obra estaría terminada a finales de abril.

—Bueno, casi lo está.

—¿Por qué no haces algo con ella?

—Bueno, en realidad no está… está todo ahí, está trabado, pero… no parece tener ningún sentido. Pero tengo que hacer algo —dijo, agarrándose la barbilla—. Tengo que conseguir algo de dinero.

Se quedaron callados. Otto se acercó, cogió una revista y se sentó a su lado. La revista era *Días de perros.*

—¿Qué hace esto aquí? —preguntó distraídamente.

—Eso es algo que trajo él una vez, cuando hablábamos de tener niños. Oh, a veces era tan… ¡Oh…!

—¿Qué pasa?

—El sueño que tuve anoche, acabo de recordarlo —dijo ella—. Era sobre mi hermana Rose, estábamos volando cometas en un solar, como solíamos hacer, y había unos chicos con una cometa que tenía trozos de vidrio en el borde, y rasgaban nuestra cometa, que caía en picado al suelo.

—Pero eso no suena tan terrible.

—Era espantoso, era… —Otto la hizo volverse y acalló su boca con la suya. Finalmente, ella dijo—: ¿Me quieres hacer un favor?

—¿Afeitarme antes de ir a la cama?

—¿Cómo lo sabías?

Al cabo de un rato la llamó desde el cuarto de baño.

—Este pañuelo puesto a secar en el espejo, ¿puedo quitarlo y doblarlo? Está seco… Esther, ¿me has oído? Este pañuelo…

—Sí, sí —gritó ella de repente; luego reparó en su voz y la controló—. Sí, quítalo.

Cogió la chaqueta de Otto del sofá y se dirigió hacia el cuarto de baño, donde se oía el zumbido de la maquinilla eléctrica.

—Puedo usar esto, ¿no?

—Ah, sí. Sí, claro. Me alegro de que la estés usando.

—Ahí hay una navaja —dijo volviéndose hacia ella, parada en el umbral con su chaqueta, mientras la

maquinilla runruneaba en su mano—, pero no creo que sepa manejarla.

—Ya sé —dijo ella—. Es extraño. Que se dejara eso. —Luego entró en el dormitorio a colgar la chaqueta —. ¿Qué es este libro que llevas en el bolsillo? —le preguntó desde allí.

—¿Ése? —Otto se paró a mirarse en el espejo—. Es una novela, una novela francesa que me regaló una vez.

—¿La has terminado?

—Bueno, yo… todavía no he llegado al final. Es una… yo… Oh, a propósito, encontré una hoja dentro, algo que debió escribir de pequeño. Es sobre la entera creación trabajando para liberarse de la vanidad del tiempo, sobre la naturaleza esforzándose en esa gran redención. Parece un sermón.

—Un sermón de su padre —dijo ella, colgando la chaqueta mientras Otto entraba y se sentaba en la cama.

—Pero es bonito. Para ser un sermón —dijo quitándose un zapato, que sostuvo en la mano durante un minuto, mirándolo fijamente.

Era una noche oscura, sobre todo para ser de primavera, o así lo parecía en el bajo West End, junto al río, donde hay poca iluminación y el aire arrastra día y noche a lo alto la cuota de sedimento negro de la ciudad desde el ferrocarril y los barcos en el agua. Se oían pocos ruidos, pues a medida que avanzaba la noche eran cada vez más escasos los sonidos de la caprichosa circunstancia, los fortuitos sonidos de la casualidad, los temerarios sonidos del accidente; hasta que los únicos que se elevaban por el aire cargado de sedimentos eran los sonidos de la necesidad, claros e inevitables, tan ávidamente confundidos hasta entonces por aquellos que ya se habían retirado de la oscuridad y dormían, esperando el alba.

Pero el cielo no traslucía aún ningún indicio del alba, en su ausencia una quimera para temer su concreción en soledad, e incluso ella proscrita y enterrada, llevándose consigo esa sustancia de la que están hechas finalmente todas las cosas, la prima materia que había intentado rescatar de la conspiración de la tierra, el aire, el fuego y el agua, que la tenían aquí atada en el fango. «Una imagen dormita por mí en la piedra», dijo Zaratustra, no más contento de dejarla allí atada que aquellos enterrados desde entonces ¿decepcionados?, ¿o estaban sorprendidos?, por ficciones, y los seguidores que los invocaban, vicarios que les exigían una satisfacción vicaria en vida por lo que habían sufrido en la intimidad de la muerte.

Borrachos errabundos y vecinos curiosos lo veían a veces de noche, cerca de los muelles y los mataderos que había a una manzana de distancia, recogiendo trozos de madera de cajones de embalaje para alimentar la chimenea baja en un extremo de la habitación del sótano. Benny se había detenido a buscar su nombre en todos los portales, y no lo había encontrado. Luego vio una figura, la reconoció a una manzana de distancia y corrió hacia ella, para cogerle del brazo y detenerlo antes de que se deslizara en uno de los portales y desapareciera.

—¡Gracias a Dios que te he encontrado! —dijo Benny, viéndolo allí parado bajo una farola, con los trozos de madera bajo el brazo—. ¿Dónde has estado? Llevo meses, llevamos meses sin verte por la oficina.

Benny era un hombre ansioso vestido de franela gris, chaqueta sin cruzar, pañuelo de seda ondeando al viento y un cigarrillo en la mano.

—¿Qué te ha pasado? ¿Qué estás haciendo? ¿Estás bien? Tienes buen aspecto, nunca te he visto con tan buen aspecto, pero espera, espera…

—Pero espera, espérame un momento, escúchame, ¿estás… has hecho algún proyecto, has hecho alguno más?

—Proyectos de puentes… ¿no sabes quién soy? Proyectos de puentes, tengo que hacer otro, tengo que presentar otro ahora.

—Pero escucha, ya lo sé, no sé ni lo que digo, pero escucha. Ahora tenemos uno en marcha, uno muy importante, y si te traigo la localización y el problema, ¿lo harás?

—Pero escúchame. Llevo meses sin presentar nada. Una vez, escucha, presenté un proyecto mío, y se rieron de mí, se rieron de mí, creyeron que era una broma, dijeron: «Esto no va en serio, ¿verdad, Benny? ¿Después del viaducto de Cooper City? ¿Y del Desfiladero del Arca Caída? Eras un genio, Benny, ¿qué te ha pasado?». Espera, escúchame, escucha, sólo uno más. Escucha, el viejo J. W. murió el mes pasado, ¿lo sabías? Murió. ¿No lo entiendes? Puedo ser vicepresidente, y no tendré que volver a trazar un plano en mi vida, vicepresidente responsable de proyectos, y puedo hacerlo. Puedo hacerlo, sabes que puedo hacerlo. Pero todo depende de esto, todo depende de este nuevo trabajo, para demostrarles…

—Sólo éste, este último. Y te lo pagaré, sé que nunca te he pagado, pero éste te lo pagaré, te pagaré lo que quieras.

—Escucha, puede que nunca te haya agradecido como es debido todo lo que hiciste, pero sabes cuánto significó. Ahora puedo pagarte. Puedo pagarte. No tienes nada que perder, y yo todo.

—Todo, y yo… y tú… Mírate. ¿Qué te pasa? ¿Qué estás haciendo, qué te estás haciendo? Tienes buen aspecto, he dicho que tenías buen aspecto, pero no pareces tú, bueno para otro pero no pareces tú.

Benny alargó la mano para agarrarlo otra vez del brazo, y un clavo de una de las tablas le rasgó la manga.

—Eres el único que puede hacer esto por mí. Eres el único que puede salvarme. Uno más. Y olvidaremos todo el asunto, como si nunca hubiera ocurrido…

El pañuelo de seda tremoló al viento. Luego Benny se alejó también, dejando vacío el cono de luz, hacia el este y la ciudad, donde la marea lo atrapó y el reflujo lo arrastró como de una playa desierta, sin dejar rastro a los pies de la figura que se detuvo un momento a contemplar la bajamar y luego siguió recogiendo madera de deriva.

Cuando Esther llegó sola se detuvo a la entrada del cuarto de estar; luego dio un respingo, sobresaltada.

—No te había visto, no te había visto ahí parado. —Encendió una luz, y se quedó en medio de la habitación quitándose el sombrero, mirándole la espalda—. Ahí parado —dijo finalmente, dejando caer el sombrero en una mesa—, como estaba él siempre. Como un viejo.

Otto apartó la mirada de su reflejo en el cristal de la ventana, que la lluvia primaveral listaba de transparencia.

—Sí —dijo, mirando al suelo entre ambos—. Más de un año…

—¿Qué?

—Y me prevenía contra la juventud. ¿Lo sabías? La trampa de ser joven. Me prevenía contra ello. Decía que la juventud es una trampa que…

—Por favor, no quiero oír ni una palabra más al respecto.

—Pero… es que no acabo de creerlo, ha pasado un año entero y yo sigo aún…

—Otto, si te pasas todo el tiempo quejándote y… haciendo el tonto por ahí…

—Pero tengo que conseguir algo de dinero.

—Y esa obsesión que tienes por el dinero…

—Sí, pero el dinero, hace falta dinero para…

—Pareces tomarte el no tenerlo como una tacha en tu virilidad.

—Pero el dinero, maldita sea, quiero decir que en Nueva York un hombre sin dinero se siente castrado. Y bueno, dices que mete bastante en tu cuenta corriente, pero… quiero decir que para mí eso de, bueno, no sacarlo y gastarlo, pero al final dejarte pagar…

—Otto, sabes que nunca he entendido por qué no has buscado nunca a tu padre. Si vive aquí mismo, en Nueva York, y nunca lo has visto. Y supongo que podría darte algo de dinero.

—Pero yo no…

—Y eso te ayudaría probablemente a aclarar esa neurosis obsesiva que tienes por…

Gordon: Cuando perdemos el contacto con la amada, perdemos el contacto con el mundo entero.

—¿Qué estás escribiendo?

—Sólo una cosa que se me acaba de ocurrir. Para esa obra. —Otto la había seguido al dormitorio y se sentó en el borde de la cama, que se había convertido en un refugio, ya no un comienzo sino un fin desesperado, ya no un panorama de futura conquista sino un santuario donde el fracaso en todo lo demás hacía insoportable esta única posesión, inmerecida y llegada demasiado pronto—. Todo es como una comedia, como una mala comedia con nada más que entradas y salidas. Y tu obra, tu novela —murmuró contenciosamente—. No la has…

—¿Mi qué?

Levantó la vista hacia ella.

—¿Quién es ese Ellery con el que sales?

—Trabaja en publicidad, y está muy interesado en el psicoanálisis. ¿No has pensado en meterte en…?

—¡El psicoanálisis! ¿No hemos discutido ya eso?

—Iba a decir en publicidad.

—¡En publicidad! ¿Crees que he caído tan bajo? Y qué… En cualquier caso, ¿por qué sales con él? ¿Vas a salir esta noche?

—Sí.

—Pero ¿por qué?

—Me sienta bien dejarme ver con gente que triunfa.

Otto se aclaró la garganta. Miraba fijamente al suelo entre ambos. Alzó levemente los ojos, lo suficiente para ver sus pies aplanados sobre el suelo por su peso. Musitó:

—A veces me gustaría ser viejo, un viejo.

—¿Otto?

—Qué.

—Tú… Oh, nada, pero te prefería de joven —dijo desde el ropero, donde se estaba poniendo la combinación.

Las mujeres que nos reconvienen por nuestras debilidades son generalmente las que más se sorprenden cuando mostramos nuestra fuerza y las dejamos.

—Yo…

—Nosotros…

—Tú…

—¿Esther?

—¿Ellery…? Oh, ¿Otto? Otto se fue —dice Esther desde el ropero, donde se está quitando la combinación—. Se fue a Centroamérica, a trabajar en una plantación de bananas.

Las imágenes nos rodean; mientras revoloteamos por las mentes de los demás, llevamos puesto el abigarrado traje cortado por sus malas digestiones, la vergüenza y el fracaso, plagas pandémicas e indecencias privadas, cuentas sin pagar y éxtasis animales recordados en camas de hospital; nuestras peores acciones y mejores intenciones nunca están quietas: regañándose, burlándose o simplemente parloteando se acometen entre sí, pasmadas al reconocerse. A veces la simplicidad ayuda, aunque hasta la estática imagen de san Juan Bautista recibió atenciones prenatales (con seis meses de vida, saltó de gozo en el seno de su madre cuando la saludó María, que había concebido el día anterior): una vez dado a luz, aparece plantado en un vado del río con un taparrabo de pelo de camello, taciturno, alimentándose ascéticamente de miel y langostas, molestando a los transeúntes, censurando la carne en los que la llevan con gusto. ¿Y el Nazareno al que bautizó? Pasan tres años, con una humildad que sobrepasa el entendimiento: y luego la muerte, ¿decepcionado?, ¿sin sospechar nada?, y el cuerpo abandonado en la tierra, el que iba a gobernar las doce tribus de Israel, abandonado en la tierra gritando: «Dios mío, ¿por qué me has abandonado?». En la resurrección, ascendiendo sin esperanza, la imagen es estacada en el viento por un epiléptico que hace tiendas, sus fuertes manos extienden la lona de la fe en un vistoso caravasar, refugio de viajeros cansados de la arena ardiente, atraídos por aquel olvido rayado de oro y carmesí, con tres pisos, visible de lejos, perfumado de Oriente, mientras el sol descarga uniformemente por doquier el puño de la realidad sobre aquel desierto donde la verdad sigue aún caminando con los pies descalzos.

—Esta casa necesita airearse bien. Basta echar una mirada ahí dentro, a ese cuarto, para darse cuenta de que tu marido…

—Mi marido…

—Él…

—Yo…

La música es de Mozart, el Concierto número siete en fa mayor para tres pianos.

—Me gustaría… —dice Esther. En una febril conspiración de orden, las notas de la música brotan torrencialmente de la radio en la otra habitación, que está a oscuras. Allí, en la oscuridad, embisten contra superficies duras y aristas tan agudas como ellas. Tal vez las moléculas se reordenan, se ponen a bailar, con una simpatía que no dura más que la duración de la nota; tal vez no, pero he ahí el umbral iluminado para entrar en concertada avalancha, las plantas desnudas de unos pies de hombre que cuelgan del borde de la cama, objetivos callosos e improbables—. Me gustaría… —dice Esther. Aparta la mano rápidamente, pero demasiado tarde, de donde la tenía puesta, agarrando las sábanas. Su pecho, desnudo y no especialmente lleno sino prominente, centrado e inmóvil, es muy real para ella y para nadie más: se lleva allí la mano rápidamente, pero demasiado tarde, mientras una nota de uno de los tres pianos hiere con la decisión de una espada, y penetra en el corazón con la fría intimidad de una navaja—. Me gustaría…

—No irá a entrar él, ¿verdad?

—*¿Él?*

IV

«Les femmes soignent ces féroces
infirmes retour des pays chauds».

RIMBAUD

En la calina de la estación seca, los montes tenían un color azul oscuro y parecían más lejanos que el propio sol, pues el sol parecía haber penetrado en aquella calina, colgar entre el hombre y el horizonte donde, censurado y sumiso, sufría la indignidad de su mirada. El calor del día era tan inerte como la calina que lo hacía visible, y sólo cedía con la disolución de la calina en la oscuridad.

De aquella oscuridad, al otro lado de la ventana, llegó el grito de un pájaro, *staccato,* el sonido de un gran despertador al que alguien da cuerda en el cuarto de al lado a altas horas de la noche. Otto estaba sentado, en calzoncillos, escribiendo. Cuando la puerta se abrió de golpe y entró un hombre que sólo llevaba puesto un mono desteñido, con una botella en una mano y un vaso en la otra, Otto dejó la pluma y dijo:

—Hola, Jesse.

—«Hola, Jesse». ¿Qué te parece eso? «Hola, Jesse». ¿Qué demonios estás haciendo? —dijo el hombre tatuado, y se sentó en la otra silla de madera.

—Estoy escribiendo.

Jesse dejó la botella y el vaso en la mesa y miró a su alrededor. Crispó las comisuras de la boca, momentáneamente confuso por algo, pero algo que iba a ser agradable. Contempló la mesa, cubierta de papeles ilegiblemente garrapateados, y las láminas clavadas en la pared.

—¿Quieres un cigarrillo? —le preguntó Otto.

—Sí, dame un cigarrillo. —Jesse alargó la mano, y luego rechazó con un gesto el paquete verde de MacDonald's
Gold Standard—. ¿Por qué fumas eso? Ni siquiera están hechos en América.

—No sé, yo… de todas formas es tabaco de Virginia, yo…

—Sí, ¿por qué fumas esa porquería? ¿Por qué no fumas cigarrillos americanos?

Tiró con el codo a la escupidera uno de los calcetines limpios que Otto tenía en la esquina de la mesa, y observó recelosamente cómo Otto se levantaba y le rodeaba para recuperarlo.

—¿Qué demonios estás haciendo? —preguntó Jesse. Luego dijo—: Eres un bastardo religioso, ¿eh?

—No exactamente, por qué dices…

—Eso. Eso es una pintura religiosa, ¿no?

—Ah, no, no es más que una reproducción, de un cuadro del Renacimiento italiano…

—Parece una jodía *madonna* —dijo Jesse, desconfiado, y volvió a mirar a Otto. Luego esputó en la escupidera—. Dame un cigarrillo.

—Sólo tengo de éstos —dijo Otto, tendiendo un paquete de Emú, producto local.

—¿Por qué fumas esa porquería? ¿Por qué no fumas cigarrillos americanos? —Jesse volvió a escupir, esta vez en el suelo. Otto le acercó la escupidera con el pie descalzo—. Yo no llevo ninguno encima, ¿no? —Jesse bajó la vista hacia su pecho, donde un barco se debatía entre una maraña de vello. Sobre cada tetilla parda se lanzaba un azulejo. En un hombro, un pavo real; en el otro, una marina con palmeras. Los brazos mostraban anclas, una lápida sepulcral con madre escrito sobre un rollo de pergamino, y un puñal. La galería se hinchó mientras la contemplaba—. Es bien bonito, ¿eh? Qué te parece, ¿eh? —Giró la cabeza hacia un hombro y luego hacia el otro, admirando el arte ondulante allí plasmado. Luego volvió a mirar a Otto de arriba abajo.

Otto encendió un cigarrillo. Era demasiado tarde para arreglarse y ponerse unos pantalones.

—¿Por qué no sales y te entonas un poco? —Jesse Franks volvió a su propio esplendor—. Esto es todo un hombre, ¿eh?

—Sí, sólo que…

—¿Eh? Qué te parece, ¿eh? —Luego miró los papeles garrapateados que se pegaban a su antebrazo en la mesa—. ¿Qué es toda esta mierda?

—Es mi obra.

—Es tu obra, ¿eh? Toma —dijo, cogiendo un puñado de hojas y empujándolas hacia Otto—, léeme tu obra.

—«Gordon: El ingenio, mi querida Priscilla, es algo vulgar, la moneda corriente de la sabiduría.

»Priscilla: Pero cariño, nadie puede acusarte de ser vulgar. Aunque a decir verdad, hay momentos en que me siento completamente asfixiada por la gente ingeniosa.

»Gordon: Estás rodeada de gente que considera una verdad a medias deliberadamente mal entendida como uno de los privilegios del ingenio». No está del todo… quiero decir que este acto…».

—Lee otro acto.

—«Priscilla: Sabes que te quiero, Gordon. ¿Te da miedo eso?

»Gordon: Cualquier persona racional teme al amor, mi querida Priscilla.

»Priscilla: Y por eso no te vas a casar conmigo, porque te quiero.

»Gordon: El amor romántico, querida mía, el amor romántico. El reto más difícil para un ideal es su transformación en algo real, y pocos ideales sobreviven. El matrimonio exige del amor romántico que se convierta en algo real, y cuando un ideal se convierte en algo real deja de ser un ideal. Alguien ha comentado certeramente lo sórdida que habría llegado a ser la pareja de Dante y Beatriz tras veinte años de comidas mal preparadas. En cuanto a la *Divina Comedia,* cabe decir que el *Purgatorio* se habría escrito, aunque quizá una versión bastante menos poética. Pero el Cielo y el Infierno rejuvenecidos, creo que no, querida. En algún sitio hay unos versos sobre esto referidos a Petrarca y su Laura, pero no los recuerdo. Pero incluso Virginia, acaso lo recuerdes, prefirió ahogarse ante los ojos de su amante a casarse con él. Pablo tuvo al menos el placer de verla ahogarse desnuda, pero ella sabía lo que se hacía. Una chica lista, Virginia.

»Priscilla: Pero entonces, lo que estás diciendo es…».

—¿Qué demonios está diciendo?

—Bueno, Gordon está diciendo que el amor, quiero decir, el amor romántico…

—¿Eso es lo único que hacen, hablar?

—Bueno, es una obra de teatro, quiero decir que…

—¿Cuándo se la mete?

—Bueno, en un escenario no se puede…

—De modo que se casan, ¿no?

—Bueno, no, quiero decir que en realidad no, pero…

—Pero de todas formas se la ha estado tirando, ¿eh?

—Bueno, él… quiero decir…

—Y a todas éstas, ¿quién es Gordon?

—Bueno, es el héroe de la obra.

—¿El héroe? No tiene mucha pinta de héroe. ¿Por qué no escribes sobre Jesse?

—Bueno, yo…

—¿Quieres escribir sobre algo bueno? Muy bien, apunta esto. Gordon era uno de esos tipos que entran en… que se abren paso empujando con el hombro para entrar en un bar. Entraba y conseguía lo que quería. Si alguien quería pelea… no. Era un buen tipo, pero si alguien quería pelea… ¿Has apuntado eso?

—Sí —dijo Otto, lápiz en mano.

—Si alguien andaba buscando pelea… no, eso no suena muy bien. Bórralo. —Observó el lápiz de Otto para asegurarse de que lo estaba tachando—. Muy bien, ahora empieza con esto. Yo andaba por Bahía Chilano, en Colombia, sin dinero del país, ¿entiendes? Tenía algo de dinero, tenía unos cien dólares, pero no dinero del país, ¿entiendes? Pero necesitaba un poco para moverme por el país. Estaba en un barco con un cargamento de contrabando. De modo que me busqué un *chuleta.* ¿Sabes lo que es un *chuleta?*

—No, yo…

—Entonces no eres tan listo, ¿no? Sólo porque fuiste a la universidad. Es un cambista, un tipo que cambia dinero y se queda con algo. Muy bien. De modo que se dejó caer por el barco un cayuga que quería comprar el cargamento. Pero no se lo vendieron. Valía demasiado, ¿entiendes? ¿Has apuntado eso?

—Sí, yo…

—Muy bien. ¿Por dónde iba?

—Se dejó caer por el barco un cayuga…

—Sí. De modo que este tío sólo lleva puesto un mono muy ceñido, ¿entiendes? Es un tío membrudo, y lleva puesto un mono muy ceñido. ¿Has apuntado eso?

—Sí.

—¿Cómo lo has escrito?

—«Era un tipo membrudo que llevaba puesto un mono muy ceñido».

—Muy bien. De modo que va a la ciudad y conoce a una chica en un bar. Ella quiere acostarse con él. Pero él no puede correr riesgos con ese cargamento. La policía, ¿entiendes? La chica va a verlo a su casa, pero él no quiere correr riesgos. De modo que le dice, tómatelo con calma… —Jesse se detuvo y miró a Otto—. Te van a pagar por esto y yo no voy a sacar nada.

—Todavía no he vendido nada —dijo Otto.

—Ya. Bueno, puedes vender esto, ya verás. Es lo que le gusta leer a la gente. ¿Por dónde iba? Muy bien. De modo que ella quiere quedarse, pero a él sólo le interesa pescar tiburones. Bahía Chilano, el mejor sitio para pescar tiburones. De modo que bucea en busca de tiburones. Tiburones de los blancos y los negratas. Esos son los negros. Nadie mata a los blancos, pero él va a hacerlo, ¿entiendes? No tiene miedo. Está dispuesto a pescar cualquier tiburón. Punto.

Otto esperó.

—¿Cómo va eso? —preguntó el autor.

—Bueno, todavía no es propiamente una historia…

—¿Cómo que no es una historia? ¿Crees que no sé lo que es una historia? Esto es lo que le gusta leer a la gente, realismo, hombres reales haciendo algo, no un montón de mierda con adornitos cursis. ¿Te enteras?

—Sí, yo…

—Te van a pagar por ello y yo no voy a sacar nada.

Jesse se miró de nuevo el pecho con admiración. Otto se levantó y se acercó a la cama. Se rascó el brazo, para tener ocupada la mano.

—Qué ricura eres, vaya. ¿De dónde has sacado esas manos? No son manos de hombre.

—Simplemente, me crecieron —empezó a razonar Otto—, como a ti las tuyas…

—¡Como las mías! —Jesse cerró el puño, mientras Otto volvía a sentarse—. Tienes que espabilarte, ¿entiendes?

Jesse se acercó con la botella plana en la palma de la mano y se detuvo, tambaleándose encima de él. Hizo ademán de estampar la botella en la cara de Otto, y luego la apartó riendo.

—Tengo que acostarme, Jesse.

—Sí, tienes que acostarte. Mira, conejo, voy a poner un huevo, ¿entiendes?

Otto siguió sentado sin moverse.

—¿Me entiendes?

—Te entiendo.

Jesse siguió tambaleándose durante un momento. Luego dijo:

—Tengo que ir a hacer de vientre.

—Bueno, yo voy a acostarme —dijo Otto. Se levantó, se estiró como si se sintiera a sus anchas, fingió un bostezo. Jovialmente, de hombre a hombre, dijo—: Buenas noches, Jesse. No es que quiera echarte, pero…

—¡Echarme! Vaya, conejo, no podrías echarme… inténtalo, venga, si quieres que te corra a patadas por todo el cuarto. Echarme, conejo, esa sí que es buena… —dijo Jesse mientras salía por la puerta con la botella, dejando el vaso sucio.

Fuera, la plantación estaba en calma, la selva mantenida a distancia por miles de erecciones de un verde turgente que brotaban de los tallos de los plataneros. No había serpientes venenosas, ni dardos envenenados. Años antes, recordaban con desaliento los nativos, se las arreglaban con primitivo contento para ir tirando a base de vender pita de calidad regularmente inferior, racimos de plátanos verdes y a veces cargamentos de madera dura a los barcos que venían sin prisa a comerciar. Luego llegó una compañía frutera norteamericana, harta de comprar miles de racimos de plátanos y dispuesta a producir cientos de miles de manos. La Compañía reemplazó el vacilante embarcadero del puerto por dos sólidos muelles, despejó el terreno y plantó un inmenso platanal; y mientras esperaba a que creciesen sus plantas, ofreció ocho dólares por mano a los cultivadores locales, pues los barcos de la Compañía estaban listos para atracar de modo regular. Los nativos recogieron plátanos con frenético afán, y plantaron millares más. Luego empezó a madurar la cosecha de la Compañía. El precio bajó a tres dólares. Los plátanos de la Compañía fueron cortados y cargados, llenando los barcos de la Compañía hasta los topes. Los barcos de la Compañía eran los únicos que atracaban en aquel puerto, pues la Compañía era la propietaria de los dos nuevos muelles, de los que tan orgullosa había estado la gente al principio. El mercado local de plátanos desapareció. Simplemente dejó de existir. Los barcos que costeaban por aquellos parajes navegaban entre el olor de la fruta pudriéndose en las plantas, que llegaba varias millas mar adentro. (Ahora se decía que una compañía maderera de Virginia Occidental estaba planeando nuevos y similares beneficios para esta gente afortunada, tan recientemente impulsada a la vanguardia del progreso, cuyo nivel de vida había sido

elevado a alturas tan maravillosas que ninguno de ellos podía alcanzarlo).

La única bombilla desnuda oscilaba en su cable tan levemente que las sombras se movían por el suelo con la tenue reciprocidad de la respiración, inhalando y exhalando en oleadas y reflujos; las tablas sin desbastar por las que Otto se movía en silencio, recogiendo una camisa, luego una corbata, parecían respirar el silencio de aquella noche plomiza anterior a las lluvias.

Las paredes eran de tablas pintadas de blanco. Había una cama metálica con un colchón desteñido encima, una cómoda metálica, con espejo, una mesa con dos sillas, un largo estante y una escupidera. La habitación tenía el techo alto, con respiraderos a su alrededor para que circulase el aire. Fue por aquellos respiraderos por donde el estridente *crac*…

crac-crac

de su máquina de escribir había despertado al principio y provocado la ira de sus vecinos, y después de su primera entrevista con Jesse decidió escribir su obra a mano, y pasarla a máquina en la oficina de la Compañía los días que no trabajaba.

El espejo tenía un marco que parecía de madera castaña, pero que era de metal pintado a tal efecto. Esto era a causa de las termitas, que tan laboriosamente trabajan en los trópicos. En la oficina de telégrafos, abajo en el puerto, las termitas habían devorado un diccionario de Funk & Wagnalls que tenía cincuenta años y el tamaño de una maleta, olvidado en una mesa coja; apenas dejaron una palabra entera. Pero el marco de aquel espejo conservaba su pátina. Bien podría haber sido el marco de un cuadro, pues para entonces había enmarcado tan a menudo su imagen que no parecía tener cabida para ninguna otra. Miró por la ventana, y sólo vio su sombra en el suelo. Jesse había apagado la luz. Volvió al espejo.

Ahora llevaba puesto un traje de lino blanco que Brooks Brothers, que conservaban sus medidas a dos mil millas de distancia, le habían enviado. Llevaba una camisa de Brooks Brothers, de algodón egipcio y color blanco grisáceo, y una corbata de seda (de Brooks Brothers) de cuadros grises. Faltaba algo. Con una despreocupada mirada por encima del hombro al espejo, se volvió y cruzó la habitación, cogió un cigarrillo canadiense de la mesa y lo encendió, con su imagen reflejada absorta en él. Se sonrió en el espejo. Arqueó una ceja. Mejor. Se humedeció los labios, y frunció el superior. Mejor aun. La sonrisa, que daba un aire obsequioso a su cara, había desaparecido.

Debía recordar aquella cara: ceja izquierda arqueada, párpados ligeramente caídos, labios humedecidos, separados, con las comisuras bajas. Era la expresión para Nueva York.

Una vez repuesto, arrojó el cigarrillo a la oscuridad por la ventana y volvió a mirarse los pelillos que tenía sobre el labio superior, que serían ya un bigote cuando dejara el trabajo. Luego, con un sursuncorda en los labios de despedida a la imagen abandonada en el espejo, volvió a desnudarse y se tumbó en el sudado colchón. Antes de que se quedara dormido empezó a llover.

Las cerillas especialmente preparadas se encendían con facilidad, pero los cigarrillos se deshacían entre los dedos. Las semanas pasaban con mortal lentitud, un desfile de calor, insectos, agua, trabajo de oficina, estupidez agresiva y miedo, y la escritura laboriosa de su obra. Las malas hierbas crecían de un modo exuberante. Lo único que le confirmaba a Otto que el tiempo pasaba era la frecuencia con que tenía que cortarse las uñas. Sus zapatos, olvidados bajo la cama, se volvieron verdes.

Flores rojas se marchitaban al extremo de largos tallos, y después caían mostrando el fruto en impotencia infantil. Semana tras semana crecía el fruto, apuntaba hacia fuera, luego hacía arriba, y era cortado en el pleno vigor eréctil de la juventud.

Luego se acabó, temprano aquel año; y en el instante en que terminó la estación húmeda fue olvidada. Cerca del horizonte apareció la calina, y el sol, en parte dentro y en parte fuera, se elevó deformado como en el recuerdo ebrio de un amanecer. Sobre los edificios de la plantación flotaban negras cenizas de un incendio, a cierta distancia aún. En el cuarto de al lado se oía una radio en la que alguien tocaba con armónica la Rapsodia rumana n.º 3 de Enesco. Otto contó su dinero.

Habían acabado los meses de espera, los meses sin entidad. San Pablo nos exhorta a que redimamos el tiempo; pero si tanto el presente como el pasado están presentes en el tiempo futuro, y ese futuro está comprendido en el tiempo pasado, no hay más que una redención posible. Es la que ahora palpaba Otto con su muñeca para asegurarse de que no había desaparecido mientras se vestía, sin prisa, como un colono cansado en el escenario de un teatro del West End, pues había vuelto a meterse la cartera en el bolsillo interior de la chaqueta. El hombre con la muñeca Kewpie tatuada en la parte interior del antebrazo (que había firmado por dos años) dijo: «Dos años no es mucho, si te empeñas en que pasen deprisa». Para aquellos nómadas que vendían el tiempo de sus vidas, el tiempo era o bien dinero que ganaban o bien dinero que gastaban, y la vida un círculo de vivir y no vivir, como la vida del marinero pierde el principio, la mitad y el final del viaje de puerto a destino y se convierte en una repetición de estancias en el mar y en

tierra, de sueño y violencia. Las horas de trabajo eran horas de existencia vacía, pero los minutos eran centavos, y en cada dólar estaba cautiva la hora perdida para ganarlo: aquí se retenía al tiempo esclavo, para gastarlo luego según los propios deseos. Al igual que los avaros conservan los años escondidos en colchones y viejas latas, envueltos en periódicos, cosidos en forros (y en la costa cantan «¿Qué vamos a hacer con un marinero borracho?»), él salía de allí con varios meses en el bolsillo, y con plenos poderes para decidir cómo gastarlos.

—Me paso por el culo la ciudad de Nueva York entera —dijo el hombre con la muñeca Kewpie tatuada en el antebrazo, que estaba ante un espejo de los aseos comunes comiendo chile frío de una lata. Comía ante el espejo para poder ver dónde tenía la boca, pues llevaba tres días bebiendo. No trabajaba debido a la quemadura que tenía en la espalda, que según decía le había hecho un tipo arrojándole un pollo que acababa de sacar de una olla hirviendo, en un prostíbulo del puerto. La herida de su espalda no tenía forma de pollo. Había sido pintada con una solución púrpura, una gran isla con la forma de Australia el primer día, ahora reducida a las dimensiones de Nueva Zelanda, con la pincelada de Tasmania corrida mar adentro, pues el pulso del médico no era demasiado firme.

—Allí vivo yo —dijo Otto. Le gustaba entrar en aquellos aseos, pues los espejos en fila sobre los lavabos producían la agradable impresión de estar pasando ante numerosos escaparates—. Suena como si estuvieran haciendo toda una revolución —dijo Otto mientras se lavaba las manos en el lavabo contiguo.

—Esos bastardos no saben cómo hacer una revolución —dijo el otro, volviéndose con tal indignación anglosajona que el chile naranja le corrió por la barbilla—. ¿Sabes lo que haría yo si estuviera allí? Lo único que hay que hacer es atraer a esos polis idiotas con sus motocicletas y atravesar una buena cuerda de piano en la carretera, y luego ponerse al final de la carretera y dispararles un par de tiros. Entonces ellos te persiguen en sus motos y *zing zing zing* van cayendo sus cabezas. Lo único que hace falta es una buena cuerda de piano. No saben cómo hacer una revolución. Tienen miedo de que maten a alguien. Si yo estuviera allí…

—Tengo que hacer las maletas —dijo Otto—. ¿Has visto a Jesse?

—¿Para qué quieres ver a ese estúpido hijo de puta?

—Me voy. Sólo quería despedirme de él.

—¿Vas a algún sitio?

—¡A Nueva York! Ya te lo he dicho. Me voy a casa.

—¡A Nueva York! ¿Para qué quieres ir allí? Me paso por… —Pero estaba ocupado comiendo.

Otto acababa de recordar su original, el manuscrito de su obra. Estaba seguro de que no lo había guardado en una maleta, pues lo había dejado fuera para poder mirarlo hasta el último momento antes de marcharse. No apareció en ninguna parte en su habitación. Lo único que encontró fue un periódico, en el que había estado buscando avisos de levas de puertos cercanos (sabiendo durante todo el tiempo que cogería el barco de la Compañía) y sólo había encontrado un anuncio en el que se pedía un chihuahua macho para cría. Tiró el periódico a la otra punta del cuarto, y con un cigarrillo en el puño como arma humeante salió a grandes zancadas, bajó al porche y se dirigió hacia la chabola donde se reunían las mujeres de la limpieza a aquella hora del día.

—*¿Quién limpian mi cuarto mañana?* [24] —preguntó nada más llegar, soltando de golpe la frase que había tardado todo el camino en construir erróneamente.

Una mano tímida y vetusta se levantó entre las mujeres.

—*Yo* —contestó su propietaria, dejándola caer.

Una a una se levantaron todas las mujeres ante él.

—*¿Hay visto una manuscripta aquí?*

Otto se había inventado la palabra «manuscripta». Uno de los éxitos de su estancia había sido la eficiencia con que había evitado aprender más de treinta palabras mal pronunciadas de la lengua.

—*¿Qué dijo?*

—*La manuscripta de mi playa* —dijo Otto enérgicamente. Sabía que añadiendo una *a* podía traducir satisfactoriamente cualquier sustantivo inglés. [25] Las señoras estaban tremendamente confusas. Otto se dio la vuelta y se dirigió hacia su edificio. Ellas lo siguieron.

—*¿Qué dijo de playa?* —preguntó una, atraída por el misterio de un hombre que buscaba una playa. Ninguna intentó contestarle. Atravesaron en silencio la explanada de tierra. Una vez en su habitación, Otto se volvió hacia la mujer que había admitido haberla limpiado.

—*Él está para la máquina* —dijo, señalando la máquina de escribir—. *Esta mañana.*

—*Perdido* —dijo una mujer, satisfecha de que algo se hubiera perdido.

—*Sí, perdido* —dijo otra igualmente contenta, que empezó a buscar bajo el colchón.

—*¿Qué cosa?* —preguntó valientemente la acusada.

—*Papel* —dijo el amo—. *Papel que yo escribo mi playa al máquina* —terminó con triunfal confusión—. *Mi playa* —repitió amenazadoramente.

—*Es muy misterioso* [26] —dijo una de las mujeres.

—*Sí.*

—*Muy misterioso* —repitió la tercera, mientras la cuarta dejaba caer el colchón (era allí donde ella hubiera escondido algo) y se quedaba calladamente maravillada de aquel hombre que había perdido una playa en aquella habitación.

—*Titulito:* La vanidad del tiempo —volvió a empezar Otto.

—*No entiendo* —le replicó la mayor, desvalidamente desairante.

—*La vanidad del tiempo* —dijo él con más fuerza—. *La vanidad del tiempo,* maldita sea —casi gritó—. Analfabetas, viejas chochas analfabetas. —Buscó a su alrededor un lápiz, no encontró ninguno, volvió—. *Tiene una… una…* —Hizo gestos de escribir en el aire—. *Por escribo.*

Una le tendió un lápiz.

—*¿Un lápiz, señor?* —preguntó.

Lápiz, por supuesto; aunque cualquiera que lo mirase podía ver que era un lápiz. Se lo cogió de la mano y escribió

LA

VANIDAD DEL TIEMPO en grandes letras.

—*Mucho papel* —dijo.

—*Ay…* —dijo la vieja, cayendo en la cuenta—. *Pero sí, sí señor* —con feliz alivio. Aquel montón de papeles le resultaba incómodamente familiar. Una vez se lo habían señalado como *mucho importante,* y cada día había quitado el polvo con esmero a la hoja del título; las palabras eran tan inolvidablemente incomprensibles para ella como la leyenda en latín que rodeaba a la mayor Virgen local—. *Aquí está* —dijo alargando la mano hacia una pila de sábanas en un estante—. *Lo puse aquí cuando empacaba, todo estaba tan revuelto que tuve miedo de que se perdiera, o se ensuciara…* —terminó de decir, con algo que sonó como una palabra de inmenso alivio.

Dando un gran suspiro, Otto se lo cogió de las manos. *«Gracias, gracias, señoritas»,* musitó sin separar los ojos del valioso fajo. «Nada, de nada, señor» [27], murmuraron las cuatro entre sonrisas, y salieron por la puerta arrastrando los pies, apiñadas en torno a la exculpada en demanda de una explicación.

Llevó el fajo de hojas en limpio hasta una silla. Las palabras eran hermosas. Las propias letras eran hermosas. Su letra, en cuidadosas notas escritas en algunos márgenes para dar a la cosa un aire informal, era hermosa. Leyó al azar las conocidas frases, sonriéndose. Todas las páginas eran hermosas, salvo una que tendría que volver a mecanografiar, pues había aplastado una cucaracha encima. O tal vez, tal vez tuviera estilo propio, aquella mancha oscura. En Centroamérica había tarántulas (aunque él no había visto ninguna). ¿O eran viudas negras? ¿Y dejaría una mancha parda una viuda negra?

Luego volvió la cara hacia la puerta. La sonrisa obsequiosa había desaparecido. Con la ceja izquierda arqueada, los labios humedecidos, ligeramente separados y fruncidos, esperó mientras se acercaba un editor, con la mano tendida en gesto de bienvenida. Otto contempló la visión, ladeó la cabeza despreocupadamente, buscó un cigarrillo. No llevaba ninguno en el traje de lino. Tuvo que interrumpirse para ir por el necesario accesorio a la sucia camisa de rayas; y regresó a la silla dando toda la vuelta a la habitación, deteniéndose (ante el espejo) para encender el cigarrillo. Al dejar las hojas en la mesa del editor se le cayeron algunas, pues sólo podía usar una mano. «Traiga, deje que le ayude», dijo el editor. «Nada grave, espero». «Nada, nada en absoluto», contestó Otto, volviendo a meterse el brazo en cabestrillo bajo la chaqueta. «Un rasguño. Centroamérica, ya sabe».

Leyó unas cuantas líneas del segundo acto y exhaló un perfecto anillo de humo en el aire inmóvil. Luego estaba Esther. ¿Dónde la vería? ¿En el piso? Pero no quería volver a ver a su marido. Pensar en aquel hombre apenas diez años mayor que él le revolvía el estómago; aquel hombre que al principio había parecido casi un padre, luego un tonto y, finalmente, casi un maníaco. Sería mejor llamar a Esther para tomar unas copas. O para invitarla a comer. Todavía mejor encontrarse con ella por casualidad, por accidente cuidadosamente preparado.

—Qué aspecto tan maravilloso tienes, Otto.

—Un poco de color… ¿Qué tal te ha ido?

—Oh, lo mismo de siempre, ya sabes, pero sin ti ha sido tan aburrido y solitario… Pero ¿y tú, qué me dices de ti? ¿Y qué te ha pasado en la mano?

—Una revolución. Una de esas cosas sin importancia, un gaje del oficio muy corriente allá abajo.

Posiblemente leerías algo al respecto en los periódicos.

—Oh, nunca los leo, ya lo sabes, ya no. Pero me han dicho que has escrito una obra maravillosa.

Y luego, mientras se quitaba la camisa y los pantalones: «Y estás tan moreno, todo el cuerpo, y todo vestido de blanco…».

Fuera, el sol derramaba su calor sobre el verde interminable de los bananeros con hojas en forma de abanico. Mientras Otto recorría penosamente el porche cargado con dos maletas y su máquina de escribir, salió una voz de una puerta abierta.

—Eh, ven aquí, quiero enseñarte unas fotos.

—Tengo que coger el tren del puerto —gritó al hombre de la muñeca Kewpie tatuada en el antebrazo—. Sale dentro de veinte minutos.

—Ven aquí. Quiero enseñarte unas fotos.

Otto se había imaginado alguna vez hermosas despedidas de hombre a hombre, cordiales apretones de manos, unas pocas palabras de brusca pero leal amistad. Dejó sus bultos junto a la puerta y entró. Instantáneas de todos los tamaños y grados de descoloramiento rodeaban al hombre sentado sobre la colcha arrugada.

—Las estoy poniendo en un álbum —dijo. Apenas podía incorporarse—. ¿Ves ésta? Este soy yo con mi primer coche, en Pensilvania. —Extendió cola por todo el dorso, y luego sacó un sobre de esas cantoneras negras que se usan para pegar fotos en álbumes, y las encajó en las esquinas. Mientras las ensalivaba se desprendieron y se le metieron en la boca, y la cola le cayó por la barbilla, manchada de chile seco—. ¿Ves ésta de aquí? —siguió, escupiendo las cantoneras y sacando otras—. Este soy yo con mi viejo. Lo que hay detrás es mi primer coche. Era en 1931, ¿lo ves? Un coche nuevo. A pesar de todo no me iba tan mal. —En las páginas que había completado, las fotos aparecían firmemente pegadas con artístico descuido respecto a los ángulos, el tamaño y el número de cantoneras. Sin embargo, todas coincidían en una cosa—: Éste soy yo. Éste soy yo en un bar de Brooklyn con unos marineros griegos, uno de ellos tenía una cámara, yo estaba trabajando en el arsenal de la Armada. Éste soy yo en Panamá, trabajé en la zona del Canal antes de venir aquí. Éste soy yo en Darién, en una cacería con unos indios. Mira, éste soy yo con unos indios cunas…

—Tengo que irme, tengo que coger ese tren. Sale dentro de unos diez minutos.

—Mira, mira ésta… —Para entonces tenía ya casi toda la barbilla cubierta de cola, y cantoneras pegadas a las muñecas y los brazos, rodeando la muñeca Kewpie—. Éste soy yo… —empezó mientras Otto se dirigía hacia la puerta—. Oye, puedes pasarme esa botella que hay en la mesa antes de irte, no quiero levantarme y armar un lío con todo esto. Mis nietos…

Cuando Otto se alejaba por el porche oyó a sus espaldas una sonora ventosidad y la frase: «Ahí va un beso de despedida para ti, chaval».

Mientras corría, los leves copos de ceniza que flotaban en el aire se posaban en su traje de lino blanco.

La pequeña ciudad del puerto podría haber tenido un solo sentido en este mundo temporal, el de ponerse presentable para la partida de Otto, tras lo cual podía muy bien hundirse en una larga e ininterrumpida decadencia. Paseó de un lado a otro por sus calles, mirando a su alrededor con aire despreocupado, deteniéndose sólo cuando veía su reflejo repentino en el escaparate de una tienda. Parado ante una tienda parecía estar mirando los artículos expuestos ante él, pero su mirada no iba más allá de la imagen, que le devolvía el cristal. Luego cruzó al lado en sombra de la calle. Pasó ante una galería en la que tres negros jugaban a las cartas. Al verlo señalaron hacia arriba, sobre sus cabezas, sonriendo y asintiendo. Encima, en una terraza, había una chica tan negra y sonriente como los de abajo. Sólo iba envuelta en una toalla blanca, sujeta con una mano. «¿Quieres pollita?», preguntó uno de los hombres. «Chico, cambia tu suerte», gritó otro tras él mientras seguía andando. «Chico lindo coge todo lo que quiere…».

La blancura del barco de la Compañía resplandecía bajo el fuerte sol. Había pocos pasajeros a la vista, pero el muelle estaba abarrotado de gente vendiendo y mendigando y buscando cualquier trabajo que les permitiera ganar un centavo. El color de su piel iba del café claro al negro carbón. Vestían ropa que nunca habían visto nueva, y todos llevaban cosas sin valor, una cesta de muñecas de paja, fajos de papeles, dulces incomibles.

—*La limpia* [28] —gritó un crío a Otto, señalando los zapatos, y luego perdió interés.

Aquellos zapatos eran perfectos. El traje de lino blanco se había arrugado favorecedoramente durante el viaje, y bajo aquella luz cegadora el matiz gris de las cenizas no se veía, claramente la definición de la timidez cultivada. Por un bolsillo lateral asomaba un libro francés, titulado *Adolphe,* que siempre llevaba encima cuando viajaba y simulaba leer en lugares públicos. Mientras se dirigía hacia el barco, con un chico

que apenas le llegaba a la cintura cargado con sus bultos, el sol proyectaba su sombra dando zancadas ante él con engreída seguridad.

Junto al barco se sacó el dinero suelto del bolsillo para contarlo. Había unas cuantas monedas de la república que abandonaba, mezcladas con otras *E Pluribus Unum* de diez y veinticinco centavos, curiosas monedas relucientes (se había asegurado de escogerlas nuevas) con las que pagaría por error en bares de Nueva York. Sintió que una mano le tocaba el brazo, y al volverse se encontró con una cara negra prematuramente envejecida, carente por completo de belleza a sus ojos.

—*Una limosnita, por el amor de Dios*… [29] —La cara tenía mechones de pelo en la barbilla y sobre el labio, tan nítidamente blancos que parecían haber sido pegados allí un momento antes. Otto contempló sus monedas. La brillante de dos centavos y medio parecía de diez. Pensó que el mendigo se confundiría también, o creería que lo había hecho sin darse cuenta. Puso la moneda menor en la vieja mano y se dio la vuelta—. *Dios se lo pague* —dijo la voz con amable tono amenazador.

Una vez se hubo deshecho del equipaje y su porteador, Otto cruzó la ciudad hasta la amplia plaza abierta con bancos de cemento y palmeras. En el centro había una fuente seca, y niños que no parecían tener nada de qué reírse y se reían de nada. Callaron un momento cuando pasó el cura. Era un ser largo con faldones negros y botones magenta de la garganta a los pies, con cinco botones magenta en cada puño. Alrededor de la parte más voluminosa de su persona llevaba un ancho fajín de glorioso púrpura. Su negro sombrero redondo tenía un cintillo púrpura. No hizo gesto alguno mientras se acercaba a la catedral.

La deteriorada fachada de aquel viejo edificio estaba bañada por el sol. Resultaba difícil creer que alguna vez había sido nuevo, que estaba construido piedra a piedra bajo la superficie de yeso. Los santos, algunos sin brazos y sin cabeza, esperaban en nichos tranquilos, erosionados y pulidos por la lluvia. Las torres se erguían pesadamente con campanas calladas. Pero en algunos sitios se había caído el yeso, mostrando los muros construidos ladrillo a ladrillo, separados con capas de mortero puestas por manos de hombres. Junto a la entrada esperaba una Virgen; el cura entró sin mirarla, pasó a su lado con seguridad de propietario. Cuando desapareció los niños se olvidaron de él y se acordaron de sí mismos. Los pájaros, que no olvidaban nada ni se acordaban de nada, sembraban los bancos de puntos blancos.

Otto apretó el paso, temiendo que alguno le cayera en el traje, y de repente se encontró cara a cara con una muchacha junto a la fuente seca. El halo de oscuridad que la rodeaba le daba un aire de riqueza, la piel de un color jamás quemado por ningún sol; y durante un instante evanescente la amó. Al recuperarse sintió un azoramiento igualmente repentino, y rodeándola atravesó la plaza.

En torno al peso de la catedral, la ciudad parecía transitoria, brillantemente coloreada y fortuita, como si desprovista de aquel peso fuera a desintegrarse, a alejarse y perderse entre las verdes colinas.

El buque blanco se alejó perezosamente del muelle, de las caras negras, cobrizas y morenas vueltas hacia arriba, de las manos extendidas para coger al vuelo una última moneda y de las pocas levantadas en gestos de despedida. El agua era poco profunda y verde claro. Lentamente fue quedando atrás el calor de la tierra, y en la barandilla de la cubierta de botes, separadas por cierta distancia, dos personas se quedaron mirando cómo perdían forma los edificios y se convertían en manchas de color, cómo perdían su majestad las palmeras y se confundían gradualmente con el verde oscuro del campo. El puerto estaba en calma, no se advertía ningún movimiento, y sus gritos y sonidos se habían extinguido; sólo se oía la trepidación del barco, que avanzaba resueltamente por aguas de un azul cada vez más oscuro. Mientras se acercaba a la proa, Otto se llevaba consigo el sol de aquel país perdido.

Sacó un estuche del bolsillo, lo abrió, y se mordió el tembloroso labio inferior con los dientes cuando una sacudida del barco le golpeó la mano contra la barandilla y envió las gafas de sol con montura de oro al agua blanca. Se quedó apretando con fuerza el estuche vacío, mirando por encima de la proa hacia donde hendía el agua, como si tuviera que haber alguna forma de recuperarlas.

—Qué pena —dijo una voz jovial a su lado, un norteamericano ferozmente enrojecido por el sol—. Parecían unas gafas muy bonitas. —Otto cerró el estuche y se lo metió en el bolsillo—. ¿Por qué no tira también la funda? —preguntó su testigo.

—Puedo usarla para algo —dijo hoscamente Otto, a la defensiva.

—¿Para llevar pastillas? —dijo el viajero, y volvió a reír—. Hace un calor infernal, ¿eh? Refrescará cuando nos alejemos un poco.

—Es posible —dijo Otto, y se dirigió hacia popa.

El espejo de su camarote era más pequeño de lo que le habría gustado, con un marco de madera cubierto por una gruesa capa de pintura verde. Revisó su equipaje. Estaba todo allí, con tarjetas de

embarque atadas a las asas. Luego se le ocurrió mirarse las uñas. No como lo hace un hombre, con los dedos doblados sobre la palma, sino como una dama, contemplando el dorso de la mano extendida para admirar la delicada belleza de sus dedos. Otto admiró la tiesa forma oscura de su mano, se olvidó de mirarse las uñas y tuvo que volver a mirar (con los dedos doblados sobre la palma). Inmediatamente sintió el dolor de tener que tapar aquella hermosa mano con una venda. Sin embargo, podía haberse hecho la herida en la muñeca, en cuyo caso la gasa blanca iría espléndidamente con la mano, resaltando sus largos dedos morenos como el guante de noche de una dama. Comprobó que le quedaban dos paquetes de Emú para ofrecer (preferentemente a las damas), mostrando después una despreocupada indiferencia hacia sus toses sofocadas. Pensó en deshacer las maletas, pero no había ninguna prisa. El cabestrillo que había preparado estaba en lo alto de la pequeña. Habría tiempo aquella noche para volverlo a intentar, para decidir dónde pondría el vendaje, dónde estaba la herida.

El sol descendía hacia el mar, acentuada su rojez con la prisa por marcharse, corriendo como si le persiguieran. La tierra quedaba ya muy atrás, una leve bruma tras la estela del barco, que se curvaba lentamente, una estela blanca sembrada ya de desperdicios sobre los que se arrojaban y revoloteaban pájaros blancos. Otto no vio nada de esto. Había empezado a fijar en la pared el grabado italiano *(Virgen de los enebros),* pero se acordó de lo que había dicho Jesse, se acobardó y decidió no hacerlo. Se acordó de su cartera, y palpó con la muñeca el bulto de su chaqueta. Su pelo, como sus uñas, tenía justo la longitud adecuada. También el bigote, ralo y rubio. Se apretó el nudo de la corbata y se estiró los faldones de la chaqueta. Con el humo de un nuevo cigarrillo arrojó un círculo perfecto contra la dura superficie del espejo, donde quedó prendido, agrandándose y aclarándose alrededor de aquella imagen de su cara apremiante.

Cargado con diez millones de plátanos, el barco seguía su rumbo remontando la costa del Nuevo Mundo, dejando un rastro de desechos que se agitaban confusamente en el agua a su paso, cada vez más brillantes a medida que la luna salía a proa por estribor y ascendía sin esfuerzo por el cielo, sin avergonzarse de los estigmas que mancillaban la cara que mostraba desde las gélidas nieblas de los Grand Banks hasta las selvas de Brasil, donde a orillas del río Branco se la conoce como una muchacha que amaba a su hermano el sol, y el sol, receloso, delató su perversa pasión dibujando una mano ennegrecida en su cara, dejando las marcas que la traicionaron, y que la siguen traicionando.

V

«América es el país de los jóvenes».

EMERSON

—Nada —dijo Maude Munk.

—¿Nada? —repitió Arny Munk.

—Nada —confirmó ella, dejando caer cubitos de hielo en un vaso—. Lo mismo. Me han preguntado lo mismo que llevan preguntándome desde hace tres años. Que si *estaba* consciente después del accidente, y si no lo estaba cómo pude contárselo a la policía, y que si me dolía la espalda *entonces*, y si me dolía por qué no consta en la ficha clínica. Luego mi médico y su médico discuten, y mi abogado y su abogado discuten, y el taxista que conducía el taxi vive ahora en Detroit. Me gustaría que dejaras los zapatos en otro sitio cuando te los quitas.

—Bueno, yo podría decirles que te ha cambiado la personalidad. Y antes de ese accidente no bebías. Te molestaba que yo bebiese.

—Y me sigue molestando, Arny. Terriblemente. Y tú no tienes dolores como yo. Hoy llegué a preguntarle al juez: «¿Dejaría usted que le operasen dos veces y llevaría un braguero vertebral si se estuviera fingiendo enfermo?».

—Ten cuidado, Maude, estás derramando tu copa —dijo él, enderezando el vaso, que goteaba olvidado en su mano.

La radio emitía música de cóctel, «Cuando Buda sonríe».

—¿Qué te pasa? ¿Estás cansado? ¿Arny…? Oh, me gustaría que te cansaras haciendo algo que te guste.

—Uno no se gana la vida haciendo algo que le guste.

—Pero vender… y año tras año… y… cosas como la de la semana pasada.

—Maude.

—¿Lo sabe tu padre? O simplemente finge que no lo sabe, y se alegra de que colocaras otra remesa jugando a las cartas en una habitación de hotel adonde mandan mujeres desnudas para vuestros clientes de provincias. Y mientras tanto tu padre con esa pinta tan digna de anciano respetable. Bueno, si mi papá hubiera…

—Maude.

—De todas formas, mi papá era un hombre.

—¿Qué quieres decir con eso? Sólo porque me hice una hernia…

—No me refiero a tu vieja hernia. Sólo que… —Se lo quedó mirando un momento, y luego se levantó, se sirvió otra copa y cambió de emisora. Finalmente preguntó—. ¿Qué estás leyendo? ¿Arny? Ni siquiera estás leyendo, ¿verdad?

—Maude.

—Como si estuvieras completamente solo. A veces entro en la habitación y te veo ahí sentado con un libro abierto, pero no estás leyendo. ¿Te quedas ahí sentado mirando a la página pero sin leer? ¿Te sientes solo?

«… que parece mejor, huele mejor, sabe mejor y es mejor», dijo la voz de un joven por la radio.

—Pero ¿cómo puedes sentirte solo? *Yo* estoy aquí.

—«… la próxima pieza de nuestro programa, la Obertura del Festival Académico, de Chaikovski».

—Arny, ¿has rellenado los papeles?

—¿Qué papeles?

—*Los* papeles, cuáles van a ser. Para el Centro de Adopción Corazón Rojo.

—Es Sagrado Corazón. Corazón Rojo es una comida para perros.

—Bueno, sea como sea, ¿los has rellenado?

—Sí, Maude.

—¿Y podemos ir a recogerlo mañana?

—Quizá tengamos que esperar.

—¿Cuánto tiempo?

—Maude, por favor, no te tomes otra copa.

—Una pequeñita nada más, Arny. Hará que todo vuelva a ser diferente entre nosotros, ¿verdad? ¿Para ti? Quiero decir, para mí, hará que volvamos a ser como éramos, ¿verdad?

—¿Está lista la cena?

—¿Quieres chutney?

—¿Chutney?

—Con el curry.

—Sí.

—Entonces tendrás que salir a comprarlo. No queda nada.

—Entonces me da igual.

—Pero yo quiero chutney.

—Esperaré mientras vas a comprarlo. El paseo te sentará bien —añadió, alzando la vista hacia los ojos de su mujer, que oscilaban por encima de él sin detenerse en nada—. Están llamando a la puerta.

—Oh, Herschel, lo había olvidado, ha llamado Herschel y no hay forma de cortarlo por teléfono hasta quedar con él de algún modo, dijo que se pasaría por…

—¿Vas a abrir la puerta?

—¡Herschel…! Arny, es Herschel, y… ¡viene con una chica!

Ante la puerta había una señorita subiéndose una liga. Su acompañante la observaba.

—Bueno, entrad —dijo Maude.

Herschel esperó hasta que la liga quedó ajustada, la media alisada sobre la rodilla, la falda sobre el muslo. Entonces dijo:

—¡Cariño! —mirando por primera vez a Maude, y le tendió las dos manos. Herschel era alto y siempre había sido guapo. Había sido el chico más guapo de su pueblo natal, y el único de aquella zona de Ohio que tenía esmoquin. Su foto, con esmoquin, estaba todavía en el escaparate del fotógrafo de la calle mayor, donde, amarillenta y moteada por las moscas, seguía conservando cierto prestigio, pues llevaba varios años sin ir a casa—. Vengo con una amiguita bípeda —dijo—. Arny y Maude, os presento a…

—Adeline —aportó la rubia.

—Adeline.

—Qué tal estáis y todo eso —dijo Adeline.

—Cariño, ¿de verdad te llamas Adeline? Yo tuve una niñera que se llamaba Adeline, una negra, la gran negra Adeline de las Indias Occidentales. Un día le di un mordisco bajo el manzano en plena…

—¡Herschel…! Tu cabeza es braquicéfala —dijo Maude desde donde estaba sirviendo bebidas, whisky con agua (había oído decir que la soda era mala para las paredes del estómago)—. Es la forma de moda en cabezas.

—Qué encanto eres, cariño. Nadie me ha dicho nunca *eso.*

—Maude.

—Es verdad, Arny. La forma de la cabeza es muy importante. Arny cree que soy tonta porque leo libros sobre cabezas, ese libro que está ahí. ¿Ves la ilustración por la que está abierto? Es un buen ejemplar de doméstica. Por eso quiero ver primero a los bebés, no queremos uno que vaya a salir doméstico. En la página siguiente hay una un poco prominente por detrás, esa es la Intelectual. Y esa grande y cuadrada es la del Líder de Hombres. Vamos a tener un bebé —dijo deteniéndose camino de la cocina, adonde iba por más agua. Adeline dejó suspendido su vaso ante sus labios y contempló con curiosidad la figura de la otra mujer —. Mañana por la mañana.

Adeline pareció terriblemente ofendida.

—Oh Dios, ¿otra vez, cariño? —dijo Herschel, recostándose en su butaca.

—No, esta vez sí que vamos a ir, ¿verdad, Arny? Mañana a las nueve. Oh, ¿querías una copa? No sabía que la querías, Arny.

—No debería decir esto, cariño, pero si vas buscando una ganga…

Maude gritó desde la cocina:

—Oh… una cucaracha. Odio Nueva York, vivas donde vivas hay cucarachas. Los del piso de abajo también tienen, las ahuyentan hasta aquí arriba y luego yo las ahuyento otra vez hacia abajo, arriba y abajo por el sumidero.

—¿Por qué no utilizas DDT?

—No sirve de nada, sólo las pone histéricas —dijo Maude, entrando con el agua—. Corren chillando de un lado a otro.

—¿Las cucarachas?

—Bueno, en realidad no se las oye, pero se adivina que es eso lo que hacen, es lo que hace uno cuando

está histérico.

—Cariño…

—Sí, mañana a las nueve. ¿Has terminado ya ésa, Arny?

—Si no tienes muchísima prisa —dijo Herschel con aire taimado—, sé de alguien que podría ayudarte. Alguien que va a tener uno. Quiero decir, tenerlo de verdad. Aunque todavía no.

—¿Una mujer? Pero ¿cómo puede ayudarme eso…?

—Porque no lo quiere tener, cariño. Alguien me dijo que estaba buscando un médico, alguien cuyo nombre no debo mencionar, y me preguntó a mí. ¿Te imaginas que *yo* pudiera saber una cosa así?

—¿Un médico? Conozco muchos médicos, ¿de qué clase? Médicos de la espalda, médicos de huesos…

—No, un médico que le *arregle* el asunto, uno con un instrumento…

—¡Oh!

—Maude, estás derramando la copa.

—Tú conoces a Esther, cariño… Bueno, no soy quién para decirlo, pero…

—Me la encontré por la calle —dijo Maude—. Tiene una mala suerte.

—¿Te lo contó a ti?

—¿Lo de Rose?

—Oh, no, todo el mundo sabe lo de Rose, que le han mandado a su hermana Rose de esa granja de chiflados y Esther ha tenido que acogerla en su casa. Pero esto es algo que no debes contar a nadie, cariño. Tus orejitas deben ser una tumba. Tiene un pavo en el horno.

—¿Tiene qué?

—Está encinta, cariño.

—Pero… ¿su marido?

—¡Su marido! Nadie sabe nada de él. Yo no lo conozco. Estoy seguro de que si hubiera dicho alguna vez algo divertido lo habría conocido en algún sitio, pero tengo entendido que vive bajo tierra. O bajo el agua. En alguna zona de la ciudad realmente absurda. Nadie ha estado nunca allí.

—Antes pintaba, ¿no? Pintaba cosas, ¿verdad?

—Oh, y quién no, yo también pintaba —dijo Herschel—, las cosas más escabrosas que…

—Nadie lo ha vuelto a ver desde que aquel chico, Otto… ¿te acuerdas de Otto?

—¿Otto? Ya nadie se llama Otto, debe de ser un impostor.

—Herschel, tú lo conoces, tonto. Se lo veía en todas partes con Esther antes de que ella y su marido… quiero decir, después de que ella y su marido…

—Oh, sí que me acuerdo, Otto. No paraba de hablar. Era bastante mono. Sí, me acuerdo de Otto, durante casi un año él y Esther hicieron la mitad de una pareja muy linda. No debes repetir esto, pero me contaron que Otto y el marido de Esther…

—Herschel, no seas…

—Cariño, yo no tengo la culpa de todas las cosas raras que ocurren. Me lo explicaron como un complejo de padre o un complejo de madre o algo vulgar. En fin, ya nadie tiene secretos.

—Pero el marido de Esther, qué…

—No debes contarlo, pero anda mezclado con una banda internacional de falsificadores, hace oro allí abajo, lo saca de recortes de uñas…

—Herschel, tonto…

Adeline parecía muy interesada.

—Pero cariño, si todo el mundo lo sabe. Y tiene allí una chiquilla escuálida… bueno, de *ella* se cuentan historias de lo más terroríñco. Se sabe que toma drogas. Se sabe en todas partes.

En esto, Maude sacó una cajita redonda de esmalte de Battersea, con las palabras «Vivimos con esperanza» en la tapa, y sacó una pastilla.

—Otra copa no, Arny, mañana por la mañana…

—¿Quieres otra?

—No, me duele un poco la cabeza.

—No os toméis a mal que os pregunte esto —empezó Herschel—, al fin y al cabo todos tenemos el mismo psicoanalista.

—Me gustaría que Arny hubiera terminado, yo casi he terminado el mío —dijo Maude—. Me recordaba a papá. Nos presentó él, ¿lo sabías?

—¿A ti y a Arny?

—Sí, pensó que podríamos ayudarnos mutuamente, y por eso pensó que deberíamos casarnos. Supongo que ésa es la razón por la que nunca terminamos. El análisis, quiero decir. Arny, casi te has acabado esa

botella de whisky. Ya sabes lo que pasó el sábado.

—Pero… ¿podéis decirme por qué no os lanzáis sin más y *tenéis* un bebé?

—Es más fácil… es más fácil de este modo, ¿verdad, Arny? Y además, ¿cómo se puede tener un bebé hoy día en un… un sitio como éste, cómo se puede…?

Maude pareció de repente a punto de echarse a llorar. Cuando sonó el timbre de la puerta corrió hacia ella, pero se detuvo un momento antes de abrirla.

Fuera estaba un joven bronceado, con ropa veraniega, bastante azorado.

—¡Otto! —dijo ella—. ¡Vaya, Otto, qué gracioso! Es Otto —dijo volviéndose hacia la habitación, y luego, mientras le seguía—: Qué moreno estás.

—«Les pido perdón, señoras y señores, se trataba del Festival Académico de Brahms. Nuestra próxima pieza, del compositor francés Clair… quiero decir Claude Debussy, "Alapres midi dunfon"…».

Otto arqueó una ceja, blandió el cabestrillo y tropezó con los zapatos que había junto a la mesa.

Arny se levantó y le ofreció una bebida. Herschel se levantó y dijo:

—Cariño, ¿qué haces con un traje como ése? Te morirás de frío.

Y Adeline se quedó mirando el bigote dorado, y el brazo en cabestrillo, y no dijo nada en absoluto.

—Me muero de frío, pero es el único que tengo. Los demás me vienen siguiendo, deben estar en algún lugar entre aquí y la tierra de los plátanos.

—¿Quién te viene siguiendo, cariño?

—No, me refiero a mi ropa. He estado en una plantación de pl…

—Oh, sí, estabas en una plantación de plátanos —dijo Maude—. Me lo dijo Esther. Sonaba tan… tan horrible que traté de olvidarlo.

—No sabía que la gente siguiera huyendo a plantaciones de plátanos. No, no vayas a una plantación de plátanos, cariño. Está pasado de moda.

—Herschel, tonto. Acaba de volver.

—Con más razón se lo digo. ¿Por qué llevas eso? —dijo Herschel, señalando el cabestrillo.

—Mi mano, yo…

—¿Le pasó algo?

—Hubo una revolución. Bueno, son riesgos normales del…

—Para empezar no entiendo por qué se te ocurrió ir allí lejos.

—No estuvo tan mal. A pesar de la revolución conseguí escribir una obra de teatro…

—¿Sí? —preguntó Maude—. ¿Sobre plátanos? Arny, no bebas más, por favor. Mañana a las nueve tenemos que estar allí, esta vez va en serio. —Se volvió hacía Otto, que estaba ocupado arqueando una ceja hacia Adeline—. Vamos a tener un bebé.

—¿De verdad? Es maravilloso, me…

—Mañana mismo vamos a ir a adoptar uno.

—Es maravilloso, me…

—¿Alguien quiere venir a una fiesta? —preguntó Herschel—. Era allí adonde íbamos.

—¿Quién la da? —preguntó Maude.

—No lo sé, cariño. Es una fiesta para un cuadro. Alguien ha pintado un cuadro, así que van a hacer una fiesta para que todo el mundo pueda verlo. ¿Entiendes?

—¿Dónde es?

—Aquí tengo la dirección. Alguien me la escribió. —Sacó un papel arrugado con Memorándum impreso en lo alto en negritas, y luego, en letra gótica, *Senado de los Estados Unidos*—. En la calle Sullivan.

—No podría soportar una fiesta en el Village esta noche. ¿Y tú, Arny? Son siempre tan horr…

—Horribles —la ayudó Herschel.

—No iba a decir eso, tonto. Iba a decir horrendas. No podría soportar una esta noche, ese aire especial del Village de palidez cadavérica y mugre inhumanas. Y mañana mismo, Arny, por favor, no te tomes otra. No, Herschel, de verdad, suena demasiado horrible.

—Tienes razón, cariño, por supuesto. Has conseguido que ahora me sienta fatal al pensar en ir. Pero todos los que van se sienten igual. ¿Quieres venir a ver el cuadro? —preguntó a Otto, que acababa de encender un hediondo cigarrillo negro con la ayuda de Adeline, junto a su silla—. Oh, lo siento. Adeline, te presento a Otto. ¿Quieres venir con nosotros? El cuadro se llama *chantier.*

L'âme d'un

—Herschel, qué tonto. ¿En serio? En serio. ¿Qué es un Lam?

—No tengo ni idea de quién la da —dijo Herschel—. No importa, siempre te encuentras con la misma gente.

—Significa alma —dijo Otto—. El alma de un…

—Y *chantier* es «cantante» —dijo Maude—. El alma de un cantante.

—¿Vienes, cariño? —dijo Herschel, cogiendo su abrigo y el de Adeline.

—¿Habéis visto últimamente a Esther? —preguntó Otto, titubeando un poco—. Quiero decir, ¿creéis que podríamos…?

—Llevo meses sin verla —dijo Herschel.

—Bueno, conocía a gente allí, me…

—No tengas miedo. Todo el mundo tiene un pasado del Village. Los que se quedan allí simplemente no saben que está pasado.

—No, no quería decir eso, me…

—Arny, por favor. No más. Recuerda lo que hiciste el sábado por la noche. —Maude se volvió hacia ellos—. El sábado por la noche Arny se quedó bebiendo aquí hasta muy tarde, él solo, y cuando me levanté el domingo descubrí que se había desnudado y había metido toda su ropa cuidadosamente doblada en la nevera.

Mientras subían los cuatro tramos de escaleras, Herschel instruyó a Adeline. «Todos hablan de pintura. Recuérdalo bien, diga lo que diga quien sea, tú simplemente haz un comentario sobre los sólidos en Uccello. Puedes decir que no te gustan o que son divinos. ¿Te acordarás de eso? Los *sólidos* en U*che*lo, ¿sabes decir eso?». Llegaron a una habitación llena de gente que pasaba la vida en habitaciones.

Adeline fue directamente en busca del cuarto de baño; Herschel se quedó apoyado en la jamba de la puerta, recuperando el aliento; y Otto (pensando únicamente en cómo quedaría Otto entrando en una habitación) entró. Iba vestido cómodamente para la temperatura que hacía. No era una habitación muy grande. Los invitados ya instalados estaban demasiado absortos hablando, o esperando a tener ocasión de hablar, para fijarse en los recién llegados. Algunos alzaron la vista, como alzan la vista las personas sentadas en el compartimiento de un tren para echar una ojeada a un nuevo viajero que avanza penosamente por el pasillo lateral en busca de un asiento; pero todos mantuvieron una compostura que reflejaba la impertinencia mostrada por los recién llegados por el mero hecho de llegar. Es decir, todos menos los dos policías, que estaban situados como relojes que deben ponerse torcidos para indicar la hora.

En la desconchada repisa gris de la chimenea había una corona fúnebre, que alguien había cogido alegremente de la puerta de una afligida familia italiana del piso de abajo. Encima estaba colgado el cuadro. Nadie lo miraba. El lienzo sin marco era de color canela. La parte central aparecía salpicada de unas cuantas gotas brillantes de minio. Los puntos de la esquina inferior izquierda eran de color de orín; sobre ellos había largas líneas de pintura verde, y en la parte superior derecha una gran mancha de lo que parecía ser grasa negra. Daba la sensación de que habían expuesto la espalda de la camisa de un honrado obrero, de que las mangas, el cuello y los faldones podrían encontrarse entre los desechos de la chimenea.

Un joven con gafas de montura de carey, que tenía en la mano unas hojas tituladas *Iniciación al inodoro y democracia* estaba diciendo: «Pero tenéis que entender Nueva York. Nueva York es una experiencia social». Otro dijo: «No me digas lo sincero que es. Le interesa Roma de un modo tan superficial como a otros les interesa *El gozo de cocinar*». Un hombre con barba decía a una chica: «Desde que me casé no he vuelto a mirar a otra mujer. ¿Me encuentras atractivo?». Alguien chilló: «¡Maricas! Hasta las cucarachas de esta casa son maricas».

—Realmente —dijo Herschel, cuando recuperó el aliento—, qué afectadamente artísticos podemos llegar a ser.

—Sí —dijo Otto, que había dejado de mirar el cuadro—. ¿Quién es ésa?

Había entrevisto fugazmente a una mujer bronceada con un vestido blanco por una abertura de la cortina de fondillos de pantalones que la rodeaba, y que inmediatamente volvió a ocultarla. Sin embargo, su voz seguía oyéndose: «Querido, estuvimos allí seis semanas, y durante todo ese tiempo no cenamos en casa más que cuatro o cinco veces, y fueron cenas de gala».

—¿No la conoces? Es Agnes Deigh, acaba de volver de Puerto Rico. Gracias a Dios, también ella está curda.

—No, no la conozco, me…

—¿Conoces a su hermano? ¿No? Es el chico más mono… ¡Bueno! Por supuesto, en realidad yo nunca lo he visto, no me deja, por alguna ñoña razón. Pero he visto su foto, vestido de soldado, el chico más mono… *Nada* que ver con su marido Harry, que es el tipo más… También es escritor, ¿sabes? «Publica y estarás perdido», decía el duque de Wellington, ¿recuerdas? Harry está en Hollywood, dicho al revés. ¿Entiendes lo

que quiero decir? «No comercies con arte pudiente», dicho al revés. Oh, da igual. Después de todo, son precisamente las impurezas las que dan a las gemas su brillo exquisito, ¿no? ¡Y su valor! Porque Shelley bebía láudano como una esponja, ¿no? ¡Y Swinburne, por supuesto! ¡Querido! Me siento tan desnudo entre toda esta gente. Es como un baile de máscaras, ¿no? ¡Mira!, ¿la ves?, esa chica del sofá, se parece *demasiado* a la *noyée de la Seine,* esa patética máscara fúnebre que sacaron de la cara de una pobre cría sin nombre que no pudo seguir afrontando la vida. Quiero decir la vida real, ya sabes. Y dime si no fue de lo más *francés* conservar su belleza cuando estaba muerta en una máscara que *todos* pudiéramos admirar, en vez de derrochar dinero para mantenerla viva y permitirle conseguir… pues todas las cosas que las mujeres *consiguen.* Ahí está, ¿la ves?, demasiado *noyée* para hablar, ay, si pudiera ser tan bella correría mañana mismo a ahogarme, ¿tú no? Me siento tan desnudo, ¿tú no?, entre toda esta gente espantosamente enmascarada. ¿Recuerdas a Maupassant?, Guy de Maupassant, por supuesto, escribiendo a aquella chica rusa: «Yo me enmascaro entre gente enmascarada». ¿Lo recuerdas? No llegaron a conocerse, ya sabes. No llegaron a conocerse, no. Por supuesto, él estaba más loco que una cabra, y ella se llamaba Marie Bashkirtseff. Pintaba. También se murió, sabes, antes de poder ganar trescientas libras en los sitios más obvios y convertirse en mujer. Era rusa. Y ahí va ese chico horrible que me habló de Thomas à Becket. No, ¿o era Kempis? ¡Plagiando la *Imitación de Cristo,* imagínate! ¿Lo ves? Ése, el de la piel bastante estropeada, es mono, ¿no? Pero imagínatelo plagiando la imi-*ta*ción de Cristo. Bueno, Haendel plagió unas cosas de lo más delicioso, ¿verdad? Pero se trataba de música, ¿no? Y, finalmente, la mano de ya-sabes-Quién lo dejó ciego por tener tan pocos miramientos con la obra de los demás. ¿No? Pero qué me dices de *ti.* Y tan moreno. Como un pastelillo de chocolate. La viva imagen…

—¿Yo? Yo… —Otto había retrocedido un paso, mirando a su alrededor con contenida anticipación en los ojos y una premonición de saludo en los rasgos, como si estuviera buscando a un viejo amigo al que había esperado ver allí. Buscaba un espejo.

—… ¡del negro del Narciso!

—¿Eh?

—Debes tener mucho cuidado por debajo de la calle Catorce, cariño. Hay ciertas palabras que sencillamente no se pueden decir. ¡Y pensar que conoces al hermano de Agnes desde hace tanto tiempo y no me lo has presentado! ¿Y también fuiste soldadito en la última escabechina?

—Yo… ¿qué?

—Y no sabía que conocieras también a su marido. Nadie lo conoce. A pesar de que se llama igual que ella. De apellido, quiero decir. Adoptó su apellido cuando se casaron, ¿no fue eso encantador?, porque nadie sabía pronunciar el suyo. Antes de casarse ella lo llamaba señor Seiscentos-sesenta-y-seis, porque ése era el número de la primera habitación de hotel a la que la llevó. Entonces, ¿no lo conoces?

—No, ¿está aquí?

—Oh, no, *no,* cariño. No salen juntos desde que se descubrió el pastel. Cuando se casaron, los dos querían escribir. Todo fue bien hasta que se publicaron los libros, entonces descubrieron que habían escrito el uno sobre el otro. Ésa es la única razón por la que ambos querían casarse, para estudiarse mutuamente. Se sentaban y se preguntaban el uno al otro por su infancia, y por toda clase de cosas, y ambos creían que el otro lo hacía por amor. Ahora se limitan a vigilar mutuamente sus ventas, y el que va por delante se pone toda la crema en el desayuno.

—¿Ella es…?

—*Cuando* desayunan. Juntos.

Otto se estiró para echar otra mirada. La oyó diciendo: «Es absolutamente idílico, la gente es tan pobre que trabaja por casi nada. Teníamos una doncella que también hacía la colada, ¿y sabéis cuánto le pagábamos…?». Bajo el holgado vestido blanco llevaba un sujetador abierto por arriba («Allá abajo los llevan todas como locas», dijo) que le levantaba el pecho hasta donde podía verse sin mucha dificultad. En la bronceada muñeca, engastado en oro con toda la pedestre fealdad de la herejía modernista, llevaba un reloj de Mickey Mouse. Otto estaba perturbado por el lozano color de su piel, que el vestido y (la cortina de fondillos de pantalones volvió a separarse y le vio las uñas) el esmalte de uñas blanco realzaban mucho mejor que el traje de lino arrugado y el cabestrillo de seda negra el de la suya. Se pasó la punta de un dedo por su bigote dorado.

—Este no parece el lugar más adecuado para ella —dijo—. Con ese vestido blanco.

—Cariño, ¿y qué me dices de tu traje tropical?

—No quería decir eso, quería decir el Village, con ese vestido, es como tan formal…

Otto se quedó titubeando, esperó un comentario, y sólo oyó decir a alguien: «Ese es el argumento, en pocas palabras. Ahora bien, ¿crees que puedo considerarme un positivista negativo?». «Creo que sería más

acertado que te considerases un negativista positivo».

—Todo el mundo sabe por qué siguen casados los Bildow —dijo una voz grave—. Él es impotente con todas menos con ella.

—¿Sabes la verdadera razón? —la refutaron—. Es porque ninguno de los dos se lava.

—¿Es cierto que Arny y Maude van a adoptar un niño? —preguntó Otto.

—Pobre Arny, llevan años intentándolo, pero siempre se sienten demasiado mal por la mañana, pobre Maude…

—¿Niño o niña? —preguntó perentoriamente una voz de chica tras ellos.

—Un niño. Oh, Hannah —dijo Herschel—, cariño…

Puso cara de temor y desdicha, como si quisiera huir y olvidar a aquella chica claramente poco atractiva. Ella se mantuvo firme, vestida con el traje rústico del Village, una sucia camisa de hombre embutida en unos pantalones de dril sobre una figura acoplada, compuesta de unidades independientes, pantorrillas, muslos, pecho y cabeza, como una estatua de piedra blanda cuyos bloques se hubieran separado por las inclemencias del tiempo.

—Probablemente es homosexual —dijo Hannah.

—¿El niño? —preguntó Herschel desvalidamente.

—No, el padre. Es el que quiere un niño, ¿no?

—¿Conoces a Arny?

—¿Arny qué?

—Arny Munk. Es el que va a ser padre.

—No.

—Entonces cómo puedes decir…

—Es psicológicamente obvio, es la única razón por la que los maricas quieren tener niños para perpetuar su especie.

—Hannah, por favor…

Hannah murmuró algo desagradable para saludar a una figura alta y cargada de espaldas con una camisa verde de lana, que estaba a punto de cruzar la habitación cuando ella vio el libro que llevaba en la mano.

—¿Qué haces con eso, *Los árboles del hogar?* ¿Leyendo éxitos de ventas?

La figura cargada de espaldas interrumpió su laborioso avance y se volvió hacia ella; lo mismo hizo su achaparrado compañero, que se quedó mirando con aire ligeramente ofendido (era un poeta corto de vista, y como todo menos la página impresa se desenfocaba antes de poder verlo, el mundo era simplemente una serie de imágenes borrosas y espectáculos amenazadores, que afrontaba con los ojos bajos como buscando un libro a mano que le explicara todo); luego dijo:

—¡Un éxito de ventas! El tipo que lo escribió lo presentó a una comisión que se lo dio a leer a una muestra representativa de lectores, el público lector. Y al público lector no le gustó el chapucero final, de modo que el tipo escribió el chapucero final que le sugirieron, y se publicó. Un éxito de ventas, por el amor de Dios.

—Estoy haciendo una reseña —dijo el hombre cargado de espaldas, y empezó a alejarse laboriosamente.

—¿Lo has leído?

—No —dijo por encima del hombro—, pero conozco al hijo de puta que lo escribió.

—Ese pobre bastardo —dijo Hannah mientras se retiraba—. Quiere ir a Europa. Los dos quieren ir, pobres bastardos, vete a preguntarles por qué. No verán nada, los dos son miopes. ¿Adónde vas? —dijo a Herschel.

—Sólo iba a… Hannah…

—¿Te has hecho ya el tatuaje? —preguntó en tono arisco.

—No.

—¿Y qué andas escribiendo?

—Cosas para revistas de cine, todo sobre sexo —contestó Herschel, haciendo un esfuerzo—, las más obvias perversiones. Ahora estoy metido en una serie completa sobre las estrellas de cine y Dios. Todas son exactamente iguales. Todas creen que *Algo* nos está llevando a *Alguna* parte, y sencillamente apestan con la más exquisita sinceridad.

—¿Quieres decir que les haces entrevistas?

—Cariño, simplemente tomo unas cuantas notas sobre ellas y luego escribo esas entrevistas con-el-corazón-en-la-mano. El agente publicitario le echa un vistazo y firma con el nombre de ella. *Ella* nunca lo lee.

—¿Ella? —preguntó Otto.

—Ella. Son *estrellas* de cine.

—¿Qué le pasó a tu senador? —preguntó Hannah.

—El último discurso que le escribí no lo vio hasta que apareció en las Actas del Congreso, y decía sencillamente todas las cosas que no debía decir. Ahora le han abierto una investigación y está bastante enfadado *conmigo*. ¡Imagínate! Sencillamente voy a tener que escribir yo también una novela.

—¡Escribir tú una novela! ¿Quién leerá una novela en la que no aparezca ninguna mujer?

—Pero, cariño, aparecerán, haré lo mismo que hizo Proust, escribiré sencillamente sobre toda la gente que conozco y luego lo revisaré y cambiaré los nombres de chicos por otros de chicas, conozco a la perfecta Odette…

—Deberías volver a analizarte. O hacerte una vagotomía y acabar de una vez. Sólo porque tu psicoanalista se suicidó…

—No se suicidó, fue un accidente.

—¡Un accidente! Se ata una cuerda al cuello y se tira por una ventana, pero la cuerda se rompe y cae cuarenta y seis pisos, ¿eso es un accidente?

—Hannah, voy, voy por una copa —dijo Herschel volviéndose hacia la habitación, sin tener ni idea de adonde iba, pero apartándose.

—No sabía que fuera escritor —dijo Otto.

—¡Escritor! Es un negro. Acaba de escribirle la autobiografía a un general del ejército. ¡Escritor!

Otto miró hacia Herschel.

—Yo diría que es un heterosexual latente —dijo, e inmediatamente se arrepintió de malgastar una frase tan inspirada con Hannah, y decidió repetirla después a alguien que la repitiese como si fuera suya. Incluso trató de encontrarle rápidamente un sitio en su obra.

—Personalidad disociada —dijo seriamente Hannah—. Ya no está seguro de quién es, ni siquiera de si es alguien. Por eso quiere hacerse un tatuaje, por supuesto. Es simplemente una cuestión de egoidentificación.

—Para que cuando se despierte sepa que es la misma persona con la que se acostó —dijo un joven que les había estado dando la espalda, volviendo ahora su cara sin afeitar.

Herschel se acercaba a ellos, llevando hacia la puerta a un chico de aspecto atractivo y aire confuso. «Será mejor que te vayas», decía, «hazlo por Agnes. Vamos, cariño. Me ha pedido que te saque de aquí, dice que está de ti hasta las tetas, y no querrás que se enfade…». Pero cuando llegaron a la puerta apareció Agnes entre ellos con un brazo alrededor del chico. «Pero querido, ¿adónde vas? ¿No te irás? No puedes irte ahora, es tan temprano…». Arrastró a este pétalo consigo, y Herschel, farfullando algo sobre su pecho, les siguió dando traspiés con aire aturdido.

—Pobre Charley —dijo Hannah.

—¿Ese es Charley? —Otto se había fijado en una cicatriz que cruzaba la garganta del chico, y en algo que le brillaba entre el pelo—. ¿Qué es eso que tiene en el pelo?

—Una placa de plata, se la pusieron cuando le sacaron la bala con la que intentó suicidarse. ¿Te has fijado en su garganta? Y tiene las muñecas llenas de cicatrices. Estuvo en el ejército, en un avión que tiró una bomba atómica, y tiene fuertes sentimientos de culpa. Odiaba el ejército. Gracias a que ya lo dejó.

—Me imaginaba que en un caso así lo habrían mandado a un hospital.

—Oh, no, esa no fue la razón por la que lo licenciaron —dijo Hannah—. Cuando todavía era soldado se quedó una noche de permiso en la casa donde yo estaba viviendo. Al día siguiente salió a tomar café, pero como tenía la ropa hecha un asco porque la noche anterior había vomitado, se puso ropa interior mía de abrigo bajo el uniforme. La policía militar lo pescó en
Nedick's
, y cuando lo registraron y descubrieron que llevaba ropa interior de chica creyeron que era marica. Y lo licenciaron.

—Oh.

—Creo que se va a hacer una lobotomía —dijo Hannah—. ¿Qué te parece el cuadro? —dijo mirando por encima de la repisa de la chimenea.

—Los colores son buenos. Muy subidos.

—¿Subidos?

—Bueno, quiero decir el naranja y el verde. Por supuesto, un pintor está limitado por sus materiales, ¿no? Quiero decir que hay pigmentos que no se pueden mezclar sin más en ciertos medios confiando en que liguen. Hay pigmentos que no se pueden extender sobre otros confiando en que agarren, quiero decir que por supuesto se desprenden, hay que conocer los materiales y respetarlos, pero la pintura moderna…

—Creo que es lo más triste que ha hecho Max en su vida. Es un epitafio.

—Léger, quiero decir, Chagall…

—La vacuidad que revela, duele mirarlo. Es tan real, tan *real*.

—Soutine, por supuesto, Chagall y Soutine —siguió Otto—, no quedará nada de ellos en ninguna parte dentro de cien años, se desharán y se disgregarán sobre el mismo lienzo. Vicio inherente, creo que lo llaman. Hay ciertos pigmentos…

—Creo que es lo más triste que ha hecho Max en su vida.

Otto dejó de hablar: ¿quién era Max? Recordaba a Max como alguien que no le gustaba especialmente, alguien con quien se sentía inseguro. Consciente de la presencia de una cara sin afeitar junto a su hombro, sacó un paquete de sus impresionantes cigarrillos, y no se volvió hasta que el chico sin afeitar, que no había tomado parte en su conversación, se alejó rascándose una barbilla penosamente granujienta.

—¿Quién era ése?

—Es un borracho —dijo Hannah—, se llama Anselm. Se hace la picha un lío con la religión.

En un rincón de la habitación estaba de pie un joven delgado con un grueso bigote cuyo peso parecía inclinar su redonda cabeza hacia delante. En aquel momento la inclinaba hacia una ventana sucia, que contemplaba melancólicamente. Su gabardina tenía el cinturón abrochado por detrás, y le quedaba demasiado corta. Los pantalones le caían formando arrugas, y sus vueltas deshilachadas se arrastraban sobre la punta de sus zapatos. Tenía una franca expresión culpable, como si supiera que no debía estar allí, pero no viera otra forma de salir sino osmóticamente por el translúcido cristal de la ventana. A su espalda, un grupo descoyuntado de risa amenazaba con molestarle. Estaban discutiendo. Luego uno de ellos lo llamó:

—Eh, Stanley, ¿es «ils vont prendre le train de sept heures» o «de huit heures»?

—«Güit» —contestó, y se volvió de nuevo hacia la sucia ventana murmurando—: ¿Qué podría ser sino «güit»? —Luego volvió los ojos y se quedó mirando a quienquiera que estuviera sentada en el sofá, oculta para Otto.

—Si los pintores modernos no estudian sus materiales —empezó Otto de nuevo, dando golpecitos con el dedo sobre el dibujo del emú en el paquete de cigarrillos, y hablando con corteses vacilaciones que indicaban un pensamiento concurrente digno de sus palabras—, si no pueden perder el tiempo, por supuesto un escultor tiene que conocer todas las propiedades de su medio antes…

—¿Lo conoces? —preguntó Hannah.

—… de ponerse manos a la ¿qué? ¿A quién?

—A Stanley.

—No, ¿es escul…?

—¿Stanley? ¿Por qué iba a ser escultor?

—No, pero, ejem… y como dice Praxiteles…

—¿Qué?

—Sólo iba a decir, como dice Cicerón de Prax…

—Música, escribe música, música para órgano.

—¿Quién?

—Stanley. Ese. —Se lo señaló—. Esa cosa en la que lleva trabajando tanto tiempo, una misa, quiere terminarla a tiempo para dedicársela a su madre. Tiene diabetes, está en el Hospital de la Inmaculada no se qué, está por aquí cerca, le acaban de cortar la pierna, tenía gangrena. Está allí arriba tumbada sin moverse, rodeada de todos esos recuerdos metidos en botellas, su apéndice y sus amígdalas y algo que le sacaron de la nariz, quiere tenerlos consigo, está ahí tumbada sin moverse, mirando su dentadura postiza en un vaso vacío, rumiando sus recuerdos.

Otto le ofreció un cigarrillo. Hannah no fumaba, por lo que la única forma de impresionarla fue arrojar algo de humo en su dirección. Tosió y dejó de hablar.

Sobre la repisa de la chimenea, la corona fúnebre se había marchitado, y se veían los alambres que la mantenían tiesa. No había costado mucho. Los grupos de invitados iban y venían distraídamente ante ella como lánguidas flores mustiándose en la tierra donde habían brotado, agitándose en el polvo. Otto paseaba la mirada por la habitación en busca de algún conocido con quien poder hablar, o de algún desconocido a quien poder hablar. Durante un breve instante entrevió la cara de una chica que estaba sola en el sofá, contemplando con una sonrisa fresca aquel jardín moribundo, permitiendo que la ocultase. Luego desapareció, con la callada conciencia de un cuadro tapado por un grupo de seres humanos charlando. Él la había mirado en aquel momento de revelación: sus ojos le habían estado mirando, y luego los apartó, y su sonrisa le pasó por encima, como una cara que le resultara tan familiar que nunca podía recordarla.

—Ella se hartó de verlo poner mala cara al asado del domingo, así que se pegó un tiro, ¿te parece mal? —dijo de repente Anselm a su lado, hablando a Hannah del hombre cargado de espaldas con la camisa verde de lana, del que se acababa de separar—. Eso es lo que me rompe el corazón —añadió, y se rascó la barbilla.

—¿Quién es ése? —preguntó Otto, volviéndose.

—Un crítico de mala muerte —dijo Hannah—, cree que tiene que hacerte infeliz para que lo tomes en serio.

—Tres veces psicoanalizado —añadió Anselm—, por el amor de Dios. Acaba de decirme que Bildow va a vender La Revista. Tragedia.

Hannah alargó la mano hacia el libro amarillo que llevaba.

—*Justine,* ¿lo has leído? —preguntó, devolviéndoselo.

—Lo he traído para enseñárselo a Stanley.

—Déjalo en paz esta noche —dijo Hannah.

—Hay un pasaje muy bonito, en ese monasterio benedictino, cuando el abad pone la hostia sobre ella y la profana…

—Escucha, Anselm…

—Eh, Stanley, ven aquí, quiero enseñarte una cosa —llamó Anselm, y Hannah repitió «Déjalo en paz», mientras Stanley se acercaba a ellos con aire preocupado. Otto se atusó el bigote con la yema de un dedo.

—¿Qué estás leyendo? —Anselm le cogió el libro a Stanley de debajo del brazo—. Malthus, por el amor de Dios. Mira que andar por ahí con esto en público, ¿quieres que te excomulguen? Lo próximo que harás será ponerte a vender condones por la calle.

—Malthus no recomienda… esas cosas, cuando habla de continencia moral…

—¡Continencia moral! —rio Anselm, agitando su libro amarillo—. ¡Si te crees que la Iglesia no cambiaría radicalmente de opinión sobre los anticonceptivos si tuviera un montón de acciones de goma de Akron! ¿Y cuántos bienes raíces crees que tiene en esta casa de putas que es el mundo? Mira, tienes que leer esto —siguió, abriendo *Justine—,* hay un tipo que te gustaría, se llama Roland, tiene a una chica atada a una cruz…

—Escucha, Anselm —empezó Hannah.

—… puede jugar al zurriago…

—Me han dicho que has vendido otro título de libro —le interrumpió Stanley.

—*Salvo la fornicación,* cincuenta pavos. Mateo diecinueve, nueve: «Salvo en caso de fornicación…».

—Tengo un pequeño problema con un título —mintió Otto.

—¿Una novela?

—No, una obra de teatro que acabo de terminar. La he titulado *La vanidad del tiempo.*

—Muy visto —comentó Hannah—. Qué mierda de fiesta.

—Está sacado de un sermón…

—Manteca de cacahuete, por el amor de Dios. Cincuenta millones de libras de comida consumidas cada día en Nueva York, ¿y qué me dan a mí? Manteca de cacahuete.

—¿Te gusta el cuadro? —le preguntó Stanley.

—La composición es buena. A Max se le da bien la composición, la borda, pero sigue trabajando como si pintar fuera tener un orgasmo, tiene que aprender que lo importante no es sólo la experiencia, es aprender a asimilar la experiencia… ¿Qué demonios estás fumando? —tosió, mirando el cigarrillo que sostenía la mano morena de Otto.

Stanley se volvió y preguntó tímidamente:

—¿Y qué estás haciendo ahora, Anselm?

—Estoy muy ocupado aserrando tapas de retretes para críticos de mierda —dijo Anselm sin volverse hacia él, sin apartar los ojos de la alta figura cargada de espaldas con camisa verde de lana.

Otto se aclaró la garganta.

—Esa… ejem… chica del sofá, la… ¿la conoces? —Anselm lo miró por primera vez, y añadió—: Quiero decir… —y se aclaró la garganta.

—Esa es Friné —Anselm observó la falta de reacción en la cara de Otto—. Friné. ¿No sabes quién fue Friné, por el amor de Dios? Me pareció oírte hablar hace un momento de Praxiteles.

—Bueno, sí, pero lo que quería decir es que cuando Cicerón dice que lo único que tuvo que hacer Praxiteles fue quitar el exceso de mármol, para llegar a la forma verdadera que estaba allí debajo todo el tiempo, quiero decir dentro…

—Y llegó a Friné. ¿No la has visto nunca?

—¿Qué?

—La estatua de Friné que hizo Praxiteles. Quién demonios crees que estaba escondida dentro de ese bloque de piedra sino una puta de lujo. La tienen en el Vaticano con todas las demás putas de lujo. Sólo quería ser Eva antes de la Caída —parodió Anselm con voz gimiente—, por el amor de Dios.

Stanley tenía la vista clavada en el suelo. Anselm se enjugó la boca.

—Mirad a Agnes —dijo—, rodeada de todos esos mariquitas. Cristo. —Miró un momento distraídamente en aquella dirección, y luego se volvió hacia Stanley—. ¿Cuándo vas a ir a Italia? —preguntó perentoriamente, y con la misma rapidez se volvió hacia Otto, que levantó el cigarrillo como una humeante arma defensiva, pero Anselm dijo nada más—: Allí está esa vieja iglesia destartalada donde quiere tocar el órgano, quiere tocar algo que ha escrito en ese órgano. «Sentado un día ante el órgano», ¿eh, Stanley? ¿Cómo sigue, «cansado y desazonado»? Y tus dedos deslizándose perezosamente por el… ¡eh! —salió corriendo tras alguien que llevaba una botella—. Dame un poco de cerveza.

En algún sitio, una voz sobria dijo: «Supongo que puedes considerarme un negativista positivo». En otro sitio: «Claro que no volverá a escribir otro libro, tiene las estanterías abarrotadas de libros con distintas cubiertas puestas sobre ese mismo libro suyo». En una conversación sobre la excelente composición abstracta en fragmentos aislados de Constable, se elevó la voz de Adeline, «como los sólidos en Uchelo…». Por encima de todos ellos colgaba en silencio el Alma del Obrero, repeliendo los comentarios; aunque el minio recordaba puentes construidos por manos callosas, sexualmente diferentes de todas las que ahora hacían tintinear vasos debajo de ella, y los puntos color de orín una ancha espalda masculina estirándose entre vigas, genéricamente diferente de todas las que iban y venían por la habitación. Pese a todas sus brillantes salpicaduras, aquel lienzo parecía muy cansado, ajeno y olvidado en la pared sobre aquel triste jardín.

Anselm se detuvo con un vaso en una mano, frotándose la barbilla con un trozo de papel de lija (n.º ½) que tenía en la otra. Stanley se volvió hacia Hannah y preguntó con solicitud:

—¿Y qué es de tu cuadro?

—Se lo llevaron el lunes.

—¿Se lo llevaron? —repitió Otto.

—El mes pasado alquilé un Modigliani, y como no podía pagar otro mes de alquiler, se lo llevaron. No puedo vivir sin ese cuadro, no tengo sitio para colgarlo pero no puedo vivir sin él, era más hermoso que mi madre. ¿Pero qué les importa a *ellos?* Lo único que quieren son sus inmundos veinte dólares.

—Pero eso es mucho dinero, podrías comprar un buen grabado —empezó Otto—, un Picasso…

—Picasso, ése pinta como quien mea.

—Bueno, por supuesto… —dijo Otto con aire incómodo—, y el… quiero decir que si un pintor sólo busca… ejem… efectos inmediatos…

—Algunos de ellos se han propuesto matar el arte —dijo Stanley en voz baja, mirando al suelo—. Y otros están tan excitados con la idea de descubrir nuevos medios y nuevas formas —siguió, levantando la vista entre las dos personas a las que estaba hablando— que nunca tienen tiempo para ponerse a trabajar en uno que ya esté consolidado.

—Sí, y cuando no han estudiado sus materiales…

—O no les importa, sencillamente no les importa. No. Aceptan la historia y… le hacen un corte de mangas.

—Mientras tú te sientas a intentar componer música como Gabrieli.

—Si un pintor conoce sus materiales y los respeta…

—Oh, Cristo. ¿De qué estás hablando? —lo interrumpió Hannah—. Con la mierda que ahora compras en tubos, ¿cómo vas a saber lo que te dan?

—Bueno, por supuesto —convino Otto, moviendo su mano húmeda en el cabestrillo—, puede que haya más tinta en polvo que añil en un tubo de añil barato, o absolutamente nada de granza en uno de rosa de granza, pero…

—Muy bien, entonces, ¿por qué echas la culpa al pintor, si es este sistema de libre empresa el que lo jode vivo?

—Bueno, tú… quiero decir…

—Hoy día se pueden comprar colores tan buenos como los que se hacían en cualquier otra época —dijo Stanley—, pero hay una especie de satisfacción en prepararse uno mismo los colores, ¿no?, en este mundo donde todo lo que compras está hecho en serie, todo es automático. Cuando Henry James dice «trabajar eficazmente con unas cuantas normas serias, rígidas…».

—Oh, métete a Henry James… —empezó Hannah, y tosió.

Otto había encendido otro cigarrillo. Se volvió hacia su cara seria y poco favorecida como para acusarla de haberlo hecho a propósito.

—Por supuesto, cuando Vainiger dice… —empezó, pero ella se volvió y se dirigió hacia un plato de galletas saladas.

—¿Eres pintor? —preguntó Stanley a Otto.

—¿Yo? Oh, no, sólo escritor, dramaturgo, acabo de terminar una obra.

—Por la forma en que hablabas pensé que tal vez lo fueras.

—¿Dramaturgo?

—Pintor.

—Bueno, en realidad tenía la impresión de que tú… Pero ¿y Hannah, qué hace?

—La verdad es que no *hace* mucho —admitió Stanley.

A su espalda apareció una cara, para aportar:

—Hannah se sabe de memoria *El ruido y la furia.*

—¿El ruido y la furia? —se volvió Otto.

—*El ruido y la furia.* La novela de Faulkner. ¿Es que no la has leído?

—Por supuesto que la he leído —dijo Otto sin vacilar un instante.

—Hannah se la sabe de memoria.

—Pinta un poco —dijo Stanley en tono vindicador.

—¡Pinta! ¿Viste el abstracto que hizo para las Fuerzas Aéreas? —insistió la cara—. Como prueba psicológica, lo utilizaban para descubrir a los maricas, si eras marica el cuadro no te decía nada, si no lo eras te parecía una chuminada.

—¿Una qué?

—¿Qué pasa, eres marica?

—Pinta naturalezas muertas —terció Stanley amablemente.

—Tarda tanto que la fruta se le pudre.

—Pero Cézanne…

—Ahora pinta paisajes, pero tiene que poner postes telefónicos en todos para conseguir la perspectiva. Perspectiva lineal.

—¿De qué vive, si no trabaja?

—Dice que el trabajo es la muerte.

—¿La gente le da dinero?

—El trabajo es la muerte. Es demasiado digna para pedir limosna. Pero cuando necesita realmente algo, eso es otra cosa, todos la ayudamos cuando le extrajeron los dientes delanteros.

Los que tiene ahora son de celofán. Se lava y hace toda la colada en un servicio de señoras del metro.

—Es muy… tiene tanta integridad de intención —dijo Stanley débilmente.

—¿Intención? —repitió Otto—. ¿Qué intención?

—Simplemente… intención —dijo Stanley, viendo alejarse a su anónimo interlocutor—. Debería marcharme —añadió, volviéndose nerviosamente, mirando hacia la lozana flor abierta cuyos remilgados pétalos se doblaban y amarilleaban en tomo a su blanco carpelo cargado de esporas, Agnes Deigh. Estaba recitando unos versos jocosos sobre Tiziano que terminaban «subió por la escalera y la hizo suya» para rimar con aleluya.

—Y a todo esto, ¿a qué se dedica? —preguntó Otto de ella, mientras se acercaban hacia allí.

—Es agente, agente literario —respondió Stanley entre dientes, y llegaron a tiempo de ocupar un hueco en la cortina de fondillos de pantalones que la rodeaba. Hubo un momento de silencio: Agnes Deigh y Otto compararon sus bronceados. Luego ella dijo:

—Estoy reclutando miembros para Arte por el Trabajo y la Democracia. Es un partido.

—¿Una fiesta? —se volvió a preguntar alguien de otro grupo. [30]

—Un partido político, querido —dijo ella, y el otro se retiró.

—No me interesa la política —le dijo Otto.

—Pero si no tienes que hacer nada. Simplemente, me das dos dólares, eso paga tu cuota de afiliación y ya tienen otro miembro.

—Pero ¿por qué afiliarme, si no voy a hacer nada?

—Necesitan miembros. Sólo quieren tu nombre, querido.

—Lo siento, me temo que no puedo permitírmelo, en serio.

—¿Dos dólares?

—No me refiero a eso…

Pero Agnes Deigh estaba ya hablando con otro. Otto se retiró, para serenarse con una ceja arqueada sobre nada.

La corona fúnebre estaba en el suelo, y en el jardín sin sol que la rodeaba las flores se marchitaban a uno y otro lado, inclinándose unas hacia otras y hacia fuera. Durante un breve intervalo se oyó música. La voz de una chica, falsificada por el tocadiscos, cantó «Vendí mi corazón al trapero…» hasta que la aguja se rompió y la canción se perdió en un chirrido y en un momentáneo parpadeo de la luz eléctrica. La sana voz de barítono de una chica con un pecho tuberculosamente hundido dijo: «Pero en realidad no es una buena novela, el único capítulo perspicaz es en el que el chico descubre que es marica».

Un joven con una sonrisa desmedidamente persistente, chaqueta demasiado larga y pantalones demasiado cortos, estaba contando el argumento de su novela no-terminada-aún, «que quizá recuerde ligeramente a Djuna Barnes. A un hombre le dicen que su chica es lesbiana, así que se disfraza de chica y va a una fiesta donde sabe que estará ella. Se le insinúa, ella acepta y entonces se quita rápidamente el disfraz y la viola…». «Pero, querido, si no tienes que *hacer* nada», se oyó la voz de Agnes Deigh.

El tiempo, esencial para el crecimiento, parecía haber olvidado aquel lugar, abandonado aquel jardín que nunca había visto el sol ni conocido el canto ni los excrementos fertilizantes de los pájaros; sin embargo, quizá hubiera gusanos, y uno se lo habría pensado dos veces antes de fisgonear por debajo para comprobar que no los había. Aunque no era alto, Otto paseaba altivamente la mirada sobre la polvorienta escena, como la había paseado dos semanas antes sobre el bullicioso mercado del puerto centroamericano. Aquí, como allí, arrojaba sobre los mercaderes humo de tabaco desdeñosamente acre y fortuito, erguido con un pie extendido, una ceja arqueada. De vez en cuando se atusaba los extremos de su reciente bigote, o fingía molestias en su cabestrillo. Nadie había mencionado ni el uno ni el otro.

Pese al hecho de que el sofá no se veía, se dirigió hacia allí, recordando de pronto la eterna caza; a estas alturas ya había bebido lo suficiente para animarse a enfilar hacia la mujer buscada en vano, *die Frau nach der man sich sehnt* (como la llamaba Gordon en el tercer acto). Así conocía los ojos que miraban más allá de él y no lo reconocían, las manos que ofrecían pero protegían, y éstos eran los sitios donde uno se veía obligado a buscarla en Nueva York, a pesar de las sombras, del aire sofocante, aquella *Ewig-Weibliche,* la Eterna Helena. Entonces oyó de repente la voz de Jesse Frank diciendo «Parece una jodía *madonna»,* y sin advertir el prodigio en aquel comentario ni en el hombre que lo había hecho, lo desechó.

—Llevo meses sin verte —dijo alguien a su lado.

Se estrecharon la mano.

—He estado en Centroamérica —dijo Otto, blandiendo el cabestrillo.

—¿Sí? No lo sabía.

Otto lo reconoció: el joven que llevaba la chaqueta demasiado larga y los pantalones demasiado cortos. La sonrisa desmedida, recordó con desagrado Otto, una sonrisa que no le hacía sentirse a uno alegre en su presencia y persistencia. Más bien sugería que su portador conocía todos los secretos sombríos de alguna jungla maligna de la que acababa de volver, un lugar de tráfico subrepticio en el fétido aire dulzón donde los frutos colgaban podridos de los árboles.

—¿Qué te parece mi cuadro?

Por supuesto, aquel era Max.

—Los colores son buenos —dijo Otto con cautela a su anfitrión. La sonrisa no era fría, pero su mismo esfuerzo por parecer franca y honesta revelaba un cálculo que te desarmaba. Era una sonrisa que había animado a muchos a hacer confesiones, de las que luego se arrepentían al salir al aire frío de fuera, y desconfiaban de él en consecuencia. Se ocupaba sobre todo de datos, sabía por ejemplo que la mayoría de las faldas de juncos hawaianas se hacen en Suiza, que las baladas de frontera escocesas proceden de las islas del Pacífico, que los tartanes escoceses se hacen en Suiza y las espadas del ejército británico en Alemania. Era en aquellos momentos cuando Otto deseaba llevar una pistola, no para esgrimirla, desde luego no para dispararla, sino simplemente para sentirla pesadamente protectora bajo el brazo—. ¿Has tardado mucho en pintarlo?

—Lo más laborioso fue imaginarlo —dijo Max.

—Siempre lo es. Yo acabo de terminar una obra de teatro y…

—¿Conoces a Ed Feasley? También estuvo en Harvard —dijo Max, que había estudiado en Nueva York.

—Hola —dijo Ed—. Crissto, estuvimos en la misma clase. Sabes, te llamé hace un par de meses. Cuando vine a Nueva York, busqué tu número en la guía y te llamé. Se puso un hombre. Parecía conocerte, pero no sabía dónde estabas.

—Debía de ser mi padre —dijo Otto.

Se oyó un golpazo al otro extremo de la habitación: Anselm se acababa de desplomar.

—La última vez que te vi —dijo Otto— estabas jugando al golf en la calle, golpeando pelotas de golf por la calle Thompson.

—Estaba borracho —dijo Ed, cuyo padre poseía unos astilleros de acorazados—. Dio la casualidad de que llevaba unos palos en el coche.

—¿Qué haces ahora?

—Maldita la cosa. El viejo me dijo que me daría un diez por ciento de comisión si le vendía uno de sus malditos barcos. Creo que el viejo bastardo me estaba tomando el pelo. Quiere que trabaje en uno de sus talleres. Que empiece desde abajo.

—¿Qué pasó con esa chica con la que ibas a casarte?

—Oh, Cris-s-to —dijo Ed cansadamente. Su forma de arrastrar las palabras, muy de vieja escuela, le quitaba de encima el peso de la blasfemia—. En vez de eso he decidido escribir un libro sobre ella.

Era un joven alto y fornido, con la cabeza muy pequeña, lo que se tenía por el clásico tipo universitario antes de que esas instituciones derribaran sus barreras, ahora considerado por los endebles cabezas rapadas que habían entrado como la prueba definitiva de la degeneración de la raza.

—Parece que todos estamos escribiendo —dijo Otto alegremente—. Yo acabo de terminar una obra…

—Y a todo esto, ¿qué te ha pasado en la mano? —preguntó Ed.

—He estado en Centroamérica. Una revolución…

—¿Y a qué fuiste allí?

—Estuve trabajando, pero cuando empezó esa revolución, bueno, ya sabes, antes de darte cuenta te ves mezclado en el lío. Y ver cómo se te echa encima una docena de policías en moto, después de atar una cuerda de piano…

—Señor Feddle —dijo Max—. Me alegro de que haya venido.

Aquel intruso era un anciano, que parecía contento de estar allí.

—Me siento rejuvenecer entre todos vosotros —dijo—. Y debo decirte algo, pues sé que te interesará. Van a publicar mis poemas.

—Eso es estupendo. Felicidades. Ahora las cosas serán mucho más fáciles para usted y su mujer. ¿Está aquí?

El señor Feddle paseó la mirada por la habitación.

—Estaba —murmuró—, estaba —mientras se alejaba tambaleándose.

—Lo único que necesitas es un trozo de buena cuerda de piano…

—¿Has dicho que estabas escribiendo una novela? —preguntó Max a Ed Feasley.

—No —dijo Otto—, una obra de teatro. Acabo de terminar una obra, allí en…

—¿La ha leído alguien? —le preguntó Max.

—No, me… bueno…

—Me gustaría leerla —dijo Max.

—¿Sí? Veamos. Podría traértela mañana. Es lo que pasa, no puedes estar realmente seguro de ella hasta que otra persona la ha leído —dijo Otto, explicando este súbito sometimiento a sí mismo y a ellos, como si fuera a enseñársela a Max porque no estaba seguro. Y Max sonrió a Otto, como si lo conociera muy bien y lo hubiera visto a menudo en otra parte de la jungla.

Se oyó cantar a alguien a través del humo. No cantaba para el grupo, sino para sí, como para animarse. Si alguna vez había florecido una dalia en jirones en aquel terreno pardo, era Herschel. La letra de su canción era siempre la misma, pero la melodía no estaba sometida a tal limitación:

—Me voy al Siam holandés, me voy… me voy

cantaba desde el suelo, donde estaba jugando con sus pies como un tonto de pueblo. No se había apartado de aquel rincón desde que presentó a Max, Hannah y Stanley, dando nombres que se había inventado, a una rubia señorita Adeline Algo. Los tres se quedaron sin habla, luego lívidos, y dijeron a voces sus verdaderos nombres a Adeline; después, sin molestarse en preguntarle el suyo, se retiraron.

—Me voy… —estaba muy borracho—, me voy…

La señorita Algo estaba al otro extremo de la habitación, lo más lejos que podía estar de él en aquel lugar.

—Está bien ido, ¿eh? —dijo Otto, y mientras se volvían a mirar añadió—: Yo diría que es un heterosexual latente.

—Perdone —dijo una anciana junto a Max—. ¿Ha visto a mi marido? Probablemente estará borracho, el

viejo tonto.

—Oh, señora Feddle, no, no está nada borracho. Tiene buen aspecto. Me ha alegrado mucho enterarme de que las cosas se van a arreglar. Ahora la vida les va a resultar mucho más fácil.

—Bueno —dijo ella con aire cansado—, publicar algo cuesta dinero, ya sabe.

Paseó la mirada por la habitación, mientras Otto se retiraba hacia la estantería. Cuando estaba entre gente que no conocía, Otto cogía a menudo un libro del que apartaba los ojos de cuando en cuando para observar la escena que fingía desdeñar. Una noche había leído así diecisiete páginas de *Sobre las abejas,* de Thomas de Brabant. Ahora se encontró enfrascado en Robert Browning:

> Bueno, ¿y no fue una gentileza que interrumpieran su charla
> —Ella para morder su negro antifaz, él para acariciar su espada—,
> Mientras tú, al clavicordio, tocabas majestuosas tocatas?

—¡Oh, Dios! —exclamó Agnes Deigh con placer—. ¡Querido!

Su risa pareció despejar el humo, que flotaba como gas de los pantanos sobre la habitación, durante el tiempo suficiente para dejar ver su abandono ante el alto sueco que acababa de llegar a darle una llave.

—Es de mi baúl —dijo el sueco—, y no debes perderla nunca. Sencillamente no me fío de mí mismo. Vaya, soy capaz de abrir ese baúl y sacar esos vestidos divinos, toda esa prrr preciosa lencería. A veces sencillamente *tengo* que ponérmelos. Pero si tienes tú la llave no me dejarás caer en la tentación, ¿verdad?

—Pero háblanos de Roma, querido. De París.

—He tenido un viaje de vuelta de lo más divino. No te puedes imaginar algo tan morboso. ¡En el mismo barco en que iba el brazo derecho de san Ignacio de Loyola! ¿No es graciosísimo? No te puedes imaginar, viajar con una reliquia. Victoria y Albert han venido conmigo. No te puedes imaginar el contratiempo que hemos tenido al desembarcar…

—…

—¿…?

—Unas latas de opio que intentaba pegarse al cuerpo con esparadrapo, querida, y con el calor del camarote por supuesto reventaron, sencillamente lo pusieron todo perdido, y allí estaban cubiertos de trozos de lata y con ese horrendo esparadrapo pegajoso por *todas* partes, la pobre Victoria tuvo que tirar un frasco de Chanel al suelo y romperlo, sólo para tapar el *olor.* Todavía tiene la boca llena de llagas. Las cogió besando el anillo del papa.

—Pero ¿qué quieres que haga yo con la llave, querido?

—Simplemente tenerla escondida hasta que venga chillando a pedírtela. ¿No es fantástico? En el mismísimo barco, queridos, en que iba ese odioso brazo derecho conocí a la persona que me había robado el pasaporte en Venecia. ¿Podéis imaginar que te presenten a ti mismo? No podéis. Pobre chico, se lo llevaron directamente a la cárcel, a pesar de que me ofrecí a tenerlo bajo mi custodia. No me dejaron. ¿No es divino? He oído unas historias muy conmovedoras sobre la vida en la cárcel.

—¿Cuándo has llegado?

—Esta misma mañana. ¿Y sabéis la inmunda jugarreta que me han hecho? Estuve allí, en el apartamento de Rudy, y dejé todo mi equipaje cubierto con las más adorables etiquetas de todas partes, queridos, de todos los hoteles elegantes de los que hayáis oído hablar. Y cuando llegué esta noche habían sacado todos mis bultos al pasillo, pero ¿sabéis lo que habían hecho? No os lo podéis imaginar. Sencillamente habían arrancado todas esas etiquetas divinas y habían pegado unas cosas horrendas, de lo más vulgar, todas mis preciosas maletas sencillamente cubiertas de etiquetas de paquetes de Trigo Molido y de cajas de Kotex. ¿No es de lo más infame?

—Pero ¿tendrás tu esmoquin el viernes por la noche?

—Nunca, nunca más. En el viaje de ida se lo presté a un joven siciliano divino. Se suicidó con él puesto, y me faltó valor para pedir que me lo devolvieran…

El humo se posaba rápidamente, los invitados volvían a encontrarse y a unirse con zarcillos de conversación. La chica plana dijo:

—Elogio fúnebre de un hombre de Wall Street que vivía en Westchester: «Nacimiento, abono de transporte y muerte».

—Cópula —dijo Stanley en un tono indignadamente alto, cortando la risa asmática que ella se había ganado. Estaba mirando a la chica del sofá.

—Vaya, Stanley —le reprendió Agnes Deigh desde su sillón, y tendió hacia su cara con gesto apaciguador un ramillete de uñas blancas. Pero la mente consagrada apartó a un lado el corazón errante.

—Es «nacimiento, cópula y muerte» —dijo a la chica profana.

—Pero si era una chiste, querido —dijo Agnes Deigh mientras su mano alcanzaba su temblorosa barbilla.

> «¡Polvo y ceniza!». Así cantas, y quiero que el corazón te reprenda. Queridas mujeres muertas, con aquel pelo… ¿qué fue de todo el oro que colgaba acariciando sus pechos?

Otto levantó la vista, rehuyendo los ojos de Max. De repente ella lo estaba mirando, escondida aún en el sofá. Fingiendo que no se había dado cuenta, dejó pasar varias páginas bajo el dedo y siguió.

> Nunca vio, nunca hasta hoy,
> Lo que podía dejarlo sin aliento,
> Una cara para perder la juventud
> Por ella, para envejecer soñando
> En ella, y con ella encarar la muerte…

Y estaba sola. Al verla se había sobresaltado: no miraba a nada, los labios callados y casi sonrientes mientras los otros charlaban, el cuerpo inmóvil donde todos se agitaban, sólo consciente en sí misma mientras los demás sólo eran conscientes de sí mismos. Sola en el sofá, y sola en la habitación como la mujer de ese cuadro cuya belleza no se puede apresar, cuya presencia no se puede ignorar volviéndole la espalda, pero cuyo silencio te hace volverte de nuevo, sin saber si preguntar o responder. Otto volvió a dejar el libro en el estante y se dirigió hacia ella. Luego le pasaron por los hombros un brazo vestido de *tweed.* A su lado alguien decía: «Había una mujer en Brooklyn que lo hacía, pero creo que la policía la pilló. Le pusieron una multa de doscientos dólares». Y otro dijo: «¿Es el primero que tiene? No puedes pasarte mucho de dos meses». «Podría sacarle partido», dijo un tercero. «Hoy día te dan dos dólares por una onza de leche materna».

—Alguien ha sido muy
cru-el
al no presentamos —dijo el propietario del brazo vestido de *tweed.* Otto se desasió y siguió avanzando, mientras en el otro grupo alguien decía: «Me sorprende que hasta ahora no se haya visto nunca metida en un lío como ese».

A través del humo, entre las nalgas entrechocadas y las palabras malgastadas, llegó. Ella alzó la vista y sonrió.

—¿Quieres que te traiga algo? —le preguntó. Había sacado el paquete de cigarrillos y se puso el último que le quedaba entre los labios, que tenía secos—. Lo siento, es el último —dijo mientras intentaba encenderlo, y luego, aturulladamente—: Oh, lo siento, debería haber…

Se quedó gesticulando con el cigarrillo humeante.

—Me apetece un cigarrillo —dijo ella.

—Pero yo… toma, toma éste. —Había olvidado el aire desenvuelto, las cejas arqueadas, los labios humedecidos, ligeramente separados. Tenía la boca seca, y las manos húmedas de sudor—. Lo siento. Espera que te busque uno.

—No, creo que tengo —dijo ella, y se inclinó para coger su bolso del suelo—. Me llamo Esme —le dijo al incorporarse con un cigarrillo.

—Oh. ¿Sí? —dijo Otto mientras intentaba abrir una pequeña caja de cerillas con una mano. Ella lo ayudó a encender el cigarrillo. Su cara delgada y angulosa exageraba la belleza de sus grandes ojos, y la imagen que él buscaba, flotando dilatada en sus superficies, se sumergió y desapareció.

—Sí. ¿Y tú?

—¿Yo? Oh. Me llamo Otto —dijo.

Una cara para perder la juventud por ella, para envejecer soñando en ella, y con ella encarar la muerte…

—Pero ¿no quieres sentarte?

Se sentó.

La habitación estaba llena de humo, humo seco y rancio que retenía como una telaraña los cadáveres insectiles de vainas secas de palabras que habían sido dichas y no volverían a oírse, los alientos exhalados que no volverían a aspirarse. Pero las palabras seguían fluyendo, y en los breves intervalos entre cigarrillos, las exhalaciones volvían a aspirarse. «No sé, me ha dicho que era un positivista negativo». «Bueno, a mí me ha dicho que era un negativista positivo». «A propósito, ¿has leído *Nuestra sociedad anticonceptiva?».* «Mi

querido amigo, si lo escribí yo, por el amor de Dios». Adeline había sido acorralada por Ed Feasley, que le estaba diciendo que el problema de Norteamérica era que era un matriarcado y no tenía ningún mito patrio. Alguien dijo: «Aquí nadie entiende de verdad Nueva York. Es una experiencia social». Max estaba discutiendo sobre cajas de orgón como si se hubiera pasado la vida viviendo en una. Buster Brown tenía cogido de la cintura a Sonny Byron, un joven negro que según se decía descendía de un poeta inglés del que pocos habían oído hablar en aquella habitación. Uno de los policías estaba dormido. El otro estaba sentado con un vaso en la mano, haciendo muecas al vacío. Anselm se abría paso pegado a la pared, para no perder el equilibrio, en dirección a la ventana. El chico italiano sin barbilla estaba completamente aislado, contemplando el cuadro. Charles estaba en el cuarto de baño, registrando el botiquín. Hannah estaba dividida entre el intelecto y la emoción: por una parte, asegurando que D.
H. Lawrence
era impotente a un joven con los ojos pintados que insistía en que en el fondo era una «reinona de cuidao»; por otra, tratando de proteger a Stanley de Agnes Deigh, que lo tenía sentado en el brazo de su sillón con las uñas blancas hundidas en su rodilla.

—A veces sé muy bien cómo debes sentirte siendo el brazo izquierdo de san Ignacio de Loyola —dijo el sueco alto, que parecía a punto de echarse a llorar.

—Cariño, no me toques —dijo Herschel—, tengo la cabeza braquifálica —y empezó a cantar mientras volvía a desplomarse en el suelo.

Anselm consiguió llegar a la ventana, la abrió y salió gateando por la escalera de incendios, causando un estropicio en el patio inferior. El crítico de la camisa verde de lana estaba encorvado sobre el poeta, diciendo: «Esos mocosos que salen de la universidad creyendo que pueden escribir novelas…».

El señor Feedle estaba ocupado escribiendo una dedicatoria en la hoja de guarda de un libro. Por la puerta entró un chico con un sobre manila bajo el brazo, y se acercó al policía que estaba haciendo muecas.

—La radio de su coche patrulla está armando un jaleo tremendo —dijo. El policía se abrochó la guerrera sobre el roñoso suéter rojo y salió. Entonces, el chico que había entrado dijo—: Está nevando.

—Crissto, qué innecesario —dijo Ed Feasley. Acababa de decir a Adeline que la traducción literal de la palabra alemana *freien,* «casarse», era «liberar»; pues, aparte de sus intenciones inmediatas, la consideraba como un personaje de una próxima obra de ficción. Este hijo de Harvard que nunca había aprendido un oficio la observaba con indulgente curiosidad.

> —Te falta un brazo y te falta una pierna. Holaa, holaa…

cantaba desde un rincón apartado el antiguo acompañante de Adeline, y lo hacía con súbita alegría, como si acabara de descubrir la canción.

> Te falta un brazo y te falta una pierna,
> Eres un huevo sin pollo, sin ojos y sin nariz,

(cantaba, encantado con semejante engendro), y siguió un estribillo inverosímil:

> Me voy al Siam holandés, me voy…

Entonces alguien dijo en voz alta lo que todos habían estado sospechando:

—Se ha acabado la bebida.

Se hizo el silencio en la habitación. Hasta el huevo sin pollo, sin ojos y sin nariz quedó olvidado, mientras el cantante intentaba alcanzar una postura optimistamente vertical apoyándose contra la estantería.

—Oh, Dios —dijo Agnes Deigh—. Dame el bolso, ¿quieres, querido? —pidió a unos anónimos fondillos de pantalones, tirando de la chaqueta que colgaba encima pero sin hacer juego. Tendió un billete doblado de veinte dólares a un chico que llevaba los colores de su cuadra y se levantó, diciendo—: De todas formas, tengo que ir al retrete, ¿dónde está?

Hannah había estado observándola. Se metió las manos en los bolsillos de sus anchos pantalones de dril, las sacó vacías y preguntó «¿Qué hora es?» a Max, probablemente la única otra persona sobria de la habitación.

—Las tres y cuarto —dijo Max, para quien el tiempo era también un asunto del reloj.

Ella sorbió por la nariz, como si le hubieran hecho una ofensa personal.

—Es repugnante que vayan a representar varias óperas de Mozart como obra benéfica para comprar un nuevo decorado para *El anillo.* Mozart sirviendo de alcahuete a Wagner. Y esa vieja zorra —añadió—, con su reloj de Mickey Mouse. —Luego miró al fondo de la habitación y preguntó—: ¿Quién es esa chica escuálida del sofá que está con ese… Otto?

—Escribe poemas, se llama Esme. Creo que ha posado para algún pintor. No tiene estómago.

—He oído hablar de ella —murmuró Hannah—. Va de pico. Esquizo.

—Maniaco depresiva, tendencias esquizoides —explicó Max—. ¿Alguien ha visto alguna vez a su niña?

—¿Niña? ¿Es madre, ésa? Es demasiado espiritual la muy jodía.

—Dice que tiene una de cuatro años.

—Cristo. Y mira a Herschel, es tan simple, pero Stanley, esa manía que tiene con la Iglesia, por eso se pega a esa vieja zorra del reloj Mickey Mouse, cree que quiere devolverla al seno de la Iglesia. Me gustaría que se la quitase de encima.

—A mí me gustaría que no oliese —dijo Max—. Ya te lo dije, es un tipo oral. Pero si quieres ver una auténtica neurosis obsesiva, mira eso —dijo señalando a Anselm, que se acercaba a cuatro patas con una beatífica expresión en su cara estropeada—. ¿Has leído alguno de sus poemas? No entiendo cómo se los acepta Bildow.

—¿Cómo no va a oler? —dijo Anselm desde abajo—. No se lava.

—Para ya, ¿vale, Anselm? —dijo Hannah, dando un paso hacia Stanley.

—¿Qué decía san Jerónimo? ¿«Se te pone áspera la piel sin el baño»?

—Para ya.

—«Quien se ha bañado una vez en la sangre de Cristo no necesita volverse a bañar».

Hannah se acercó a Stanley y lo cogió del brazo.

—¿No quieres irte? Vamos, te acompaño hasta el metro.

—Sí… espera un momento —dijo, bajando la vista hacia la cálida huella que había dejado Agnes Deigh en el sillón.

Hannah murmuró algo. Estaba mirando otra vez a Esme, y de repente dijo a Max:

—Da la impresión de que se cree que *es* un cuadro. Como un óleo al que se supone que no debes acercarte demasiado.

—Ahora está bien puesta, ¿no lo ves? Lleva tres días colocada.

Hannah dio un bufido, y volvió a coger a Stanley del brazo.

—¿Vienes?

Él bajó la vista para ver quién le tiraba de la pernera del pantalón.

—¿Qué clase de católico caraculo eres tú? —preguntó Anselm desde el suelo.

—Pero… pero…

—Cierra el pico, Anselm —dijo Hannah—. Por los clavos de Cristo, vete a casa a dormirla.

—¡Por los clavos de Cristo, me dices! ¿Qué sabes tú de Cristo?

—Vete a dormirla.

—Bueno, no puedo. ¿Y sabes por qué? Por culpa de Cristo. Porque cuando me tumbo y siento mis manos sobre mi cuerpo sólo puedo pensar en eso, en ese delgado cuerpo de Cristo. Puedo sentirlo con mis propias manos. ¿Te interesa eso?

—Por favor… —dijo Stanley.

—Ni lo más mínimo, maldita sea —dijo Hannah.

—Bueno, entonces no intentes hablarme de Cristo —dijo Anselm, y empezó a alejarse a cuatro patas. Luego volvió la cabeza hacia ellos—. ¿Sabéis quién se paseaba por ahí de este modo? ¿Sabéis que santa Teresa iba por ahí a cuatro patas, con un cesto de piedras en la espalda? Y con un ronzal. Eso es el *ritu quadrupedis,* si es que os parece tan jodidamente gracioso, ¿no? ¿Y sabéis lo que le dijo Cristo? «Si no hubiera creado ya el cielo, lo crearía sólo para ti». No intentes hablarme de Cristo —dijo, y se alejó hacia el otro extremo de la habitación, *quadrupedis.* Stanley se quedó quieto, y Hannah le volvió la espalda airadamente.

Herschel estaba aún apoyado contra la estantería, donde se había dejado caer un rato antes. Al ver acercarse a Hannah puso una expresión de temor e incomprensión.

—A estas alturas probablemente no sabrás siquiera cómo te llamas —dijo ella con un tono despiadadamente sobrio.

—Hannah…

—No. Hannah soy yo, ¿y tú quién eres?

Herschel la eludió, se dirigió tambaleándose hacia el otro extremo de la habitación e interrumpió a Ed

Feasley, que estaba explicando a Adeline que la traducción literal de la palabra alemana *niederlage,* rendirse, era yacer debajo.

—Adeline —dijo Herschel—. Cariño —arrojando el aliento por la boca abierta, líquidamente audible—. ¿Te llamas realmente Adeline? Una vez tuve una niñera que se llamaba Adeline, una negra Adeline occidental. Un día le pegué un buen mordisco bajo el manzano. ¿Qué te parece eso?

A la blanca Adeline le pareció suficiente como para apartarse de él. Herschel se balanceaba ante ella como un hombre con los pies calzados sobre muelles.

—¿Te llamas realmente Adeline? —imploró, ahora con tal insistencia que si ella hubiera contestado, o incluso permitido la afirmativa callándose, habría legitimado cualquier cosa que hiciera después. Pero en aquel momento se abrió la puerta entre ellos y aparecieron cuatro rezagados de ojos turbios y movimientos ondulantes, los tres chicos sin afeitar y la chica sin lavar, oliendo como seres surgidos de una ciénaga.

—Lo hemos pasado bomba, tío —dijo uno de ellos—. ¿Tenéis algo de hierba?

Un policía con la guerrera desabrochada apareció en la entrada para anunciar en voz alta que había recibido una llamada de la comisaría en respuesta a una queja sobre aquella dirección, una fiesta… demasiado ruido… tenían que bajar el tono… ¿y podía conseguirle alguien otra copa?

Otto agarró a Esme del brazo y la ayudó a levantarse, utilizando casi el brazo que yacía inútil en el cabestrillo. Recuperó suficiente ingenio para decir:

—¿Puedo llevarte a casa? Ahora se supone que tendrías que decir: «Claro, ¿dónde vives?».

Esme alzó la mirada y sonrió amablemente, con la expresión vacía. No lo entendió; y la sofistería, confrontada con la simplicidad, se perdió.

—Parece que llevamos la vida entera aquí metidos —dijo.

Alguien apareció ante Otto con un sobre manila.

—Aquí está el cuento, el que me dijiste que ibas a mandar a tu amiga de la revista —dijo, y desapareció.

Herschel estaba murmurando entre dientes. Todo su sentido del humor había desaparecido, todo su sentido de todo. Sus ojos, después de mirar sin encontrar nada, habían dejado de buscar y estaban abiertos y ausentes. Sólo cuando volvió a aparecer Hannah, reflejada en su vidriosa superficie, se nublaron.

—Supongo que ahora querrás hacerte el tatuaje, ¿no? —dijo. Él asintió desvalidamente con la cabeza—. No seas tan tonto, Herschel. Vuelve a analizarte. ¿Crees que un tatuaje resolverá algo?

—Hannah… cariño…

—En cualquier caso, ¿qué te vas a tatuar? ¿Nombres? ¿Dibujos?

—Déjame en paz —susurró.

En un rincón continuaba una discusión de feroz intensidad intelectual. Alguien había dicho que todo el mundo sabía que Tennyson era judío. En medio de la habitación se encontraron dos jóvenes. «Creía que te habías ido a casa», dijo uno. El otro lo abrazó. «Estaba esperando a que alguien me lo pidiera». El sueco estaba sentado, con la cabeza en las manos, en el alféizar de la ventana. «Esas etiquetas vulgares, horrendas, horrendas, pegadas en mis maletas», sollozó. «Pero los oí reír detrás de la puerta, detrás de la puerta cerrada, les oí reír…». La chica plana dijo: «Pero ¿no vas a despedirte de nuestro anfitrión?». Y su acompañante, una mujer hecha y derecha, dijo: «Dios, no, con *ése* no me hablo».

Agnes Deigh volvió estirándose la falda y aflojándose la cintura. Luego se oyó la voz de Stanley diciendo «No, prometí a Hannah que me iría a casa con ella», con el tono de lealtad de un niño de siete años a la madre rechoncha y eterna. Un chico con pajarita dio las gracias a Agnes Deigh por la fiesta, y ella exclamó:

—No era *mi* fiesta, querido. Yo también me voy. ¿Me llevas a casa? —Cuando salía se detuvo junto a Max, que sonreía bajo las olvidadas cicatrices del Alma del Obrero—. Hay alguien en el retrete, querido, desmayado en la bañera, no lo conozco. Será mejor que vayas a echarle un vistazo, está todo lleno de sangre.

A sus pies estaban sentados los invitados rezagados, fumando algo del tamaño de un pulgar que se pasaban entre sí, como una lastimera partida de indios proscritos matando el hambre. «Esto no me hace nada —dijo uno—, pero ¿no habéis notado que el techo se está acercando?».

El policía que había estado haciendo muecas dejó el vaso vacío y despertó a su compañero. Ambos se fueron.

Otto sentía algo extraño, sosteniendo su muñeca: que Esme podía darlo todo sin perder nada, pues el que la tomase descubriría que no había dado nada: tras saquearla, el saqueador se volvería para encontrarse vacío, y a ella todavía ofreciéndose en silencio. Cuando ella levantó la vista se sintió perdido, como si la mujer del cuadro hubiera vuelto sus ojos inmutables hacia su desamparo, y apartó la mirada de sus ojos hacia la recta oscuridad de su pelo, y luego cobardemente hacia sus dedos sin anillos. La belleza de sus ojos lo turbaba instantáneamente, en cuanto los mostraba.

—¡Puta! —dijo una voz a sus pies, una voz ronca, de alguien que respiraba entrecortadamente, como si de verdad llevase una carga de piedras en la espalda. Luego, con voz clara y dura, Anselm llamó algo a Esme, algo que cayó de su boca como una piedra redonda, y pareció golpear el suelo y quedar allí. Ella bajó la mirada hacia él.

—Vamos. Ten cuidado —dijo Otto, tirando de ella hacia la puerta.

Pero ella se quedó donde estaba, firme pese a su fragilidad, y sonrió.

—Anselm… —dijo, su voz dulce y sosegadora mientras repetía el nombre—. Anselm.

—Súcubo —dijo Anselm, con voz de nuevo roncamente gutural—. Ssúcubo —siseó—. Demonio con cuerpo de mujer, que arrastras al hombre a un pecado infame, a lascivias abominables, placeres carnales, blasfemia, los inmundos deleites de la cópula. ¿Crees que no lo sé? ¿Crees que nadie lo sabe? No para tu delectación, tú no sacas ningún placer de ello, sólo para corromper y mancillar el alma y el cuerpo de un hombre mortal. Súcubo para un hombre, íncubo para una mujer.

Levantó la barbilla salpicada de acné.

—Vamos, Esme —dijo Otto—. Salgamos de aquí.

Pero ella se quedó, encantada, sonriendo aún con dulzura.

—Vete a casa y lee a san Agustín. *Sobre la Trinidad* —dijo Anselm, alzando su cara enjuta hacia Otto—. Allí encontrarás que los demonios recogen verdaderamente simiente humana. No por delectación. Súcubo para un hombre, íncubo para una mujer. Maldita seas, maldita seas, maldita seas. Si hay demonios de todas las categorías, son los de las categorías más bajas los encargados de practicar estas abominaciones, estas inmundas delicias. No por delectación. ¿Sabes lo del monje Elías, cómo los ángeles respondieron a sus plegarias castrándole? ¿Sabes lo de san Víctor?

Otto había llevado a Esme hacia la puerta, donde el sueco sollozaba: «Detrás de la puerta cerrada, los oí reír…». Entonces Otto se volvió, sintiendo que algo lo salpicaba. Anselm había levantado una mano mojada en cerveza, y la agitaba diciendo:

—Yo te exorcizo, espíritu impuro, en el nombre de Jesucristo; tiembla, oh Satán, enemigo de la fe, adversario de la humanidad, que has traído la muerte al mundo…

Jadeó, y en aquel momento Otto oyó claramente la voz de Max desde el otro extremo de la habitación: «Yo diría que es un heterosexual latente», y al levantar la vista se encontró los ojos de Max clavados en él. Quedó atrapado un momento en los sonrientes ojos de Max; luego buscó otros, vio a Stanley hundido en un sillón, observando a Anselm.

—Seductor de la humanidad, raíz del mal, fuente de la avaricia, la discordia y la envidia…

—Esme, vamos —tiró de su brazo.

—Eh, Stanley —gritó de repente Anselm por encima de su hombro—, ¿quién es ese negrata que está con tu chica? Eh, Stanley, soy alguien, señor, que viene a decirle…

—Esme…

—Su hija y el moro están haciendo ahora la bestia con dos espaldas.

—Maldita sea…

—Anda, sé bueno… —susurró el sueco a través de sus lágrimas.

—Por el amor de Dios, Anselm…

—Id a casa a fornicar —llegó desde el suelo—. Pero sabed que Dios permite a los demonios obrar contra Su voluntad para mayor gloria Suya. Para mayor gloria Suya…

Y entonces se oyó un golpazo.

AI volverse a mirar, vieron a Hannah levantándose del suelo, y Max fue a ayudarla. Herschel se tambaleó y cayó contra un sillón, donde su cuerpo entero se estremeció, agitándose desde sus poco profundas profundidades.

—No lo soporto, no lo soporto más. Me pregunta quién soy, y se lo digo, y ella dice cómo sabes quién es ése, no es nadie en absoluto y… Oh, Dios, *Cristo,* odio pegar a alguien que no me gusta.

En el suelo, ante la chimenea, yacía la corona fúnebre, robada jocosamente de la puerta de una afligida familia italiana del piso de abajo, tan pisoteada que sus alambres sobresalían desnudos. El tiempo había pasado por allí. El jardín que alguien había creído que no podría crecer, había florecido con fétida exuberancia, como las plantas de aquella plantación abandonada. Pues incluso los plátanos deben cortarse y colgarse para que maduren cabalmente; si se dejan en el tallo se hinchan y revientan, atraen insectos, adquieren un sabor desagradable, más allá de los límites de los cultivos, más allá de la plantación, en la jungla, donde sus parientes cercanos, las orquídeas, florecen en el arte del mal, sin preguntarse por los remotos griegos o por cómo adquirieron su nombre, inocentemente derivado de la morada del diablo en el hombre: aquella parte que los ángeles cortaron al monje Elías. Otto condujo a Esme hacia adelante, y en las

escaleras ella lo arrastró hacia abajo.

VI

> «Padre», preguntó, «¿son los ricos más fuertes que nadie en la tierra?». «Sí, Iliusha», dije, «no hay en la tierra nadie más fuerte que los ricos». «Padre», dijo, «me haré rico, llegaré a oficial y venceré a todo el mundo. El zar me recompensará, volveré aquí y entonces nadie se atreverá…». Se quedó callado, y sus labios seguían temblando. «Padre», dijo, «qué ciudad tan horrible es ésta».
>
> DOSTOIEVSKI, *Los hermanos Karamazov*

«¿Por qué no tiene el hombre ojos microscópicos?», escribe Alexander Pope. «Por esta sencilla razón: el hombre no es una mosca». Y Argos, dotado con cien ojos para vigilar a la hija del rey convertida en novilla por una diosa celosa, ¿cuántas imágenes de la novilla vería?, ¿cuántas hojas del helecho donde pacía? Y tras la muerte de Argos (sus ojos trasplantados a la cola del pavo real), esta desdichada novilla, la metamorfosis de Ío, recibió la visita de un tábano enviado por la diosa celosa, y loca de frenesí por sus picaduras cruzó las fronteras hasta llegar al Nilo. ¿Qué vería el tábano? Y Argos, sufriendo la distracción de cien ojos, ¿estaría tranquilamente sentado?, o se movería distraído de distracción en distracción, como la mosca doméstica que ahora se estrellaba y se apartaba frenéticamente del cristal de la ventana, atraída por un nuevo destino en el instante mismo en que se detenía, del tirador de la persiana al suelo, de allí a la pantalla de la lámpara, y de vuelta al desconcertante cristal de la ventana. Este miserable díptero no era ningún Argos; pese a sus maravillosos ojos, no era guardián de nada; pues ¿dónde estaba la novilla? Debajo, quizá. Desde el cielo raso, la mosca carenó hasta la moldura que cruzaba la habitación, de allí a la pantalla de la lámpara, a una bufanda verde, a unos calcetines que había en el suelo, y así hasta que se posó en la cara dormida, que estudió con vigilante devoción hasta que los parpadeantes ojos no microscópicos se abrieron, y Otto se despertó.

«Oh, Dios, ¿qué he *hecho?»,* se oyó la voz de una chica, prolongada por la de un Radamés cantando en sordina ante sus jueces desde los pulmones de una radio. Otto cerró los ojos, no preparado aún para volver a esta vida. La mosca se paseó por su mejilla, advirtiendo allí los daños hoyosos de la adolescencia, una superficie desigual que ofrecía un buen agarre para patas cargadas de bacilos tifoideos. Inmóvil por un momento, la mosca examinó las cavernas nasales, que llevaban al moreno pico torcido de la nariz. Otto se pasó un brazo por la cara. La mosca remontó el vuelo, giró en el aire, volvió a posarse para pasear por el hoyo de la barbilla, y desde aquella prominencia divisó la maravilla circunvoluta que sobresalía al otro lado, y saltó silenciosamente a la oreja.

«Oh, Dios, ¿qué he *hecho?».* A esto siguió un sollozo desgarrador.

La mano de Otto se movió rápidamente hacia la oreja, pero cuando llegó allí, la mosca estaba ya pisoteándole la ceja, con una diabólica intención de atormentar que no había cambiado desde que lo llegó al Nilo, donde las madres egipcias todavía dudan en molestar a las moscas posadas sobre un niño dormido, reverencialmente temerosas del dios de las moscas,
Baal-cebú
, poder maligno y engendrador de insectos de Baal, el propio sol, amante y avivador de la naturaleza.

—«Oh, Dios, *qué* he hecho… oouuuh…». —Mientras en el escenario egipcio Radamés es encerrado vivo en la tumba, donde encuentra a Aída esperando, sin sol, y fuera, a la luz del sol, metamorfoseado por un juego de palabras,
Baal-cebú
se convierte en Belcebú, el dios del estiércol, Príncipe de los Demonios.

Así que Otto, obligado a despertarse por tres milenios, una diosa, una princesa y un demonio, lanzó un nuevo manotazo hacia la mosca doméstica y se sentó en el borde de la cama, con la cara ansiosamente torcida, escuchando. Esperó.

«¡Oh, Dios! ¡Qué he hecho!», se oyó a través de la delgada pared.

Se levantó y encendió un cigarrillo americano.

El tenue sol de diciembre entraba por la ventana, visitando de nuevo esperanzadoramente aquella ciudad desesperada de la noche anterior. En miles de habitaciones, otros tantos hombres se afeitaban absortos minúsculos pelillos de pálidas barbillas, esmerándose tanto en lograr un pulcro aspecto oficinesco como si trabajasen bajo la férula de san Wulstan, cuya santidad se ofendía hasta tal punto con las barbas

que solía llevar un cuchillo, y cuando un hombre adornado de esa guisa se arrodillaba para recibir su bendición, el buen obispo de Wulster le cortaba un mechón de la barba, lo arrojaba a la cara del pobre tipo y le ordenaba que se rapase el resto o se fuera, literalmente, al infierno. Ahora se abrochaban botones por milésima vez sin rechistar, absortos en pragmáticos monólogos interiores que anticipaban los éxitos del día en curso, alentados por los fracasos del día anterior.

La ciudad latía con refulgencia gris, con movimiento radiante, mientras palomas silenciosas barrían el aire inferior, o caminaban gruñendo por los alféizares y cornisas de los edificios, y por las aceras de las zonas despejadas. En Union Square, una de ellas atacó a un pájaro de rara belleza, tropicalmente emplumado, que parecía perdido y poco acostumbrado a desplegar sus alas más allá de los límites de una jaula.

Otto se movía con pesadez por la pequeña habitación, recogiendo su cigarrillo cada vez que había reposado durante el tiempo suficiente para hacer una quemadura parda en la madera, a fin de reavivar la brasa y dejarlo en otro sitio. Estaba en calzoncillos. El traje de lino estaba arrugado, y la luz matinal lo mostraba menos favorecedor de lo que había creído la noche anterior. Examinó una mancha en el codo (recuerdo del suelo de Esme, donde lo había dejado caer), empezó a cepillarla, y luego lo dejó. Allí quedó, testigo de lo que, por mucho que lo intentara, no podía recordar con claridad. Junto al de lino colgaban otros dos trajes y una chaqueta, sólo la franela gris cuidadosamente arrugada.

«¡Oh, Dios! *Qué he he-choo… uuuuuh…»,* se oyó a través de la pared. «Jajá. Jajá. Así es como se hace…».

Se hundió en la butaca, mirando aún fijamente la pared; pero sólo le llegó la voz de la radio: «Señoras, si les preocupa el exceso de vello, escriban pidiendo un folleto *gratis* de nuestro método, garantizado para suprimir mil quinientos pelos en una sola hora…».

Entonces se levantó y se vistió despacio. Mientras se abrochaba la camisa miró distraídamente un libro y unos papeles que había sobre la mesa, y que habían atraído la atención de la mosca. Cogió una toalla de la cama y la descargó sobre la mosca. La mosca se trasladó al techo, y varios papeles al suelo. Mientras recogía el periódico hispano local (que llevaba en público y fingía leer) murmuró algo; luego, mientras se ponía los pantalones, miró con el mismo aire distraído un trozo de papel en el que estaba escrito: «Ds dedca tnta atción momto cmo hra; ¿q sigfca?». La expresión de su cara empezó a cambiar mientras lo releía, rascándose la cabeza mientras intercalaba las vocales. Pero comoquiera que hubiera sido aquella expresión, se truncó: se quedó mirándose las uñas, dobladas sobre la palma. Luego, sin mirarla apenas, arrugó al vuelo la nota y la tiró a la papelera, tras lo cual se abrochó los pantalones y se sentó a contar su dinero.

«Y ahora, amigos, probablemente habrán oído hablar tanto sobre esta maravillosa nueva dieta proteínica que…».

Levantó la vista cuando iba por ciento treinta. En el cuarto de al lado estaban girando el dial.

«Para suprimir el olor de la transpiración. Cincuenta y dos por ciento más eficaz».

Renunciando a contar el dinero, pasó el pulgar por el resto antes de guardarlo y se acercó al espejo con una corbata. Allí examinó sus ojos ansiosamente durante un momento, luego advirtió que su piel aparecía pálida bajo la superficie bronceada, y los pelos del bigote resaltaban en ralos mechones separados.

«De modo, amigos, que para conseguir un folleto gratis… Cristo no me envió para bautizaros sino para… Ese maravilloso aroma varonil que vuelve locas a las chicas».

Entonces se puso en marcha en la calle una taladradora neumática, a unas diez yardas del lugar donde el pavimento había sido levantado y arreglado la semana anterior. Pensó en dejar el cabestrillo donde estaba, vacío sobre la mesa, pues estaba resultando un estorbo mayor de lo que había previsto. Pero temiendo encontrarse con alguien que lo hubiera visto con él, se lo colgó al cuello, y volvió a acercarse al espejo para arreglárselo.

Debajo, la taladradora se detuvo el tiempo suficiente para dejarle oír a través de la pared:

«Acaban de oír el aria de Gluck “Orfeoedeurodiche”…».

Se quedó con la puerta abierta mirando a la puerta cerrada que tenía a la derecha. Levantó una mano para llamar; pero al mirar hacia atrás mientras su puerta se cerraba vio el gran sobre manila sobre la mesa, volvió para cogerlo, y cogió también el más pequeño y menos familiar.

Hacía una mañana excepcionalmente buena, y las calles estaban aún comparativamente limpias de esas toneladas de envoltorios ingeniosamente hechos, vistosamente impresos y científicamente diseñados, envoltorios de cosas también prescindibles, que los nativos dejan caer a su paso adonde quiera que vayan, de modo tan concienzudo como esos astutos espíritus de allá abajo que se dedican a ensuciar el sendero del paraíso.

Mientras caminaba hacia la parada del autobús, advirtió que su reloj llevaba catorce minutos de retraso. Al doblar la esquina echó a correr, y el autobús que había estado esperando arrancó con un rugido y se

alejó cuando llegaba, llevándose caras que lo miraron con benévola satisfacción mientras recobraba el aliento entre los gases de escape. Esperó. Paró un taxi justo ante él; y el siguiente autobús, como no podía acercarse a la acera, pasó de largo rugiendo. El taxista, que lo había mirado inquisitivamente, lo miró con desdén y salió detrás del autobús. El autobús del centro que cogió un cuarto de hora más tarde iba conducido por un hombre bigotudo con chaqueta de cuero, cuyos movimientos fanfarrones recordaban los de los alocados pilotos de bombardero de la pantalla del cine. Su gorra, con el refuerzo de alambre quitado, colgaba chulescamente de la coronilla de su grasienta cabeza, mientras guiaba su enorme aparato por la pista para realizar otro despegue. Agarrado a una correa, Otto se balanceaba de un lado a otro intentando mostrarse tan inexpresivo como las caras que tenía ante sí, mientras miraba fijamente hacia

El próximo domingo
lleve a alguien consigo a la iglesia
Ambos se enriquecerán

Las fantasías de los pasajeros quedaron suspendidas mientras atravesaban nubes, se estremecían en baches de aire, picaban vertiginosamente hacia postes de señales. Otto se había dado por fin la vuelta, y miraba fijamente hacia

1 500 000 americanos
tienen SÍFILIS O GONORREA
y no lo saben

A juzgar por sus caras sin expresión, ninguno de los pasajeros parecía molesto por la intrusión del conductor en los dominios de sus fantasías: contemplando su trepidante espalda, parecían respetar su derecho a actuar alegóricamente, a redimir, lo mejor que le permitiera su entumecida imaginación, el absurdo de la realidad.

Anselm no dijo nada, sino que sonrió sin reconocimiento cuando se cruzaron en Washington Square. Otto contuvo el aliento y apartó rápidamente los ojos de la cara delgada recién afeitada para dirigirlos al libro de cubierta carmesí que llevaba Anselm bajo el brazo, y entró en el portal del que había salido hacía pocas horas. Los escalones tenían la familiaridad de una escalera descendida en sueños. La última vez los había visto sin iluminar, con ojos diferentes de los de la mañana: ahora le interesaron, pues se veía ya subiéndolos con frecuencia y regularidad, arriba y abajo. La puerta a la que se acercó era anónima, sin placa. Llamó imperiosamente, pero siguió igual, sin ofrecer ningún indicio de lo que podía haber detrás.

Toc, toc, toc. Y más silencio que antes.

—¿Esme? —llamó.

—¿Quién es?

—Otto.

—¿Quién?

—Otto.

—Oh. Pero si es muy temprano.

En el instante en que su voz dejó de oírse, la puerta, plana, sin placa, recuperó su anonimato, y ella desapareció, ya no estaba.

—¿Otto?

—¿Sí?

—¿Puedes volver dentro de una hora?

—¿Una *hora?*

—Tengo que bañarme.

—De acuerdo —gritó ante aquella puerta resuelta, y bajó las escaleras.

Una carita peluda se volvió hacia él desde el regazo de la rubia sentada a su lado en la barra de la cafetería. Pidió café, y empezó a toquetear la cinta verde de la coronilla del perro. La rubia se enderezó, mirando hacia el otro lado, el lhasa se volvió a mirar la máquina de
Coca-Cola
, y ella se inclinó hacia adelante para soplarle suavemente en el pelo. A su izquierda, el camarero de brazos velludos apoyó las manos en la barra. «Sí, podría escribir un libro», dijo a la chica que estaba allí sentada.

«Apuesto a que en Boston lo prohibirían», dijo ella. Se echó a reír. «No sólo en Boston», dijo él. Ambos rieron.

La rubia del perro tosió, y se corrió de asiento. Otto arrojó más humo de cigarrillo directamente ante si, y dejó el paquete de Emús en la barra.

Con la tercera taza de café, mientras contemplaba los dos sobres manila, recordó de pronto que el más pequeño tenía dentro un cuento escrito por un veterano de la armada, que le habían entregado en la fiesta de la noche anterior después de que dijera que una amiga suya tenía una revista. Aquella amiga era la chica que hacía tres años le había causado una desdicha indecible por negarse a casarse con él. Otto la recordaba ahora con cariño condescendiente. En un papelito escribió: «Mi querida Edna: Te envío un cuento escrito por un amigo mío, pues después de leerlo detenidamente he pensado que podría quedar bien en tu revista. Si no lo utilizas devuélvemelo a mí, por favor, pues él no tiene domicilio fijo…», nota que firmó y añadió a los papeles del sobre, sin molestarse siquiera en sacarlos.

Stanley no dijo nada, sino que bajó la cabeza sin reconocimiento cuando se cruzaron en Washington Square. Cuando Otto se vio de nuevo ante la puerta de Esme, dudaba entre besarla impetuosamente, formalmente o de ningún modo. La contención de de-ningún-modo sería a la postre la mejor recompensada, pues entonces ella creería que deseaba que la besase, y se las ingeniaría para ofrecerle una oportunidad inequívoca. Se arregló el cabestrillo.

Ella abrió la puerta y le sonrió, como probablemente sonreía al portero cuando aparecía allí. Otto dijo buenos días y entró. Se quitó la bufanda verde y la arrojó a una silla, de donde cayó por detrás al suelo.

—¿Cómo te sientes esta mañana? —le preguntó.

—Como me siento por la mañana —respondió Esme sonriendo, sin vacilar, como una niña buena.

—Quiero decir después de anoche.

—La mañana es siempre después de anoche.

—No, me refiero a la fiesta, y…

—Oh. Estaba… ¿cómo dijiste? ¿Cur-da?

—Estabas bastante ida.

Otto contempló su cara: cómo debía habérsela restregado, resaltando sus líneas angulosas, para ponerse luego por todo maquillaje las rayas oscuras de las cejas. Intentó agarrarla de la cintura. Ella se apartó.

—¿Me trajiste a casa? —preguntó.

—¿Que si te traje a casa? Esme…

Se la quedó mirando a los ojos, muy abiertos con inocente curiosidad.

—¿Pasa algo? —preguntó ella.

—¿No te acuerdas?

—¿De qué?

—¿No te acuerdas de *nada?*

—¿De la fiesta? —preguntó alegremente—. Fue una fiesta muy bonita. Y luego el pobre Anselm iba de un lado a otro como un perro diciendo cosas graciosas, y luego ese pobre muchacho pegó a esa chica… —Se detuvo.

—Herschel pegó a Hannah. ¿Y luego?

—Sí —dijo— Herschel pegó a Hannah. —Se detuvo.

—Pero Hannah, quiero decir, Esme, ¿es lo único que recuerdas?

—Sí, fue una fiesta muy bonita, y tú estabas allí parado fingiendo leer ese viejo libro…

Apestaba a sinceridad.

—Esme…

—Y no parabas de toquetear esa cosa tan graciosa que llevas colgada del cuello…

—Esme.

—¿Qué, Ot-to?

—¿No recuerdas que volviste aquí conmigo?

—Entonces *sí* que me trajiste. ¿Por qué no me lo has dicho, en vez de tomarme el pelo de ese modo?

La frente de Otto se frunció, el cabestrillo tembló. ¿Qué es una conquista si no es reconocida por el conquistado? Allí era donde había dejado caer la chaqueta, allí estaba el cenicero que había volcado.

—Esme…

Toc, toc, toc.

—Pero Esme…

—¿Quién es? —dijo ella camino de la puerta, sonriendo.

—¡¿…?!

—¡Chaby! —exclamó Esme, como encantada con lo que entraba por aquella puerta—. Te presento —dijo a Otto— a Chaby Si-nis-te-rra —como si se estuviera inventando las palabras sílaba a sílaba.

—Cómo estás —dijo Otto, sin desear que se lo dijeran. No se lo dijeron.

Chaby era pequeño, de huesos afilados. Tenía la barbilla pequeña y afilada, también los ojos, y los dientes: en realidad todo en él era así, menos el pelo, un tupé negro brillante que llevaba como un sombrero y se arreglaba cada dos por tres con un peine de bolsillo sucio al que le faltaba una púa, lo que dejaba un surco en la superficie por lo demás lisa y alquitranada. Su bigote era una línea delgada de pelos negros que le corría sobre el labio superior desde las ventanas de la nariz. Otto se pasó la yema de un dedo por la dispersa plenitud del suyo, y se sentó.

—Qué noche más jodía he tenido —dijo Chaby.

Y tenía las uñas negras.

Otto encendió un Emú y quedó aparentemente absorto en él, dando a entender que su pleno disfrute exigía toda su atención. Arrojó un anillo de humo a un lado, otro al otro y otro al suelo, donde se hundió y se deshizo sobre la alfombra. La alfombra terminaba a mitad de la habitación en una indecisión de color y dibujo, y su superficie, debido a la textura desigual del suelo, tenía el aspecto liso y levemente nervudo de las de ubusson. Su intrincado dibujo, que empezaba bajo el sofá donde estaba sentado Otto, daba paso a la abstracción, amenazando con algo aun peor donde terminaba bruscamente, una sensación de delirio en la mano del pintor que la había pintado allí, cruzando la urdimbre y la trama con los trazos de un pincel de dos pulgadas. Chaby daba golpecitos en el suelo con un zapato reluciente, acompañando un ritmo maligno que sonaba constantemente en su interior. Esme se sentó en el brazo de su sillón. Él se levantó y se acercó a la radio, que encendió con la desenvuelta irreflexión de una larga costumbre. La habitación se llenó con las palpitantes vacilaciones de un tango. Con silencioso desdén, tan diluido que se acercaba a la caridad, Otto comparó su atavío con el del ser enguatado y plisado que se balanceaba frente a él, hasta que se dio cuenta de que Chaby se había quitado la chaqueta y sostenía estrechamente a Esme de la cintura, un poco por debajo de la suya. Estaban bailando. Otto siguió con dolorosa atención las primeras intimidades de aquel tango. Se arregló el cabestrillo, como para indicar que si no fuera por aquella injusticia bailaría o presentaría batalla. Luego bostezó, pero el bostezo no tuvo éxito, simplemente lo dejó con la boca abierta. Alargó su mano libre para coger un libro.

El que tenía más a mano era nuevo: *En sueños beso su mano, señora,* «Una antología de cuentos románticos escritos a lo largo de siete siglos por cuarenta y seis autores de treinta y un países… Editada por Recktall Brown». La primera página estaba en blanco, la segunda repetía el título, la cuarta el título y las aclaraciones de la cubierta, pero Otto examinó la tercera: «Para / ESME / cuyo juicio infalible / es responsable del valor / que pueda tener este libro».

El tango terminó con una larga rendición reticente en la radio, y una expresión similar en medio de la habitación. Esme se recuperó. Riendo, se echó el pelo hacia atrás para apartarlo de sus sudorosas sienes.

—Chaby da clases de baile —dijo a Otto, explicándole lo que acababa de ocurrir, sonriendo como sonríe la mujer baganda en África Central, tendida en la alta hierba con una flor de plátano entre las piernas, flor que hace caer el miembro rampante de su esposo antes de llevarla a bailar en los jardines de los amigos, para animar a los plataneros que crecen en sus jardines.

—Realmente —dijo Esme—, debería ser ilegal bailar de ese modo.

Su pareja, sin despeinarse, se había abierto la camisa hasta la cintura, mostrando una medalla de plata que se balanceaba en una cadena colgada de su cuello.

—Debería serlo —murmuró Otto.

—¿Qué, Otto? —Ahora se sentó a su lado, y al ver lo que estaba leyendo dijo por encima de su hombro —: ¿No es horrible?

—¿Quién es Recktall Brown? —preguntó a su vez.

—Hizo eso porque quería acostarse conmigo —dijo ella alegremente.

—¿Quién es?

—Un gordo terrible que hace cosas como ésa.

—¿Cómo puede atribuirte el mérito de un cuento de Maupassant? —dijo él, pasando las páginas hasta «Cama número 29», echándole la culpa a ella.

—Simplemente porque lo hace —explicó—. Va a publicar mis poemas.

—¿Por la misma razón?

—Sí. Sólo porque quiere acostarse conmigo. ¿No es gracioso? ¿No es repugnante? —dijo riendo.

—Sí, lo es —convino Otto seriamente.

—¿Qué es ese olor tan curioso? —dijo Chaby—. Siempre huele así aquí.

—¿Qué olor? —preguntó Esme.

—¿No hueles nada? Un olor curioso, como a flores aceitosas.

—Lo he notado —dijo Otto a Esme—. Es lavanda —explicó, condescendiendo a echar una mirada hacía el otro lado de la habitación, donde Chaby olfateó audiblemente, formó con los labios una silenciosa obscenidad para indicar que había entendido, y encendió un cigarrillo extralargo. Ni siquiera había mirado a Otto.

—¿Es perfume? ¿O es de tu ropa? —preguntó Otto—. Quiero decir de un saquito perfumado.

Ella estaba mirando distraídamente por la ventana. Se volvió rápidamente y dijo:

—Oh, de mi ropa, supongo. Supongo que es de mi ropa.

—He visto a Anselm en el parque —dijo Otto.

—¿Qué ha dicho? —preguntó ella.

—No ha dicho nada. Simplemente lo he visto. En cualquier caso, se había afeitado.

—Ya lo sé —dijo Esme, sonriendo de nuevo—, y se ha cortado tres veces porque decía que la cuchilla no tenía filo.

—¿Qué quieres decir?

—Porque no tenía ninguna cuchilla nueva, y ha tenido que usar la misma con la que me depilo las piernas.

—¿Quieres decir que se ha afeitado aquí?

—Sí. Anselm ha venido y se ha afeitado.

—Pero…

—¿Qué es un súcubo? —preguntó Esme—. Chaby, ¿sabes lo que es un
sú-cubo
?

—Suena como alguien que la chupa [31] —dijo Chaby.

—Eres terrible —dije Esme, riendo de nuevo y haciendo ademán de tirarle un libro.

—Bueno, ¿y por qué quieres saberlo?

—Porque Anselm dice que me llamó eso, y que lo siente, que no quería llamarme eso, pero que a pesar de todo lo soy.

—Eres el mejor que conozco —dijo Chaby, sonriendo picaramente. Esme se levantó, se acercó a él y lo sacudió por los hombros—. Te odio, hoy te estás portando muy mal —dijo riendo, y se ruborizó—. ¿Verdad que se está portando *mal,* Otto?

—¿Has desayunado, Esme? —le preguntó Otto.

—No, ¿y tú? —preguntó volviéndose—. ¿Señor Si-nis-te-rra? —agarrándolo aún del hombro con cariño de hermana, y hablando con el tono de dos que comparten todos sus secretos.

Los tres bajaron las escaleras. Otto (blandiendo su cabestrillo) se olvidó arriba la bufanda verde, tirada en el suelo.

Sentados en la barra, Chaby comió ávidamente, Esme prestando poca atención a lo que comía o a cómo lo hacía, y Otto flotando ya entre náuseas sobre café vertido en silencio en otra taza para que se enfriara. En determinado momento se inclinó sobre Esme, que estaba sentada entre ambos, y dijo:

—Esme, quiero hablarte de… bueno, a solas.

—¿De qué? —preguntó reclinándose en su asiento, ofreciendo a sus ojos la atareada inmediatez de Chaby—. Cuéntame. —Le encantaban las confidencias, quería compartirlas con todo el mundo. Otto hizo una mueca, encendió otro cigarrillo—. Pero si ya tienes uno —dijo ella, señalando el que humeaba en su platillo.

—Hola —dijo Stanley tras ellos con voz apagada.

—¡Stanley! —dijo Esme volviéndose, en un tono como si llevara semanas esperándolo.

—Pareces contenta —dijo Stanley acusadoramente.

—¡Oh, Stanley! Lo *estoy.* ¿Ha pasado algo más?

Stanley le tendió un papel. Era una carta de un banco de ojos. Esme la leyó.

—Es escandalo-so, Stanley —dijo. Se echó a reír—. ¿Quieren que deposites tus ojos?

—La verdad es que no entiendo *qué* quieren —dijo Stanley—. Creo que es que si me muero quieren que les envíen mis ojos inmediatamente. Al final hay un cupón para rellenar.

—Bueno, eso está muy bien, ¿no? —dijo Esme—. Entonces ¿vendrán y te sacarán los ojos mientras estén todavía calientes?

—No digas eso, Esme, es…

—¿Por qué no?

—Es espantoso, la idea de esos completos desconocidos viniendo a sacarme los *ojos*…

—Pero si ya no los *necesitarás*…

—Sí que los necesitaré. Puede que…

Otto se inclinó hacia Esme.

—Escucha, ¿estarás en casa esta tarde? —dijo—. ¿Sola? —añadió, mientras Chaby alargaba la mano para coger un palillo.

—A menos que venga alguien.

—¿Quién?

—No lo sé. Gente.

—También tienen bancos de huesos —dijo Stanley.

—Te veré esta tarde —dijo Otto—. A solas.

Sacó un billete de cinco dólares, y le cortó con cuidado una esquina. Chaby lo observó frunciendo el ceño.

—¿Qué demonios haces? —dijo.

Otto arqueó una ceja, se adelantó un paso y pagó sus desayunos.

—Si la camarera me hubiera dicho que sólo le había dado un dólar, le habría pedido que buscase en la caja hasta encontrar un billete de cinco al que le faltase esta esquina —dijo, dejando caer el fragmento de prueba sobre la barra y guardándose el cambio.

Stanley parecía preocupado.

—He leído que en Rusia hasta les injertan… bueno, ya sabéis… a soldados que reciben heridas ahí…

—¡Stanley!

—Esme…

Otto dejó apoyada una mano delicada en la barra un momento más. Chaby estaba enseñando a Esme una foto que había sacado de su cartera, una cosa manoseada de la que sólo pudo entrever unos miembros indecentemente entrelazados. Otto miró con el aire más indiferente que pudo adoptar, y de modo igualmente indiferente le apartaron aquello de la vista. Stanley desvió la suya. «No quiero verlo», dijo. Esme se estaba riendo. Otto se volvió y salió disparado como una furiosa máquina de vapor.

Cuando llegaba a la puerta lo llamó Esme:

—Adiós, Otto… —Pero no se detuvo.

Chaby ni siquiera se había vuelto.

—Estropearon una buena puta cuando le colgaron un par de huevos —dijo—. Quizá puedan ayudarlo en Rusia…

—¡Chaby Si-nis-te-rra! Stanley, ¿verdad que se está portando *mal*? —dijo Esme riéndose.

Mientras tanto, el cielo invernal se había oscurecido. El ojo radiante del sol se había ocultado, y el cielo descendía sobre la ciudad bajo el peso de un ser sin rasgos que lo ahogaba contra la tierra. Los pináculos de los edificios erguidos contra el cielo parecían mantener a raya aquel peso portentoso, en la gran conspiración de madre e hijo, la tierra y la ciudad, contra el padre que amenazaba encima; pues era Cronos con quien conspiraba la madre, para liberar a los hijos sofocados entre los cuerpos íntimamente unidos de sus padres, donde no podían ver la luz.

Habían pasado los años sobre la capital titánica, mientras crecía hasta alcanzar su plena estatura, y sobre el continente extendido a sus pies donde un año de alivio del amor costaba ochenta y cinco millones de dólares en remedios para el dolor de cabeza, de lo que daban fe
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tabletas de aspirina, llevadas como filacterias. El estado, tocayo de este Titán, aspiró aquel año el humo de cuarenta mil millones de cigarrillos. Penetrando en los pulmones de esta encarnación de hormigón armado, el humo circulaba por lóbulos de acero protegidos por cavidades pleurales de granito (aunque a diferencia de los pulmones de un buen gigante no hacía falta ninguna superficie cóncava interna para alojar el corazón), y desde allí era exhalado por laringes de cartílago cromado para esparcirse en el vómito de mugre con que el hijo desagradecido afrentaba al padre de encima. Pavesas, cenizas y arena, alquitrán, hollín y ácido sulfúrico: seis toneladas se posaban cada día sobre aquel barrio por el que avanzaba Otto, con los sentidos tan notablemente civilizados que no parecía notar los miles de millones de partículas que giraban en torbellino a su alrededor, no parecía notar los fogonazos de las luces, el fragor del acero en pugna, los eructos de pulmones color pizarra, no parecía reconocer más que su propia intención, que lo llevaba hacia el este.

El cielo rehuyó el encuentro con que amenazaba. La tormenta rehuyó descargar, pero el oscuro ser continuó su movimiento amenazador por encima, contentándose con acobardar a su arrogante antagonista, con inspirar presagios funestos, pero eludiendo la escaramuza que daría lugar al derramamiento de su sangre por venas de rayos. Los habitantes se movían inquietos, con aprensión, absortos en inmediateces. Durante el resto de la mañana, Otto se condujo impacientemente por la calle, implacablemente en el metro, despiadadamente en las puertas giratorias. Con el brazo izquierdo tenso, a veces combativo en el cabestrillo, y el derecho apretado contra la presencia de su cartera, se movía entre destinos inmediatos, cada dirección un destino hasta que llegaba, cuando sólo ofrecía una pausa en la que poder planear el paso siguiente, un tiempo no interrumpido por el ocio sino por breves y espasmódicos trechos de vacuidad entre actividades, minutos acotados por cigarrillos. Dejando un vaso de cerveza sobre la barra, Otto volvió a la cabina telefónica. Marcó el número de Max. Estaba comunicando. Se quedó sentado, mirando por el sucio cristal, donde alguien había trazado con un diamante las letras de una sílaba obscena. Volvió a marcar; sólo oyó brrk, brrk, brrk. Marcó otros dos números, confiando en encontrar a alguien que estuviera libre para comer. Nadie lo estaba. Volvió a llamar a Max: brrk, brrk, brrk. Entonces recordó un número que le vino a la cabeza casi por costumbre, pues lo había marcado maquinalmente muchas veces. ¿Qué iba a decir? ¿Y si contestaba un hombre? Pero para entonces estaba suficientemente agitado como para llamar a aquel número sin darse tiempo para pensar en las consecuencias. Podía pedir a Esther que se reuniese con él ahora, para comer. Marcó. Al otro lado del hilo cogieron el teléfono. Dijo: «¿Diga?». Hubo un silencio. «¿Diga? ¿Diga?». Silencio. «¿Diga? ¿Está Esther?». «No», dijo una voz indecisa, como aliviada. «Hola. ¿Quién eres?». «Rose». «¿Rose? Rose, ¿eres la criada? ¿Diga?». «Rose», dijo la voz. «¿Diga?». Entonces su silenciosa comunicación entre zumbidos se interrumpió. Otto sacudió el soporte arriba y abajo. «Diga, diga, oye…». El camarero lo estaba mirando. Colgó. Se quedó sentado un momento, contemplando la palabra escrita en el cristal. Luego marcó el número de Max. Oyó el brrr que indicaba que el teléfono de Max estaba sonando. No lo cogieron. Colgó. Marcó otro número, y esta vez encontró a Maude Munk en casa, aunque daba la impresión de que no quería hablar, ni siquiera un minuto. «¿Lo conseguistéis, Maude?». «Si conseguimos ¿qué?». «Quiero decir que si fuisteis al centro de adopción». «Oh, no, tonto, los dos teníamos una resaca tan grande… De todas formas no sé quién de nosotros lo quiere realmente. Hemos decidido que no era tan buena idea, al menos para hoy… Y qué tal la fiesta, he oído que fue de lo más horrible…». «Oye, ¿conoces a una tal Rose que vive en casa de Esther? Contestó al teléfono…». «Oh, Rose, Rose, por supuesto, tonto, todo el mundo sabe lo de Rose… oye, mira, ¿puedes llamarme más tarde? Ahora estoy ocupada…». «Pero ¿quién es Rose?». «¿Hacia las cinco? ¿Puedes llamar hacia las cinco…?».

Otto volvió a la barra. Recordó que su reloj llevaba catorce minutos de retraso. Empezó a tirar de la ruedecilla para ponerlo en hora, y miró hacia el reloj de pared que había tras la barra. Aquel reloj indicaba la misma hora que el suyo.

—¿Va bien ese reloj? —preguntó al camarero.

—Sí. Puede que un poco adelantado. ¿Otra cerveza?

Otto iba a decir que no, pero entonces reparó en el espejo que había tras la barra, y se contempló diciendo que sí.

—Es curioso —dijo un hombre a su lado. Otto se volvió, y se encontró con una corbata de rayas. Sin saber muy bien a qué club representaba, dijo—: ¿Qué?

—Ese rayo de sol. Me estaba preguntando de dónde podía venir ese rayo de sol, si viene del oeste. Acabo de darme cuenta de que es un reflejo de aquella ventana al otro lado de la calle.

—Sí, así es.

—¿Puedo invitarle a una cerveza? Traiga dos cervezas —llamó al camarero.

—Siempre me sorprende ver el sol en Nueva York, sea donde sea —dijo Otto.

—¿Ha cruzado alguna vez en el ferry? ¿Ha visto alguna vez el sol en la Estatua de la Libertad a las siete de la mañana? Aquí está su cerveza. ¿Lo ha visto?

—Precisamente —dijo Otto, apoyando su brazo inútil sobre la barra—, pasé por allí en barco ayer mismo, por la mañana. Viniendo de Centroamérica.

—¿Centroamérica, ha estado usted allí?

—Acabo de volver.

—Sabe, nada más verle, o nada más oírle hablar, pensé que tenía algún tipo de acento. No un acento extranjero, más bien lo que se podría llamar cosmopolita.

—Bueno, yo…

—¿Habla español?

—Oh, sí. Por supuesto, lo aprendí allá abajo.

—¿Sí?

—No es difícil. Siempre y cuando se viva realmente con la gente.

—No lo es si se tiene don de lenguas. Usted debe de tenerlo.

—Bueno, quizá un poco, me…

—Dígame, ¿conoce muy bien Centroamérica?

—Bastante bien, he…

—Perú y el norte de Bolivia, ¿ha estado alguna vez allí?

—No he pasado mucho tiempo tan abajo.

—¿Ha trabajado alguna vez de escritor?

—Sí, precisamente me dedico a eso.

—¿Ha trabajado alguna vez en el cine?

—No directamente, he…

—Tome, ¿quiere aceptar mi tarjeta y ponerse en contacto conmigo?

Otto cogió la tarjeta. Decía SUN STYLE FILMS en grandes letras, y R. L. Jones en una esquina.

—Me alegro mucho de conocerle —dijo Otto estrechándole la mano—. Yo me llamo Otto…

—Escríbalo ahí mismo —dijo el hombre. Otto lo escribió.

—Nada más verle, o más bien nada más oírle hablar. ¿Otra cerveza?

—Déjeme invitarle —dijo Otto, buscando su cartera.

El hombre pagó con el cambio que había dejado en la barra.

—¿Qué estaba haciendo allá abajo, en Sudamérica?

—Escribiendo. Pero esas revoluciones…

—¿Estaba cubriendo una revolución?

Otto adelantó su brazo en cabestrillo.

—Allá abajo no se andan con chiquitas —dijo.

—¿Fue allí donde… le pasó algo a su brazo?

—Sí, me…

—No quería preguntárselo. Sabe, pensé que podría molestarle, quiero decir que algunas personas son muy sensibles con ese tipo de cosas.

—Oh, no me importa hablar de ello. En realidad, me…

—¿Qué hora es? —dijo el hombre consultando su reloj—. ¿Va bien ese reloj? Tengo que irme.

Se caló el sombrero sobre la frente.

—¿No tiene tiempo para otra cerveza? Me toca invitarle…

—Tengo que volver a la oficina. ¿Me llamará allí?

—Sí, desde luego, estaré encantado.

—No lo olvide. Quizá podamos organizar algo.

Se estrecharon la mano. El hombre salió. Otto hizo un gesto con la cabeza al camarero.

—¿Me puede poner un whisky con soda? —dijo, y abrió su gran sobre manila, para estudiar unas cuantas páginas de su obra con minuciosa apreciación. El camarero le puso delante un whisky sour—. Pero he…

—Sesenta centavos —dijo el camarero. Otto pagó.

El trayecto hasta la calle MacDougal requirió dos autobuses abarrotados y un metro de bote en bote. Muy animado, Otto pensaba pasar un buen rato con Max, discutiendo los mejores puntos de su obra. Max no estaba en casa. Otto trató de meter el original en el buzón, pero había que doblarlo de mala manera. Luego, la idea de que podría perderse, o ser robado (y estrenado con gran éxito bajo otro nombre), lo hizo acudir al portero. Tras dejar bien sentado el valor del objeto en aquella lerda cabeza, se lo dio para que lo entregara, sintiéndose ligeramente disminuido al separarse de él.

De camino al oeste, se detuvo en un ultramarinos italiano a comprar cigarrillos, no lo atendieron, golpeó fuertemente con el pie, y luego cogió un paquete del mostrador, se lo metió en el bolsillo y se fue.

Hannah se cruzó con él sin decir palabra. Iba hablando con un negro alto. Otto desvió la mirada.

Esme estaba sola. Acababa de detener a Chaby en la entrada, diciéndole que hacía mucho frío, que debería llevar abrigo, calentándole el cuello con los brazos durante un momento y echándole luego en torno una bufanda verde que encontró en el suelo detrás de la silla. Acababa de irse cuando apareció Otto.

Otto y Esme se quedaron sentados en silencio unos minutos, para Esme un silencio contento que no exigía nada, para él peligroso, los minutos acumulándose unos sobre otros como un precario castillo de

naipes a la espera de ser derribado. Luego ella se puso a pasear por el cuarto cantando una frágil canción, cuyas palabras, al no encontrar nada que las uniese más que la gratuidad de su voz, se separaban y se perdían. Cuando alzó la vista y lo vio mirándola le sonrió, pero con timidez. Recogiendo papeles, o colgando una falda, o simplemente siguiendo los fragmentos de su canción por el cuarto, Esme parecía mostrar lo fácil que era estar felizmente viva, ser hermosa, no hacerse preguntas.

Otto seguía impacientemente sentado. Por fin dijo:

—Puede que tenga que irme a Sudamérica.

—¿De verdad, Otto? —dijo ella, encantada.

—A Bolivia y al norte del Perú.

—Sería estupendo. Qué sitio más tonto para ir, Otto.

—No veo nada tonto en ello.

—Debes hacer lo que *quieras* hacer.

—No es tan tonto como quedarse en Nueva York. Perdiendo el tiempo con gente como Chaby. Y deficientes como Anselm. Y Stanley.

—Son bellísimas personas —dijo Esme.

—¿Chaby? ¿Una bellísima persona?

—Sí, Otto —dijo afablemente.

—Es una especie de… hay algo en él realmente rastrero, realmente repulsivo…

—Es muy desgraciado.

—Eso es asunto suyo, maldita sea.

—Por favor, no maldigas delante de mí, Otto.

—No te estaba maldiciendo a ti, Esme. Lo siento, no pretendía…

—Lo hirieron en la guerra, y así adquirió ese mal hábito.

—¿Qué mal hábito?

—Tomar drogas —dijo sobria y simplemente, con la mirada fija en la parte del suelo donde terminaba la alfombra.

—¿Es drogadicto? Debía habérmelo imaginado.

—No es culpa suya. Le dieron morfina en la guerra, cuando lo hirieron, y así es como empezó.

—Bueno, hay muchos que vuelven de la guerra sin ser unos fanáticos del pico.

—Chaby no —dijo ella.

Al levantar la mirada vio que Otto había descubierto una hormiga en el dorso de su mano, que aplastó con el pulgar y redujo a un punto de porquería inanimada. Luego dijo:

—¿Este es uno de tus poemas?

—Sí —contestó ella, viendo lo que había cogido de la estantería.

—¿Los publicas?

—A veces. Si quiero.

Otto lo leyó.

> A UNA NIÑA, VISTA CON ATUENDO ESTIVAL
> Niñita, una prenda más pequeña
> Bastaría para cubrir tu horcajadura,
> Para ocultar esa ignota caverna
> Donde el viejo Tiempo aún madura.

—¿De dónde has sacado una palabra como «horcajadura»? —preguntó Otto con voz burlona, escandalizada (pues estaba escandalizado, y esto era lo único que se le ocurría para disimularlo).

—La encontré.

—Pero ¿no crees que es un poco… vulgar? Quiero decir, ¿por qué «horcajadura»?

—Rima con «madura» —explicó Esme—. Es un poema. —Luego, con el tono de un niño conspirando, dijo—: He escrito un poema para Recktall Brown. Es sobre él y yo. ¿Te gustaría leerlo?

Otto, dispuesto a enfurruñarse de nuevo, se lo cogió de las manos.

—¿Qué significa «Efluvio»?

—Es el título.

—Sí, ya veo. Pero ¿qué significa?

—¿Por qué tiene que significar algo? Es el título.

Lo leyó hasta el final, se lo quedó mirando, y finalmente logró decir:

—No sabía que supieras palabras como «perspicaz».

—Sólo es una palabra —dijo Esme.

—Es un poema muy bonito.

—No es bonito en absoluto.

—Me temo que no lo entiendo.

—¿Y por qué habrías de entenderlo?

—Pero ¿qué significa?

—¿Qué *significa?* Simplemente *es.*

Otto pensó por un momento que se estaba riendo de él por no encontrarle sentido; después, que lo tomaba por tonto por buscarle uno.

—Tiene un aire hermafrodita —dijo a la defensiva.

—¿Her-ma-fro-di-ta? ¿Qué es eso?

—Alguien que está dotado con los dos sexos.

—¿Cómo un súcubo?

—Marica. Más que marica.

—¿Más marica que *marica?*

Ya era casi de noche, y el sofá donde se había sentado estaba sobre la superficie de la alfombra pintada, y ella fuera de ella, mirando como quien mira a una odalisca. Sola en su sillón pensó en esto, y empezó a tiritar.

—¿Qué te pasa? —dijo él, e hizo ademán de levantarse.

—No, no —dijo ella rápidamente, como asustada—. Quédate ahí, por favor. Por favor.

—Pero ¿qué te pasa?

—Simplemente que a veces tengo frío, de repente se me quedan los pies muy fríos.

—Esme, en cuanto a lo de anoche…

—¿Para qué querías verme a solas? —preguntó, como burlándose de él.

—Bueno, por lo de anoche, quería aclarar…

Ella siguió sentada sin moverse, lejos de su alcance, con una pierna doblada bajo el cuerpo. Había encendido un cigarrillo, y el humo se elevaba entre ambos. Él no deseaba aclarar los hechos de la noche anterior: sólo repetirlos bajo el palio de la media luz, pero mientras quedase suficiente luz para ver. Se levantó y se acercó a su sillón.

—Por favor, siéntate, por favor, donde estabas —dijo ella escondiendo la cara—. Si vamos a hablar tengo que verte.

El cigarrillo ardía, una tea protectora entre ambos. Otto se volvió en silencio y miró a su alrededor, hacia la cómoda, hacia la mesa. De allí cogió una hoja, cubierta con su letra grande y franca. Leyó: «A mí y a bebé / nos cocieron en un pastel / con salsa muy calentita. / Como no teníamos dinero / para pagar al pastelero / nos escapamos de la marmita».

—¿Más poesía tuya?

—Oh, no, Otto. Eso es una canción infantil que me sabía de pequeña.

—¿Para qué la has escrito aquí?

—A veces escribo simplemente cosas que me sé, cosas que recuerdo, porque me gusta escribir cosas bonitas.

—No veo qué hay de bonito en que te cuezan en un pastel.

—Por favor, siéntate —dijo ella.

Pero cuando apagó su cigarrillo, él aplastó rápidamente el suyo y llegó a su lado sin darle tiempo más que a levantar el codo ante los ojos. La cogió por los hombros y la hizo volverse hasta que su cara se abrió ante él. Sus ojos eran más grandes de lo que creía que podían ser, sus labios temblaban de miedo, y la besó aplastándola con todo su peso. Luego, como el carterista que atrae la atención sobre un brazo chocando con él, mientras la otra mano se desliza hasta la billetera, Otto apartó con una mano la tela que le cubría los pechos, mientras tanteaba delicadamente con la otra, más abajo, hasta posarla indecisamente en la calidez y la oscuridad.

—Pero ¿y tu brazo? —susurró ella.

—¿Qué brazo? —Ella señaló el pañuelo del cabestrillo, desatado—. Está bien —dijo él, sonrojándose—. Está bien.

La cara delgada de Esme tenía la expresión de un animalito aterrorizado nunca atacado, nunca atrapado y forzado hasta entonces, y ahora caído en una trampa; pero era una cara que no pedía clemencia, que no suplicaba una tregua, sólo que siguiera el ataque hasta que todo terror quedara consumado. Luego escondió

la cara.

—Otto, esa cosa rasca.

—¿Qué cosa?

—Eso —dijo ella señalando su bigote, exponiéndose, y se hundieron de nuevo en el sillón. Sonó un chasquido. Esme se llevó la mano al hombro, turbada por esta intromisión de la realidad. Luego, alegre como una niña que conoce un juego secreto, o un escondite, que sólo enseña a uno (o con la misma franqueza, a uno cada vez), lo llevó de vuelta hacia el sofá.

—Esther… —susurró Otto, y se hundió más en ella, doblando la cabeza sobre su hombro, apretando los labios que mentían contra su cuello—. *Esme*…

Como en la esgrima china, cuyas posiciones contractuales eliminan las trabas del tiempo, pasó el tiempo.

—Es una canción de Tosca —dijo ella, despertando en la oscuridad.

—¿Cuál?

—La canción cuyo título querías saber.

—¿Canción? Entonces estabas soñando.

—Entonces estaba —dijo—. ¿Qué es un sueño?

Sintió sus pies, muy fríos, apretados contra él. Y la abrazó con fuerza, sonriendo.

—Yo he soñado… —dijo—. ¿No lo hueles?

—¿Qué?

—Lavanda. ¿No hueles a lavanda?

Tras un momento de silencio, ella dijo:

—¿Qué has soñado?

—He soñado… he tenido un sueño terrible. Estaba viendo una película con una mujer que conocía muy bien, y fingía estar ciego, con los globos de los ojos mirando hacia arriba bajo los párpados. Luego estaba ciego de verdad, y caminaba con un bastón con punta retráctil. Tenía los ojos tapados con una tela que raspaba y hacía daño, pero no parecía molestarme. Y la mujer que iba conmigo me amenazaba, diciendo que no intentara apartarme de ella. Luego aparecía otra mujer, tenía los pechos muy grandes, con una especie de corpiño ceñido, íbamos al parque, y allí había alguien más. ¿Quién era? No se me ocurre quién era. Pero la mujer que iba conmigo me llevaba por una calle larga, y llegábamos a un cine. Entonces me daba cuenta de que me había quedado ciego. Y luego el bastón se partía por la mitad, y estaba allí solo. La mujer me había dejado solo. Era terrible.

—Yo he soñado con alguien.

—¿Con quién?

—Con alguien que no conoces —dijo. Luego añadió entre dientes—: Estaba en un espejo, atrapado allí.

—Acabo de acordarme de quién era el que veía en el parque —dijo Otto.

—¿Quién?

—Alguien que traté hace tiempo, alguien que no conoces —dijo Otto, y vio a aquel hombre pálido y delgado en el parque, vívidamente silencioso, observándolo sin reconocerlo mientras se acercaba, ciego, con el bastón y su punta retráctil—. Un amigo, hace tiempo… es curioso que lo eche de menos.

—Pero ¡por qué no me echas de menos a mí! —exclamó ella con voz ahogada—. Estoy aquí…

La sintió estremecerse en la oscuridad, y le pasó un dedo por la frente. Esme puso la cabeza bajo su barbilla. La estrechó contra sí, sonriendo. Y en la oscuridad se dio cuenta de repente de que ella no podía ver su sonrisa, y relajó la cara, notando el esfuerzo que le había costado la sonrisa.

Ella se arregló la ropa mientras se levantaba, y encendió una luz.

—Deja de *mirarme* —dijo.

—Tienes un cuerpo precioso.

—Eso no es verdad.

—Sí lo es, es tan esbelto, casi como el cuerpo de un muchacho. ¿Has trabajado de modelo alguna vez?

—A veces lo hago —admitió Esme.

—¿Para revistas de moda?

Ella vaciló, y volviéndose se alejó en busca de un cinturón.

—Sí, eso es —dijo, y Otto dejó de acosarla, ocupado como estaba ciñéndose la venda que se le había soltado, mostrando un trozo de antebrazo sano, aunque pálido—. Me gusta mi cuerpo porque es muy fácil de lavar —dijo Esme, y salió hacia el cuarto de baño comunal.

Otto estaba despeinado; buscando un espejo lo único que encontró fue un botiquín, con el lugar del espejo ocupado por una oscura pintura abstracta.

—¿Te gusta esa pintura? —dijo ella, entrando a su espalda.

—¿No tienes un espejo?

—¿No lo ves? No hay ninguno —dijo.

—Pero ¿por qué no?

—Los espejos dominan a la gente. Enseñan a crecer a tu cara.

—Vamos, Esme, en serio. Los espejos están para mirarse.

—¿Para mirarse? —dijo—. Son malos —dijo, pensando ahora en su sueño—. Estás atrapado en uno, y son malos. Si supieras lo que saben. Hay espejos malignos donde él trabaja, y trabajan con él, porque son espejos con una memoria terrible, y saben cosas, las *saben*, y le cuentan esas cosas terribles y luego lo atrapan… —Hablaba con histérica rapidez.

—Esme —dijo él, abrazándola—. Cálmate ya, Esme —y ella lo rodeó con sus brazos, tirando de él hacia sí como si nunca fuera a soltarlo.

—¿Hay un espejo en el cuarto de baño? —preguntó mientras la soltaba.

—Sí —susurró ella.

Trató de volverla a agarrar de la cintura, pero ella se desasió.

—Suéltame. Tengo prisa —dijo.

—¿Por qué?

—Tengo una cita.

—¿Con quién?

—Con alguien que no conoces —dijo, de pronto recuperada, y como jugando a su juego con él como una niña.

En el cuarto de baño comunal, Otto se palpó la cartera en el bolsillo, y luego advirtió la imagen de su cara en el espejo: torcida, desproporcionada, le pareció la de un extraño, porque durante aquella hora la cara de ella, escudriñándola con tanta intensidad que su propia cara quedó olvidada, que todas las caras menos la suya quedaron olvidadas, se había convertido en la viva imagen, en la definición de una cara.

Tiró del rollo de papel higiénico para quitarse una mancha de la mejilla, y el papel giró hacia él con un fuerte chirrido, llevando encima un pequeño pasajero audaz, una cucaracha, como Palinuro gobernando el barco de Eneas, cuando se quedó dormido al timón y cayó por la borda, para ser asesinado en la costa por los nativos.

VII

> «Y así como Jesucristo, de la casa de David, adoptó la naturaleza humana a fin de liberar y redimir a la humanidad, que estaba presa en las redes del pecado por la desobediencia de Adán, así también, en nuestro arte, aquello que uno mancilla injustamente será absuelto, purificado y liberado de esa mancha por otro que se opone a él».
>
> RAMON LLUL, *Codicillus*

Aquella tarde, Fuller estaba sentado en un banco, de espaldas al Central Park decembrino. Las mujeres pasaban a la carrera ante él arrastrando espesas pieles, llevando oro y valiosos adornos que observaba sin envidia. Le habría bastado sonreír, o bostezar, o levantar francamente el labio superior para mostrar más oro del que cualquiera de ellas podía llevar, incluso en sus más ofensivas aspiraciones al buen gusto: libras y libras de joyas, sortijas tan pesadas que parecían armas. El viento frío hacía continuas insinuaciones a su sombrero de paja, de ala estrecha y alta copa imperial, para que se uniera al tumulto abigarrado que pasaba. El sombrero hacía caso omiso. Estaba encajado en su cabeza con la misma firmeza con que su mano derecha empuñaba el paraguas, o su mano izquierda sujetaba la correa de la caniche negra.

La expresión de su cara siguió siendo apacible hasta que la correa se tensó, y entonces se tensaron también las arrugas de la frente y las comisuras de la boca de Fuller. Cuando caminaban, la correa estaba tirante como una barra que los mantenía separados, en vez de ser un lazo de unión. Las caras negras se observaban mutuamente con desconfianza, pero una desconfianza cansada que para entonces había cristalizado ya en resignada aversión. Aunque ahora, mientras Fuller miraba a la perra, había una nota de regocijo en su expresión de repulsa. Hacía frío; y aunque Fuller tenía frío, la perra estaba tiritando. También Fuller tenía ganas de tiritar, pero se negaba a dar esa satisfacción a la perra. Siguió sentado con el cuerpo completamente envarado, conteniéndose, pero mirando de hito en hito a la perra, que no podía dejar de tiritar. Pero la repulsa era evidente en la cara de Fuller. Quería visitar a un buen amigo cuyo local estaba apenas a seis manzanas de distancia, y estaba ahora considerando si podría ir allí y volver a casa del señor Brown antes de la hora del cóctel. El señor Brown había ido al médico. A veces volvía tarde del médico. Fuller sabía que a *él* lo castigarían si llegaba tarde. Por otra parte, sabía que el señor Brown se enteraría de la visita, llegara tarde o no. Esa era la razón por la que Fuller miraba ahora a la perra con ojos inquietos, pues estaba seguro de que aquella caniche y el amo común que tenían se comunicaban, de que si iba a ver a su amigo la perra se lo contaría.

Luego sonrió. Hoy tenía que ser diferente, y trató de eludir el hábito del miedo. Tenía su billete, y mañana se habría ido. El señor Brown lo llamaría a gritos, la perra ladraría, pero él estaría ya muy lejos. Aquel billete que llevaba recónditamente escondido era el más caro que había comprado en su vida. Su destino debía estar mucho más cerca de casa que el de cualquiera de los anteriores.

Bajó la vista para comprobar que la caniche lo estaba observando con aquella mirada que parecía penetrar en su mente y revolver en su memoria. ¿Estaba adivinando lo del billete? Fuller se levantó, tirando bruscamente de la caniche y frenando en seco su arremetida contra un pájaro que se había posado cerca. Se encaminó retadoramente hacia la Primera Avenida, arrastrando a su testigo a cuatro tensos pies de distancia.

Sólo un desvalido empirismo nos permitiría creer que Fuller había tenido una infancia, puesto que todos la tenemos. Pero a él le resultaba ya tan irreal como a cualquiera que lo mirase a la cara, donde el tiempo había dejado de experimentar hacía mucho. Aquella infancia era como un libro leído, perdido y olvidado que se recuerda al ver otro ejemplar de la edición barata en el quiosco de periódicos de una estación de ferrocarril, que se compra, se hojea y probablemente se deja en el tren cuando uno llega a su estación. El lento tren de la vida de Fuller sólo había hecho un trayecto rápido, cuando Recktall Brown lo había encontrado durante un crucero por el Caribe y lo había comprado a sí mismo con algo que entonces valoraba más que la vida, pues no lo tenía, aquella dentadura de oro, y con una promesa de magia que había quedado sin cumplir: fue entregado en lo que parecía la última parada, el señor Brown, la perra del señor Brown y la casa del señor Brown. Aquella promesa de magia, que tanto había atraído a su juventud, nunca se había materializado, aunque Fuller no había dudado nunca de que el señor Brown podía volverle blanca la piel si quería, posibilidad que ahora, ya envejecido, consideraba más como una amenaza que

como una redención, y nunca hablaba de ella.

La perra odiaba oírlo cantar. Hoy, con una ligereza fácilmente comprensible (el billete), cantó:

> Chiquilla, por favor, sal de mi cuarto de soltero.
> Chiquilla, chiquilla por favor, sal de mi cuarto de soltero,
> eres tan descocada, eres tan descarada,
> pero debes proteger tu buena fama:
> chiquilla, por favor, sal de mi cuarto de soltero,

mientras caminaban hacia la Tercera Avenida, y hacia el ferrocarril elevado, que también odiaba la perra. Fuller lo sabía, y siempre esperaba en la esquina hasta que aparecía un tren, fingiendo ante la perra que estaba contemplando el escaparate de un estanco.

—Hola, hombre, ¿cómo te va? —saludó Fuller a su amigo tras el agradable paseo (dos trenes que venían en sentido contrario se habían cruzado rugiendo sobre ellos).

El menudo empresario de pompas fúnebres le estrechó la mano.

—Hemos tenido uno grande, un… quiero decir que hoy hemos tenido uno grande, un funeral. Bueno, tengo más ahí, ahí las ves todas, todas ésas del fondo, esas flores, tengo más flores para ti de las que podrás llevarte, Fuller.

Señaló el alto cúmulo de azucenas, enhiesto por el alambre, que amarilleaba un poco por los bordes. Fuller pareció apenado.

—No puedo llevármelas, hombre.

—Pero ¿por qué? Quiero decir, ¿por qué no?

—Es ese señor Brown, hombre, que me dice: «Fuller no traigas ni uno más de tus malditos ramos de muerto a esta casa».

—Pero en tu propio cuarto, quiero decir, ¿ni siquiera puedes tenerlas en tu propio cuarto?

—No, hombre, y si lo intento lo sabrá de algún modo. Como lo de los pájaros; creo que sabe hasta lo de los pájaros. Alguien me delata, lo sé —añadió, mirando a la caniche.

—¿Qué pájaros?

—Te lo contaré en otro momento, cuando no estemos bajo vigilancia. Pero ¿y los guantes? ¿Me has reservado otro surtido de guantes?

—Sí, tengo ocho pares. Ocho de ellos, quiero decir, dieciséis. Dieciséis guantes, quiero decir, ocho pares de guantes de funeral.

Trajo los guantes, y Fuller los examinó atentamente.

—Éstos están muy bien —dijo sosteniendo en alto un par—. Muy limpios e inmaculados. Supongo que no llevó el féretro, sólo caminó a su lado para parecer respetable.

—Pero ¿a él no le importan los guantes? Quiero decir, al señor Brown, no le importa que te pongas estos guantes que han sido usados para llevar el, un… bueno, no hay nada malo en ello pero hay gente así de rara, quiero decir, ¿que sirvas cosas con estos guantes?

—Cree que los compro —dijo Fuller—. Así es como me las he arreglado para financiar mi viaje, hombre. Con el dinero que ahorro.

—¿Tu viaje?

—Sí, me temo que debo despedirme. Mañana estaré muy lejos, camino de mi casa.

—¿Te vas a Barbados?

—Pienso partir mañana por la mañana.

—Pero Fuller, no será como las otras veces, quiero decir, que ya has planeado irte otras veces…

—Pienso partir mañana por la mañana —repitió Fuller con firmeza, dirigiéndose a la perra. Se guardó los guantes bajo el abrigo—. ¿Tienes todavía a tu armeniano?

—Oh, sí, siempre, quiero decir, que siempre estará aquí.

—Sigue siendo una gran pena que su familia no pueda hacerlo volver, allá a la Armeniana donde residen, devolverle a la hermosa tierra de su patria donde debe estar.

—Siete años. Quiero decir que lleva aquí siete años. Ya estaba aquí cuando compré este local, quiero decir, el negocio. He escrito cartas a su familia, pero no pueden mandar dinero de Armenia para pagar el alquiler, quiero decir, para pagar su… que yo lo tenga aquí así. Ni siquiera estoy seguro de que exista todavía Armenia como país.

—Desearía poder ayudarlo algún día a regresar a su tierra natal —dijo Fuller, tendiéndole la mano—. Adiós. Te dejo con Dios para que vele por ti y te proteja. Y al armeniano.

—Adiós, Fuller, pásate el jueves por la noche si puedes, va a haber un gran… quiero decir… —El hombrecillo había soñado a menudo con el gran día de su carrera, cuando le entregasen al amo de Fuller para hacerle el último afeitado y ponerle el último traje, y no dudaba de que Fuller lograría que recibiese el encargo. Nunca habían hablado de ello. No obstante lo daban por supuesto. El propio Fuller había ensayado la escena muchas veces en su impaciente imaginación—. Adiós, Fuller —dijo con voz decepcionada—. Mándame una postal, Fuller.

Nada más llegar, los negros compañeros oyeron la voz de su amo repitiendo las palabras «Maldita sea» por los pasillos. Cuando aparecieron en la entrada, Fuller fue saludado con la frase:

—Maldita sea, Fuller. ¿Sabes qué hora es? —La caniche corrió a su lado y se puso a lamerle la mano—. Llegas tarde. ¿Dónde demonios has estado? ¿Con ese maldito enterrador?

Fuller miró a la perra, que lo estaba delatando en su propia presencia.

—Me paré a saludar a alguien, señor —admitió.

—Trae los vasos, Fuller. Luego vete a la cama.

—Pero señor Brown, yo no quería…

—Trae los vasos, Fuller.

Minutos después entró Fuller, llevando con guantes blancos una bandeja con tres vasos, dos paños de hilo limpios y un cubo con hielo. La dejó en el bar al fondo de la habitación, detrás de Recktall Brown y Basil Valentine, que estaban sentados ante la chimenea. Se quedó remoloneando junto al bar. Luego Recktall Brown se dio cuenta de que todavía estaba allí, esperando como una sombra esperanzada a que le asignasen algún destino a la luz.

—Antes de irte a la cama será mejor que me des ese billete, Fuller.

—¿Billete, señor Brown?

—Dame ese billete que has comprado para Útica, Nueva York.

—¿Billete, por favor… señor Brown?

—Maldita sea, Fuller, dame ese billete para Útica que has comprado esta mañana.

—Pero señor Brown, yo no quería… —Fuller estaba temblando.

—¡Fuller!

Fuller buscó en un bolsillo interior, sacó lentamente el billete y lo entregó.

—Ahora vete a la cama. Y nada de luces. Recuerda, nada de luces.

Fuller se lo quedó mirando, luego a la caniche, y volviéndose empezó a subir cansinamente las escaleras.

—A ese viejo negro chiflado le da miedo la oscuridad —dijo Recktall Brown—. Dice que lo visitan «los seres más terribles de toda la historia» —rio, rompiendo el billete para Útica. Tiró los trocitos a la chimenea —. Cree que cualquier lugar debe estar camino de Barbados.

—Tus poderes ocultos son bastante impresionantes.

—¿Ocultos?

Recktall Brown gruñó la palabra, y detuvo el cigarro en el aire tan bruscamente que su ceniza cayó entre ambos sobre la alfombra de Aubusson como un excremento gris de pájaro. Miró a través de sus gruesas gafas y a través del humo: había momentos en que Basil Valentine aparentaba dieciséis años, días en que aparentaba sesenta. De perfil, los rasgos de su cara eran acusados y flexibles; pero cuando la volvía de frente, como hizo ahora, la estrechez de su barbilla parecía despojar a la cara de esa fuerza que tan impresionante resultaba un instante antes. Con las sienes ligeramente grisáceas, de un gris bastante distinguido para ser artificial (aunque había pasado la época en que alguien podía haber dicho prematuro, y también la época en que necesitaba decolorarlas para que adquiriesen ese matiz, en vez de teñirlas de negro de vez en cuando como hacía ahora), parecía un viejo que parece muy joven, con el pelo un poco demasiado largo, vestido con un traje gris de rayas impecablemente cortado, una camisa azul pálido de blanda tela de Oxford, y una estrecha corbata negra cuyo dibujo, entretejido en la seda, apenas era discernible. Cogió una pitillera de oro con largos dedos. El oro relucía en su puño.

—¿Cómo sabías que tenía un billete para Útica?

—Esta mañana me preguntó con gran interés: «Señor Brown, ¿utilizan dinero de los Estados Unidos de América en un lugar llamado Útica?».

Recktall Brown rio, y Basil Valentine sonrió, sacó un cigarrillo de la pitillera y la dejó en la mesa baja que tenía delante. Había una larga inscripción, casi borrada, en la superficie del oro, y pasó un dedo por encima antes de dejar la pitillera sobre la pintura cubierta de cristal, sobre la delgada columna que separaba los paneles de la *Avaritia* y la *Invidia.* Cuando encendió el cigarrillo alzó ligeramente los ojos hacia el centro de la mesa, y arrojó una bocanada de humo hacia la Figura en paños menores que había allí, con la mano mutilada alzada.

—Tienes esto demasiado caldeado —dijo finalmente.

—Me gusta así.

—No para ti, no para ti. No estaba pensando en ti. Los cuadros, los muebles. Este calor infernal alabeará todo lo que tienes.

—No antes de que lo haya vendido. ¿Y qué diablos? Todo el que compra estas cosas las pone en sitios caldeados como hornos. —Recktall Brown aplastó una rosa de Aubusson con el talón al volverse para atravesar la habitación hacia el bar. Era un pequeño púlpito hexagonal, lleno de botellas. Las hojas de roble tallado y la figura de Cristo, bien clavada en su parte delantera (que le dio pie para comentar: «Era inocente y lo crucificaron»), estaban manchadas de regueros de ginebra—. ¿Ginebra?

—Preferiría whisky. —Basil Valentine no apartó la mirada de la revista que había cogido y abierto de nuevo sobre la mesa. Contempló la reproducción que aparecía en las dos páginas centrales, y sus labios se movieron. Luego echó a un lado la *Gaceta del Coleccionista* y, levantándose bruscamente, preguntó—: ¿Siempre llega tan tarde? —mientras recibía el vaso de la pesada mano con los dos diamantes en ristre.

—¿Nervioso? —rio Brown, un sonido que se detenía en su garganta, y se hundió en un sillón—. Con alguien como él no puedes esperar que…

—Hasta ahora te las has arreglado muy bien para evitar que lo conociera —lo interrumpió Basil Valentine—. Da la impresión de que…

—Procura medir tus pasos con él —murmuró Recktall Brown desde el sillón que llenaba, y Valentine, murmurando algo también, le volvió la espalda, arrojó el cigarrillo a la chimenea y se quedó mirando las letras grabadas bajo la repisa.

La chimenea era una sólida pieza isabelina, pesada como el resto del mobiliario, los sillones dispuestos sobre la alfombra que se extendía de pared a pared, y las dos mesas de refectorio, que daban al lugar el aire de un exclusivo club de caballeros; pero sólo a primera vista, pues Recktall Brown, propietario y anfitrión, estaba implícito en todas partes. Más de un invitado se había visto provocado a hacer comentarios obvios sobre el parecido genérico entre la cabeza del jabalí de verrugas, colocada en lo alto de una pared, y el retrato del anfitrión colgado al otro extremo del cuarto. Y aunque le habían tomado el pelo bastante a menudo a costa de aquel retrato (cuando había bebido), Recktall Brown no estaba dispuesto a quitarlo. En vez de ello solía detenerse ante él y contemplarlo con cariñosa veneración. Los otros también miraban por encima de su hombro, pero ninguno podía encontrar la juventud que reverenciaba allí. En vez de ello veían un informe parecido con la cara vuelta hacia el cuadro, las orejas prominentes pero erectas, sólo las manos demasiado semejantes. Había otros cuadros, sobre todo el Patinir al otro lado de la entrada, en cuya vecindad este retrato habría sido como mínimo una presencia intrusiva; pero había algo más en el propio retrato que lo hacía absurdo, aunque se tardaba un momento en comprender lo que había ocurrido. Había sido pintado a partir de una fotografía (pues el modelo estaba demasiado ocupado para posar más que aquel instante ante la cámara), en la que las manos, encontradas en primer plano por el objetivo sin discernimiento, habían salido portentosamente agrandadas. El retratista, al que ordenaron que copiase fielmente aquella fotografía, y que ni tenía suficiente talento ni recibió suficiente paga para hacer otra cosa, había copiado esmeradamente las manos tal como aparecían en la foto. Y a base de pasar y detenerse ante él cientos de veces desde que fue pintado, a menudo agarrándose una con la otra ante sí, sus manos habían llegado a parecerse a las del retrato, ganando peso y tamaño, tan flácidas en apariencia que alguien las había calificado una vez, como después habían repetido otras voces en otros ámbitos, de ubres prensiles. ¿Y el anillo de diamantes? También aparecía, aunque sólo él sabía que su doble destello había sido añadido mucho después de que la pintura se secara.

Año tras año seguían allí colgados el retrato y el jabalí de verrugas, evitando mutuamente sus miradas a través de las oleadas de calor sofocante que llenaban siempre la habitación.

—¡Maldita sea! —exclamó Valentine, volviéndose de pronto—. Esa perra, ahí tumbada, lamiéndose el… ¿no la puedes disuadir de que evite esos cuidados repulsivos en público?

Se quedó mirando con impaciencia la forma negra tendida sobre las rosas, como esperando alguna defensa enconada por parte de su amo, y como no la hubo, volvió los ojos un instante hacia la nube de humo que se elevaba informemente del sillón y los amorfos charcos oscuros tras las gruesas gafas: Recktall Brown se limitó a mirarlo, y él juntó sus estrechos pies calzados con zapatos negros y se sentó. Un momento después estaba de nuevo inclinado hacia adelante, examinando la reproducción de la *Gaceta del Coleccionista,* las manos juntas bajo la barbilla, y parecía besar el anillo de sello de oro que llevaba en un meñique.

—¿Qué hora es? —preguntó bruscamente Brown.

—Las cuatro pasadas —murmuró Basil Valentine, y luego alzó la vista y repitió ásperamente—: Las

cuatro pasadas. Probablemente andará borracho por ahí.

—No hace ese tipo de cosas, salir borracho por ahí y meterse en líos, ya te lo he dicho, es…

—Sí, ya me lo has dicho, ya me has contado lo bien que… ¡mira que tienes suerte! La mayoría de los artistas arrastran consigo la carga pesada de un hombre de un lado a otro, nunca saben qué hacer con él, se emborrachan, se meten en líos con la ley, las mujeres, el dinero… sí. ¡Mira que tienes suerte!, tener un *protégé* sin impulsos animales.

Recktall Brown empezó a hablar, pero lo dejó. Con las manos cruzadas sobre su corto y amplio regazo, los diamantes brillando en lo alto, observó cómo Valentine trazaba un contorno en la foto con la punta de un meñique, y luego alargaba la mano para apartar el cenicero, donde el puro sin apagar enviaba hacia la mano una corriente de humo uniforme que le subía por el brazo: Valentine sopló hacia el humo con aire malhumorado, y preguntó:

—¿Cuántos años tiene?

—Unos treinta y tres. Aparenta más bien mi edad.

—Nunca va a las exposiciones, ¿verdad? Cuando aparecen esos cuadros. Imagino que si fuera lo habría visto alguna vez.

—Yo tampoco entiendo por qué no va. —Recktall Brown rio entre dientes, inclinándose hacia adelante con dificultad para coger el puro y tirarlo a la chimenea—. Supongo que le daría un gustazo verlos, ver a esas solteronas ampulosas babeando ante sus cuadros, a esos críticos…

—Sí… —Sus ojos se encontraron por un momento, y Basil Valentine sonrió—. Resulta desagarrador, ¿verdad? Son tan terriblemente serios… Pero, por supuesto, precisamente es eso lo que lo hace todo posible. Las autoridades son tan mortalmente serias que nunca se les ocurre dudar, están tan ansiosos por ser los primeros en confirmar la autenticidad. Los expertos…

—Has dicho que venías a hablar de negocios. ¿De qué se trata? —dijo Brown, sin escucharlo. Se quitó las gafas y clavó sus ojos penetrantes en Basil Valentine, el cual, como si supiera que así estaba casi ciego, lo miró a los ojos con una intensidad que pareció helar el azul de los suyos.

—Preferiría esperar a que llegue —dijo con calma—. Estrictamente hablando, es bastante más que una cuestión de negocios —siguió, mientras Brown se frotaba los ojos y se volvía a poner las gafas—. En realidad es todo un reto, un trabajo que retará en toda regla a su genio.

Brown alzó la vista a través de los gruesos cristales.

—Sí que roza el genio, maldita sea.

—El talento suele hacerlo, si lleva suficiente tiempo frustrado. En cualquier caso, la mayor parte de lo que hoy llamamos genio es simplemente talento deformado.

—Mira, no malgastes esas frases tan brillantes conmigo. ¿Has venido a hablar de negocios?, o sólo porque querías conocer…

—Por supuesto —lo cortó Valentine, levantando la voz—, estoy impaciente por conocer a alguien capaz de hacer un trabajo así. Ni un átomo de esa inquietud que uno siempre descubre en… este tipo de trabajos. Ser capaz de pasar de las pinceladas concienzudas y meticulosas de Bouts a la audacia de Van der Goes. ¡Increíble!, esa… —señaló la reproducción desplegada— leve incertidumbre de una tremenda pasión, apuntando justo un poco más alto de lo que él pudo lograr en toda su vida, pobre hombre.

—¿Quién?

—Van der Goes. Murió loco, sabes. Retirado en un convento, trabajando y bebiendo. Se creía condenado eternamente, y al final corría de un lado a otro contándoselo a todo el mundo. Qué flores tan exquisitas pintaba. Y qué manos tan magníficas —añadió, mirándose las suyas.

Recktall Brown había sacado otro puro, y abrió su cortaplumas bañado en oro.

—No quiero ningún patinazo —dijo, cortando la punta del puro—. Ya ha hecho tres de ese mismo, ese Van Gogh…

—¡Van Gogh!

—Acabas de decir que…

—¡Cielo santo, Brown! —Valentine se puso en pie con la pitillera de oro—. Mi querido amigo, él no puede pintar un Van Gogh del mismo modo que no puede volar. —Valentine se echó a reír, paseándose por la habitación, observando sus estrechos zapatos negros sobre la alfombra—. Pero en el mismo instante en que aparece otro Van der Goes corren todos como locos a compararlo con el último que hizo. Nunca quedan decepcionados. Sabes —añadió, volviéndose bruscamente cuando se acercaba a la forma negra de la perra —, su trabajo es tan bueno que casi lo han tomado por una falsificación.

—¿Qué quieres decir con eso?

—Las autoridades menores, por supuesto. Las que miran los cuadros con ojos del siglo XX. Los estilos

cambian —musitó, y se quedó mirando el vasto tapiz de lana colgado en la pared tras el bar, originalmente destinado a abrigar y decorar el interior de piedra desnuda de algún castillo norteño, y que aquí tapaba un panel de madera bien caldeado. Las figuras de aquel tapiz parecían tomar parte en una escena de caza o en una comida campestre, era difícil adivinarlo con aquella luz. Sin embargo, sus ojos se veían bien, todos vueltos en una dirección, todos mirando fijamente el retrato de Recktall Brown, como detenidos por su presencia, y por la mirada que no les devolvía: una bandada de ojos severos, que desdeñaban los que ahora les contemplaban. Y como consciente de su desprecio, Valentine les volvió la espalda—. El gusto cambia —siguió, con un irritante tono monocorde—. La mayor parte de las falsificaciones sólo duran unas cuantas generaciones, precisamente porque están hechas con tanto cuidado al gusto de la época; un Rembrandt falso, por ejemplo, confirma todo lo que esa época ve en Rembrandt. El gusto y el estilo cambian, y la falsificación resulta penosamente evidente, queda fechada, porque la época siguiente vuelve a descubrir a Rembrandt de cabo a rabo, y por supuesto descubre que era completamente diferente. Esa es la maldición que todo artículo genuino debe resistir. —Había llegado hasta detrás del sillón donde estaba sentado Recktall Brown, con las pantorrillas baronialmente extendidas hacia la chimenea, y ahora miraba la nuca de Brown y los gruesos pliegues de carne que le colgaban sobre el cuello de la camisa. Nada se movía en él, salvo ligeras crispaciones cuando cambiaba de lugar el puro entre sus dientes desiguales. Valentine hundió los nudillos de una mano abierta en la palma de la otra, y volviéndose se alejó. La rapidez de sus movimientos habría podido indicar un nerviosismo extremo si no hubiera sido por su contención; ahora se alejaba con los gestos disciplinados de un buzo, cada giro con una intención, aunque se limitó a recorrer de nuevo el salón y volvió diciendo—: A propósito, no tienes que volver a preocuparte por ese contratiempo con la Galería Dalner.

—¿Qué ha pasado?

—¿Recuerdas que hace unos tres meses pusieron en cuestión uno de sus cuadros, el pequeño Bouts, diciendo que era una falsificación evidente? Aunque no puedo imaginar qué les hizo decirlo, a menos que quisieran desacreditarlo para bajar el precio. Dalner ha hecho eso otras veces. En cualquier caso, la semana pasada cuestionaron la autenticidad de un Di Gredi que pertenece a una persona muy importante, cuyo nombre prefiero omitir. Les ha demandado por calumnia, y están arreglando el asunto en privado.

Las sordas vibraciones de la risa de Recktall Brown ascendieron con el humo espeso que subía a los espacios silenciosos, y derivaba hacia la galería al fondo de la habitación de dos niveles.

—Dalner no dirá una palabra sobre esos Van der Goes. Esas vulgares tentativas de honradez salen demasiado caras —siguió Valentine—. Y por lo que se refiere a su procedencia, Dalner respeta el secreto tanto como nosotros. Mientras la gente tenga miedo de que la descubran, la tienes en tus manos. Y todo el mundo lo tiene, por supuesto. Qué conmovedor…

—Acabo de conseguir…

—Qué conmovedor resulta descubrir que sus secretos son algo patéticamente común y corriente —terminó Valentine desde el centro de la habitación.

—Acabo de conseguir un Memling. Un original.

—¿Eh? ¿Cómo? ¿Dónde?

—Un original de Memling, directamente de Alemania. Un tipo que conozco allí, en el ejército; el cuadro lo habían dado por perdido en las demandas de reparaciones.

—¿Estás seguro de que es auténtico?

—La Pinakothek de allí tiene un montón de papeles que lo prueban.

—¿Papeles? Ya sabes lo que valen los papeles.

—No te preocupes, los de éste están en regla.

—Los papeles siempre están en regla, cuando son affidávits modernos. ¿Dónde está ahora? Si los expertos…

—¡Los expertos! —dijo Brown, y volvió a reírse. No se movió, ni sus ojos sin pupilas revelaron sorpresa alguna cuando Valentine se apartó de su espalda con tan repentina irritación que podría haber sido un gesto de ataque, aunque sólo fue hasta la mesa para coger su vaso y apurarlo.

—No hace falta que me lo digas, por supuesto —dijo Valentine—. Probablemente estará a buen recaudo en tu pequeña galería privada, tras aquel panel —añadió, mirando más allá de las mesas de refectorio hacia el fondo de la habitación, mientras se acercaba de nuevo al bar.

—Está a buen recaudo.

—Qué habitación más notable —murmuró Valentine, sirviéndose whisky y mirando a su alrededor—. Es una lástima que tu gusto, cuando das alguna muestra de tenerlo, parezca inclinarse hacia Alemania.

Estaba mirando la talla policromada de san Juan Bautista en un nicho de la escalera, originalmente

destinada, y consecuentemente proporcionada, al remate de un pilar de considerable altura en una catedral alemana, por lo que la cabeza era anormalmente grande y los ojos estaban dilatados con lo que, a tan corta distancia, parecía una mirada impúdica. El brazo derecho, en tiempos extendido en gesto de bendición, había sido mutilado, dejando sólo la cicatriz de apretadas vetas del tuétano leñoso del codo.

Recktall Brown desplazó su peso, agarró su vaso y levantó los ojos hacia la galería.

—Esa armadura de ahí arriba, que es italiana, tampoco es una falsificación. Es mi pieza favorita, de las que tengo aquí. Italiana del siglo XV.

—Ya me había fijado en ella. Lástima que no esté completa.

—Qué quieres decir, está completa.

—Pero no toda es italiana. Los escarpes. Alemanes. Una tosca zarpa de oso alemana donde las haya.

—Es mi pieza favorita —repitió Brown, y dejó el vaso vacío. Luego se quedó sentado dando silenciosos golpecitos con el pie en el suelo alfombrado, y con los dedos de una mano en el brazo de cuero del sillón. Llenaba de humo el aire ante sí, una informe nube gris a través de la cual el humo no aspirado de la brasa de su puro trazaba una clara línea azul.

—No deberías fumar eso —dijo Basil Valentine, volviendo a su sillón—. Cáncer de garganta.

Y Brown volvió a reírse, un único sonido gutural que apenas llegaba a la superficie. Entre aquellos dos hombres parecía deslizarse un peso de un lado a otro, y aunque Basil Valentine diría tarde o temprano «Supongo que estamos básicamente de acuerdo…», aseverando el hecho de que la mayor parte de una discusión no es más que un acuerdo alcanzado en momentos diferentes, era en estos instantes de inversión, cuando el peso estaba listo para ser devuelto, en los que el que se disponía a arrojarlo lo hacía tensamente, como temiendo que cuando le había caído encima se hubiera deslizado por última vez. Ahora hablaban con inflexiones que reconocían las del otro, y las trataban en consecuencia, inflexiones inconexas y comentarios superficiales que podían acercarse pero nunca tocar la eventualidad que ambos parecían esperar.

—¿Y qué noticias hay del imperio editorial?

—Si te refieres a ese libro de arte que escribiste, ya he enviado los ejemplares anticipados. —Brown arrojó a la chimenea el puro a medio fumar. La perra, que estaba en el suelo junto a su sillón, dio un respingo ante el brusco movimiento de su brazo, y Valentine, como atraído por él, tendió una mano hacia la revista abierta, mientras Brown, acomodándose en su asiento, sujetaba las páginas satinadas con los dedos extendidos—. Es una buena reproducción.

—Ninguna reproducción es buena. —Valentine se echó hacia atrás y cruzó estrechamente sus manos vacías, que se buscaban entre sí ante él—. Intentos de ampliar dos pies cuadrados de lienzo para cubrir veinte acres de estupidez.

—Todos estos malditos detallitos —murmuró Brown.

—Mucho más evidentes en el Bouts que hizo, por supuesto. Un dominio exquisito de los colores brillantes, la ascética contención en las manos y los pies.

Valentine extendió las piernas y cruzó los tobillos.

—Parece como si cada pelo hubiera sido pintado por separado.

—Y lo ha sido, por supuesto.

—Esta parte es bonita. —Recktall Brown trazó una curva sobre la foto con la yema del pulgar—. La expresión de la cara.

—Esa…

—Tú…

—Por favor, tu… pulgar se parece bastante a una espátula, ¿no? Pero aquí —siguió Valentine rápidamente, antes de que Brown pudiera replicar del modo que insinuó con un encogimiento de hombros —, aquí los matices de la carne son increíbles, incluso en una reproducción. Esta blancura cenicienta, y las otras grandes masas de color, un lienzo maravillosamente templado. Es el tipo de cosas que pintaba hacia el final de su vida. Cuando la cabeza le empezaba a fallar.

—¿Quién?

—¿A quién crees que me refiero, a tu *protégé?*

—Me gusta esta cara.

Pasó el pulgar sobre aquel fragmento. Los diamantes destellaron, y Basil Valentine alargó una mano hacia allí, pero luego la detuvo y la volvió a juntar vacía con la otra.

—¿Está asegurado?

—Contra robo e incendios.

—¿Y contra el fraude?

Aquello hizo alzar la cara a Recktall Brown.

—¿Fraude? —repitió—. ¿Fraude? —Luego se echó a reír—. Jamás podrían probar nada. Nadie podría. Después de que esos expertos lo examinasen con sus lentes de aumento…

—Lo sé, los vi hacerlo. Incluso los ayudé, ¿sabes? —sonrió Valentine—. Examinando un fragmento del tamaño de una cabeza de alfiler con luz polarizada bajo un microscopio, para averiguar si era isotrópico o anisotropico, atravesando las capas de pintura…

—No hay forma de que alguien pueda probar maldita la cosa ahí. No hay ninguna prueba en ninguna parte. Pero los del seguro, lo único contra lo que no quieren asegurarlo es si le ocurre algo por sí sola. A la pintura.

—Vicio inherente.

—¿Qué?

—Apenas tienen que preocuparse por algo tan… ¿antiguo? El cuidado con que están hechos estos cuadros, y sin embargo… ¿el hombre con tres piernas de Velázquez? No importa. A medida que envejece, la pintura se vuelve translúcida, y a veces se transparentan las partes que han sido retocadas. Pero, por supuesto, nadie está dispuesto a hacer un seguro contra el vicio inherente. Muchos pintores modernos hacen cambios repentinos dictados por la absoluta incertidumbre de lo que están haciendo, lo que llaman inspiración, y pintan encima. Por supuesto, la pintura tarda poco en levantarse.

Mientras Brown miraba las puntas bien manicuradas de los dedos apoyados en una esquina de la revista, Valentine, con los pies juntos y sin cruzar, se inclinó a un lado para volver a examinar la reproducción.

—¿Cómo lo has llamado?

—Vicio inherente —dijo Basil Valentine, alzando la vista. Sus ojos quedaron atrapados al instante por aquellos que no ofrecían ningún centro eludible—. Nadie puede hacer un seguro contra el vicio inherente —repitió en el mismo tono.

Recktall Brown empujó bruscamente hacia él la *Gaceta del Coleccionista;* luego se acomodó en su sillón, con una mano cerrada en puño sobre un puro sin encender.

—Lo siento —le dijo Valentine, ofreciendo con un gesto devolverle la revista—, si todavía no has terminado…

Recktall Brown se lo quedó mirando, y de pronto preguntó:

—¿Qué anillo es ése? ¿De dónde lo has sacado?

—¿Este? Mi querido amigo, lo has visto mil veces. Es un anillo de sello. Puede que sea el sello de una familia muy antigua.

—¡Una familia muy antigua! —murmuró Brown, apartando la vista.

—Con una divisa —insistió Valentine—, como la que ahora estás mirando. *Dominus providebit?* —Echó una ojeada hacia la chimenea—. Sí… —Se arrellanó en su asiento y encendió un cigarrillo. Arrojó el humo ligero sobre la mesa y extendió la mano izquierda sobre el brazo del sillón. En la carne brillaban débilmente pelos dorados—. Los anillos de oro eran el adorno peculiar de los patricios romanos, ya sabes. Era la forma en que se distinguían de los plebeyos.

Recktall Brown se levantó. Guardó silencio hasta que terminó de servirse otra copa. Entonces preguntó:

—¿Por qué tienes que hablar con él de esa idea que se te ha ocurrido? Ni siquiera me la has contado a mí todavía.

—No es nada que pueda interesarte todavía. Simplemente una idea para otro trabajo que podría intentar, si se cree capaz de hacerlo. De poco serviría hablar de ella hasta que sepamos qué le parece. Después de tanto tiempo debéis de ser uña y carne —añadió, mientras Brown volvía cruzando la habitación hacia él.

—A estas alturas no creo que vea a nadie más que a mí.

—Una vida social animadísima. ¿Habláis?

—Puedo estar con él sin hablar. —Recktall Brown se sentó y se quedó mirando la mesa baja que tenía delante—. Jamás he conocido a nadie igual. Pero hablamos —se recuperó—. Cuando se trata de negocios, hablamos.

Basil Valentine se alisó el pelo de la nuca con la punta de los dedos.

—Debes de ponerlo furioso, ¿no? Insistiendo siempre en negocios, negocios, negocios.

—Alguien tiene que atarlo en corto para que haga el trabajo. ¿Qué demonios hay de malo en ello? Cuando parece que se olvida de lo que está haciendo. Qué demonios, cuando haces un trabajo como el suyo puedes perder el contacto con las cosas, terminas por no tener un sentido real de la realidad.

—Si es que alguna vez lo tuvo, por supuesto. Sabes, Brown, si haciendo un esfuerzo de imaginación pudiera acusarte de ser literario, te acusaría quizá de abrigar la ilusión de que uno sólo puede lidiar con la realidad mediante la comisión del mal. Es la última moda. —Basil Valentine siguió pasando el pulgar por la

gastada inscripción de su pitillera de oro, y mirando a Recktall Brown, que había bajado la vista a sus tobillos, gruesos bajo la seda negra con relojes blancos—. ¿Cómo es que no lo he conocido en todo este tiempo? —preguntó finalmente.

—Por muchas razones.

—¿Por muchas razones?

—No quiero que lo molestes —dijo Recktall Brown.

—¿Molestarlo?

—Simplemente no quiero que lo distraigas —dijo Brown hablando rápidamente. Se inclinó hacia adelante para coger su vaso.

—Sabes —dijo Valentine, encogiéndose tras su cigarrillo—, hablas de él como si fuera algo de tu propiedad. Como Fuller… o ese bicho. —Señaló a la perra, que había levantado una pata y empezaba de nuevo a lamerse—. Es lo único realmente insoportable de las hembras, ¿verdad? Todas ellas, siempre tan húmedas.

—Simplemente no quiero que lo distraigas de su trabajo.

Basil Valentine se levantó.

—Tienes unas ideas muy raras sobre mí, ¿no?

—No tengo ningún tipo de ideas sobre nadie. Se trata del trabajo.

—Sabes, Brown, pareces incurrir en el mismo error de apreciación en el que la mayoría de la gente pasa inmersa toda la vida. Que las cosas permanecen como son. Me sorprende de ti, me sorprende de verdad. —Se recostó contra el brazo de su sillón—. Dime —siguió concisamente—, ¿cómo esperas que pueda molestarlo?

—No espero que lo hagas, así que no lo hagas. Simplemente no lo líes con tus brillantes comentarios, con esas frases de sabelotodo en lenguas extranjeras que te enseñaron los jesuitas, y que nadie entiende más que tú, y… maldita sea, sabes muy bien a lo que me refiero. Tiene que seguir trabajando de firme.

Recktall Brown bebió, y se quedó mirando al frente con el vaso en la mano.

—Nunca tienes música aquí, ¿no?

—Me pone nervioso.

—Sí. Sí, creo que lo entiendo. Dime… —Basil Valentine hizo una pausa—. ¿Crees que… es feliz, crees que es feliz haciendo ese trabajo?

—¿Feliz? —preguntó Brown, alzando la vista por primera vez en varios minutos—. Tiene suficiente dinero para volar a la luna si quiere.

Valentine sonrió, y asintió con la cabeza.

—*Carmina vel caelo* —empezó con sílabas precisas, mientras sonaba el timbre de la puerta, y Recktall Brown, al dejar el vaso sobre la mesa de los Siete Pecados Capitales, derramó un poco de su bebida sobre *Invidia*—. Con hechizos se puede incluso bajar la luna del cielo. A veces, mi querido amigo —siguió hablando a la espalda de Recktall Brown, que se alejaba por la habitación—, no puedo creer que hayas estudiado realmente a Virgilio.

Luego, mientras se quedaba mirando, sus ojos volvieron a perder su líquido matiz de afable indiferencia. Se llevó las manos a la barbilla, con lo que el anillo de oro que llevaba en el meñique de la izquierda le tocaba casi los labios. No se movió hasta que oyó una voz en el vestíbulo de entrada.

—¿Qué quería… por qué quería que saliese y viniese hasta aquí?

—Negocios, hijo mío. Negocios.

Cuando entraron, Basil Valentine se había retirado a un cuarto de baño del piso inferior, donde se lavó las manos. Se las secó lentamente, mirándose en el espejo mientras lo hacía. Luego se alisó el pelo por detrás con la punta de los dedos, se detuvo a tirar hacia abajo de las costuras de sus pantalones (como hace una mujer antes de entrar en una habitación, estirándose la faja), y salió a reunirse con ellos con su mano bien manicurada extendida en gesto de presentación.

Para Basil Valentine, que era consciente de la disposición de todos y cada uno de los rasgos de su cara, y que dominaba sus expresiones para no revelar más de lo que deseaba, una cara en la que la sorpresa asomaba con cultivada precaución, la cara que tenía ante sí fue una conmoción. Aunque inmóvil como la suya, parecía estar en constante movimiento, no asombrada ni desconcertada sino prolongando aquel instante de sorpresa, sorpresa quizá no ante las cosas y los hechos que tenía delante, sino ante su propia constante exposición. La mano que estrechó Valentine fue rápidamente retirada, recuperada como un animal cuyo amo no se atrevía a dejar suelto.

—¿Cómo está usted? Creía… creía que era Fuller cuando… hace un momento. —Recktall Brown estaba a su lado con la mano puesta en su hombro—. Es sólo que… estoy acostumbrado a ver aquí a Fuller.

—Lo siento en el alma, me temo que no puedo hacer nada al respecto. Hasta el dominio del lenguaje de Fuller está más allá de mis posibilidades —dijo Basil Valentine, y luego la sonrisa abandonó su cara, pues se dio cuenta de que el hombre le había vuelto la espalda y se dirigía hacia uno de los sillones que había ante la chimenea, donde se quedó mirando la mesa, y antes de sentarse dejó allí el libro que llevaba.

—¿Dónde está Fuller? —preguntó. Alzó la vista hacia ellos, y Basil Valentine se detuvo, mirando a los hundidos ojos verdes que lo miraban entre las arrugas de la cara que inmediatamente volvió hacia Recktall Brown, quien dijo:

—Fuller está ocupado.

—¿Que está…? ¿Lo ha castigado otra vez?

—Está trabajando en unos crucifijos —dijo Recktall Brown, dirigiéndose a ambos—. Tiene veinte de marfil ahí arriba, perfectos ejemplares del siglo XIII, ablandados en vinagre para cortarlos, y endurecidos en agua. Le he dicho que si quiere que sus plegarias tengan respuesta lo único que tiene que hacer es frotarlos con la mano sudorosa. Supongo que el sudor de un negro los amarilleará tan bien como el de cualquiera.

—¿Estás seguro de que puedes… fiarte de Fuller? —dijo Valentine.

—No sabe lo que está haciendo. El otro día le di un marco grande y le dije que frotase mierda de pájaro contra los agujeros de los gusanos y lo colgase encima de la chimenea, deberíais haberlo visto. Dios sabe de dónde saca la mierda de pájaro. La trae en unos paquetitos blancos —terminó Recktall Brown, desenvolviendo un puro mientras hablaba.

Basil Valentine ofreció un cigarrillo por encima de la mesa, cogió uno para él y dejó la pitillera entre ambos. Luego ofreció fuego y se quedó esperando.

—Los huevos. Me ha traído los huevos, ¿no?

—Tus huevos frescos de campo, puestos ayer. Están en el vestíbulo, pero por qué demonios tienen que haberlos puesto hace pocas horas…

—Sí, sí, así debe ser. Así debe ser. Tienen que estar frescos.

—¿Temple al huevo? —preguntó Basil Valentine, ofreciendo fuego.

—Pues… pues sí. ¿Cómo lo sabe?

Miró a Valentine sólo el tiempo suficiente para encender su cigarrillo, y luego se volvió hacia Recktall Brown con una expresión que hacía la misma pregunta. De momento, Brown estaba velado por el humo. Basil Valentine aprovechó la ocasión para examinar al hombre sentado frente a él. Su pelo, muy corto, mostraba claramente la forma de su cráneo, un cráneo de dimensiones más bien cuadradas. La oscura chaqueta sin hombreras le colgaba de los hombros, que apenas parecían capaces de sostenerla. Las puntas de los dedos, también cuadradas, se daban golpecitos entre el humo del cigarrillo, el tabaco de Virginia bien prensado en finos pitillos que prefería Valentine, dejado en el cenicero entre ambos.

Brown emergió del humo del cigarro y se sentó con aire inseguro.

—Tienes una pinta infernal —le dijo.

Basil Valentine lo observaba atentamente. Estaba mirando la mesa, y sus labios apenas se movían mientras pronunciaba *Soberbia, Ira, Lujuria, Pereza*… [32]

—Es porque he… he estado trabajando de un modo infernal —dijo mirando a Basil Valentine, una mirada rápida e inquieta arrojada como sus palabras, que eran sonidos separados y apremiantes. Como ninguno de los dos dijo nada, añadió—: Tiene esto demasiado caldeado —y alzó la vista hacia Brown como para incitarlo a explicar todo lo que su comentario no incluía. Brown sonrió burlonamente.

—¿Para las obras de arte? —preguntó.

—Simplemente demasiado caldeado. Hace un calor de horno.

Volvió a bajar la vista.

—Ahora que por fin has llegado —dijo Brown— podemos empezar.

—Sí, llego tarde. Estaba durmiendo.

—¿Durmiendo a estas horas? —preguntó Brown.

—Sí, yo… trabajo de noche, ya lo sabe, y… No pueden imaginar lo ansioso que me pongo a veces por que se haga de noche —dijo de repente, alzando la vista hacia ambos—. A veces parece que… no va a anochecer nunca, así que intento dormir. Esperando a que anochezca. Cuando estaba en el colegio, de niño —siguió rápidamente—, teníamos esto escrito en la cartilla escolar: «Ha amanecido otro día azul. ¡Piénsalo! ¿Lo dejarás pasar sin provecho?». ¿Entienden? Eso… es bastante turbador, ese «otro día azul…» [33] ¿Entiende? —dijo, mirando a Valentine. Entonces reparó en la revista que Valentine tenía abierta en el regazo—. Esa… No conocía… no había visto esa reproducción.

—Siéntate, hijo mío, cálmate. Vamos a…

—Voy a… Sólo es un minuto.

Los dejó allí sentados, y se dirigió apresuradamente hacia la puerta por la que había salido Basil Valentine minutos antes.

—Sabes —murmuró Valentine, sosteniendo ante sí la reproducción en colores—, ahora no es nada difícil entender por qué no va nunca a esas exposiciones.

—¿Qué quieres decir?

—Mira esto. Parece salido tal cual del lienzo.

—Muy bien, pero no dejes que eso lo sobresalte. ¿Entiendes lo que quiero decir, cosas como eso de «otro día azul»? Debes andarte con cuidado o acabará como ese Van… Van… —Recktall Brown señaló las páginas abiertas con la mano del anillo de diamantes.

—Muy bien, mi querido amigo. Puedes decir Van Gogh. Van Gogh también se volvió loco. Loco de remate —dijo Valentine, inclinándose hacia adelante para dejar la revista en la mesa.

Ambos levantaron la vista cuando volvió, pasando junto al púlpito, donde se detuvo a coger una botella de coñac y una copa. Las dejó en la mesa junto al libro que había traído, y cogió la *Gaceta del Coleccionista.* Leyó el pie de foto a media voz: «… esa expresión sumamente característica del genio del arte flamenco, que parece enriquecernos con facultades visuales reforzadas, en este cuadro recientemente descubierto, *El descendimiento de la Cruz,* del maestro de finales del siglo XV Hugo van der Goes…».

—Esto es… bueno, en realidad no se puede decir «sumamente característica», sea quien sea quien…

—Aquí Valentine quiere…

—Pero «facultades visuales reforzadas», eso lo he visto en algún sitio. Sí, da esa sensación de iluminación proyectada, en vez de recibida desde fuera, no lo… ¿no lo entienden así?

—Sí. Lo he escrito yo —dijo Basil Valentine, mirándolo a los ojos.

—¿Lo ha escrito usted? —repitió.

—Y lo decía en serio. Le felicito.

—Entonces, ¿sabe que es mío? ¿Que esto es mío? —dijo, poniendo la mano abierta sobre la página de la revista.

—Mi querido amigo, «Si el publico cree que un cuadro es de Rafael y está dispuesto a pagar el precio de un Rafael», dijo Valentine, ofreciendo un cigarrillo, «entonces es un Rafael».

El cigarrillo fue aceptado distraídamente.

—Sí, yo… pero las reproducciones no… No había visto ésta, pero todas son malas sin excepción, son… mire, aquí puede verlo, este espacio de aquí pierde casi todo su valor, porque el azul no es lo bastante… no es…

—No es mala, para ser una reproducción —dijo Valentine, observando cómo se servía coñac en la copa —. Pero he visto el original, y es magnífico. Lo es, casi perfecto. Un perfecto Van der Goes.

—Sí, pero yo… no es tan simple, ¿sabe? Quiero decir, eso del original, un Van der Goes —repitió, cubriendo con la mano el cielo tras la Cruz—, esto es… mío.

—¿Suyo? —dijo Valentine sonriendo, y observándolo mientras se sentaba—. Entonces trabaja de noche, ¿no?

—Sí, ahora suelo trabajar de noche.

—Y ese aire de secretismo acaba impregnándolo todo, ¿no?

—No. No, no empiece con eso. Eso es lo que decían ellos, así que no lo diga. No es tan simple. —Bebió un trago de coñac—. Es la misma sensación… Sí, esa sensación de un día azul de verano, ¿entiende? Es demasiado, un día así está demasiado iluminado, no te permite proyectar por ti mismo esa iluminación, esa… iluminación selectiva que es necesaria para pintar… como aquí —añadió, señalando el cuadro.

—Sabe, al verle ahora he encontrado la respuesta a una de las preguntas que llevaba rondándome la cabeza desde hace tiempo. Lo primero que vi fue un pequeño Dierick Bouts, y entonces me pregunté si utilizaría un modelo para trabajar.

—Bueno, yo…

—Pero ahora resulta bastante evidente, ¿no? —siguió Valentine, señalando con la cabeza la foto del cuadro entre ambos—. ¿Espejos?

—Sí, claro que sí, espejos. —Se echó a reír, un sonido constreñido, y encendió un cigarrillo.

—Ya tiene uno, sabe —dijo Basil Valentine, y observó atentamente cómo daba un respingo, miraba el cigarrillo que tenía en la mano y lo aplastaba en el cenicero para coger el que acababa de aceptar—. Está muy cansado, ¿verdad?

—Sí. Sí, lo estoy, yo… llevo cansado mucho tiempo.

—¿No duerme?

—Sí, a veces. De día, a veces.

—Bueno, mi querido amigo —dijo Valentine, enderezándose y sonriendo—, yo tampoco duermo. Creo que Brown es probablemente el único de nosotros que goza del sueño de los justos.

—¿Usted sueña? —preguntó de repente.

—¿Si sueño? Cielo santo, no, llevo años sin soñar. ¿Y usted?

—¿Yo? Bueno, no. No, no. No, llevo sin soñar desde hace… tiempo.

—Todavía no me ha explicado todo esto, ya sabe —dijo Basil Valentine, levantando los ojos de la foto, que empujó hacia adelante con la mano derecha, donde destelló el oro del gemelo—. La Virgen.

—¿La Virgen? —repitió, mirando fijamente por encima de la mesa.

—Sí, aquí, por ejemplo. En realidad domina toda la composición.

—Sí, la domina. La domina.

Valentine esperó, observándolo.

—Un sosiego exquisito en la cara —murmuró finalmente—. ¿Eso también lo descubre con espejos?

—Yo… ella… —balbució, cogiendo su copa.

Recktall Brown se levantó con gran viveza, teniendo en cuenta su estatura y el porte pesado e inmóvil que ofrecía un momento antes, hundido en el sillón. De pie tenía un aire poco firme, pero sus ojos fluctuantes tras las gafas parecieron centrarse, y su voz se elevó severamente cuando habló. Durante todo el tiempo había estado mirando a uno u otro de los dos hombres que tenía delante, calibrando la impresión que se causaban mutuamente.

—Yo responderé a eso, y luego hablaremos de negocios —dijo—. La modelo que utiliza es una cría que le conseguí yo, que vino una vez a intentar vendernos un libro de poemas chiflados. Ese sosiego que tiene es sólo que está colgada. —Levantó una mano vacía—. Siéntate, hijo mío, y cálmate. Ya hemos perdido la mitad de la puta tarde esperándote. —Se volvió hacia Basil Valentine, levantando la mano izquierda, con los diamantes y el puro, que dejó caer su ceniza sobre la *Gula* ante sí—. Valentine tiene una idea para el siguiente que vas a hacer, pero antes quiero saber cuándo vas a dejar de tontear con ese que estás haciendo ahora allá abajo.

—¿Tontear? ¿Tontear?

—De acuerdo, hijo mío, maldita sea, trabajar. Mira, he comprado una granja en Vermont. La familia que la construyó vino de Inglaterra en el siglo XVII, tenían mucho dinero, fabricaban ladrillos. Se trajeron todo lo que tenían. Había como una docena de cuadros mugrientos cuando compré la casa, ninguno de ellos vale más de veinte pavos, según Valentine, y algunos marcos a los que quiero que eches un vistazo, marcos pequeños de roble con terciopelo rojo y verde por dentro, quizá puedas sacarles partido. Voy a llenar de cosas ese sitio para subastarlas dentro de dos semanas, y eso último tuyo puede descubrirse allí si lo terminas a tiempo. —Se detuvo—. ¿Qué dices?

Basil Valentine había empezado a levantarse, pero se dejó caer de nuevo en el sillón sin hacer ruido, mostrando los dientes fuertemente apretados entre los labios abiertos, y bajó los ojos para ver bajar los suyos al hombre que tenía enfrente, que parecía desfallecer en silencio, aparentemente sin respirar. Valentine esperó, y luego dijo afablemente:

—Ese en el que está trabajando ahora, ¿es otro Van der Goes?

—Sí, sí, lo es.

Alzó la vista y respiró hondo.

—¿Qué motivo tiene?

—Yo… yo… iba a ser una Anunciación, porque todas son… bueno, ¿ha visto alguna vez alguna mala? Quiero decir de cualquier pintor. —Sostenía las manos en el aire ante sí, los dedos casi tocándose—. Es casi como si… la misma idea de la Anunciación, un pintor no puede… ningún pintor puede hacerlo mal.

—¿La Anunciación? —dijo Valentine con aire turbado.

—No, ya… no. Iba a serlo, quería hacerlo, pero luego se me ocurrió esta otra… esta otra idea cobró forma y…

—Entonces, ¿qué es?

—Es una… la muerte de la Virgen.

—Pero ya hay una, sabe, una espléndida de Van der Goes, creo que está en Bruselas, ¿no?

—Sí, sí, la conozco, conozco ésa. Es espléndida, sí. Pero ésta, esta que he hecho es posterior, pintada en una época posterior de su vida, cuando las formas…

—¿Está casi terminada? —preguntó perentoriamente Brown, inclinándose sobre ellos.

—Sí, lo está. En realidad está más que terminada —dijo, alzando la vista hacia Brown.

—¿Más que terminada?

—Sí, yo… ya sabe, está terminada, ahora tiene que ser… dañada.

—Eso debe de ser difícil —dijo Basil Valentine.

—Lo es, es la parte más difícil. No propiamente dañarla, sino dañarla sin tratar de conservar las partes que han costado tanto… bueno, ya sabe que es ahí donde fallan, buena parte de los… pintores que hacen este tipo de trabajo: no pueden resistir la tentación de salvar esas partes, y cualquiera puede adivinarlo, cualquiera puede adivinarlo.

—Entonces llámame en cuanto esté terminada, ¿me oyes? —dijo Brown, sentándose. Acabó de un trago su bebida—. Y ahora vamos a hablar del siguiente. Valentine está aquí para…

—Yo… maldita sea, no puede decir sin más… —Alzó la mirada hacia Basil Valentine—. Me habla de ello como si se tratara de hacer un brebaje medicinal. Es…

—De acuerdo, hijo mío, yo…

—Una vez oyó que habían vendido un Fra Angélico no sé dónde por un alto precio, y se le ocurrió que debería hacer un Fra Angélico, sacarme de la manga un Fra Angélico…

—De acuerdo, vamos…

—Como si se tratara de hacer un brebaje medicinal. —Se volvió hacia Brown—. ¿Sabe por qué no podré pintar nunca uno, un Fra Angélico? ¿Sabe por qué? ¿Sabe cómo pintaba? Fra Angélico pintaba de rodillas, estaba de rodillas con los ojos llenos de lágrimas cuando pintaba a Cristo en la Cruz. Y cree que yo… cree que yo…

—Vamos, contrólate, por el amor de Dios. Tenemos trabajo.

—¿Trabajo? ¿Trabajo? Se cree que yo… como si pasara el tiempo allá abajo tocándome las narices…

—«Que el vicio tenga mérito, ése es el precio del esfuerzo» —dijo Basil Valentine, estirando los brazos y sonriendo mientras los miraba.

—Muy bien, Valentine, ¿de qué se trata? ¿Qué es esa idea tuya?

—No es mía, mi querido Brown. Pope. Alexander Pope. «Pero a veces la virtud muere de hambre, mientras el vicio se alimenta. ¿Así pues? Es…».

—Eso no, maldita sea. Esa idea…

Sonó el teléfono. Había uno supletorio en el vestíbulo, además del que estaba junto al bar, y Recktall Brown se dirigió al del vestíbulo.

—Tendría que tener a Alexander Pope metido en una caja para disfrutar de él. Jamás he conocido a nadie remotamente parecido. En serio, jamás en la vida habría podido imaginar que los negocios pudieran tener una existencia tan poderosamente independiente de cualquier otra facultad de la inteligencia humana. —Basil Valentine apoyó la cabeza en el respaldo, arrojando humo hacia el techo y mirando cómo ascendía —. Sabe, antes ha mencionado la idea de una fábrica de novelas, una especie de cadena de montaje de escritores, cada cual con su trabajito particular. Producción en masa, decía, y todo hecho a medida del gusto del público. Pero no es tan absurdo —dijo Basil Valentine, inclinándose de repente hacia adelante.

—Sí, ya… lo sé. Lo sé.

—Cuando me reí… pero no resulta tan cómico en sus manos, ya sabe. Hace poco puso en marcha esa idea de someter las novelas a una comisión de la opinión pública, una muestra representativa de lectores que dan su opinión, y el autor hace cambios en consecuencia. Éxitos de ventas, por supuesto.

—Sí, Dios santo, ¿se imagina que… sometiera los cuadros a una muestra representativa? Sería mejor que quitase… ese color… esas líneas, y… —Se pasó la mano por la cara—. Se puede cambiar una línea sin tocarlo siquiera. No —siguió tras hacer una pausa, y Valentine lo observó atentamente—, nada resulta cómico en sus manos. Todo se vuelve muy… real.

—Oh, ¿también le ha endilgado alguno de sus sermones? «Hacer negocios es cooperar con la realidad», ¿ése? ¿Y el del líquido limpiador, un producto químico que se puede comprar por tres centavos el galón, y que él vendía a un cuarto de dólar en botellitas de seis onzas? ¿Y su pasta dentífrica de tiza? ¿Y el cereal para desayunos que daba a la gente espasmos de colon? ¿Le ha contado lo de la vieja que agarró una colitis espástica por tomar un laxante que hacía, un derivado de Dios sabe qué? Los tribunales rechazaron el caso. Una historia delirante, le divierte contarla cuando bebe. Todavía saca sus buenos cuartos de un simple producto químico que las mujeres usan para sus períodos menstruales, una necesidad tan delicada que la vergüenza y el secretismo que acarrea permiten venderlo a un precio absurdo…

—Sí, el secretismo.

—¿Qué?

—Esos cuadros, vender esos cuadros, el secretismo con que se hace.

Valentine rio entre dientes.

—Por supuesto, no podría hacer nada de eso solo. Otros le hacen el trabajo, le dan ideas. ¿Quién cree que lanzó ese cuadro en este país? —Señaló la reproducción abierta—. ¿No leyó la noticia?

—¿Dónde?

—En los periódicos. No, ya puestos, probablemente nunca lee el periódico. Entonces, ¿no se lo contó? No, por supuesto que no. Podría estorbar.

—¿Estorbar? ¿Qué?

—Su trabajo, por supuesto, se pone frenético cuando se trata de protegerlo. Tengo la impresión de que está usted tan entregado a él como aquellos falsificadores medievales de antigüedades clásicas. —Valentine hablaba rápidamente y con aspereza—. ¿Fiel a su arte, por así decirlo?

—Fiel a… sí, eso es como decir que un hombre es fiel a su cáncer.

—No se ofenda, y no deje que le influya con sus explicaciones de la realidad.

—Pero lo que es extraño es que al principio tenga tanto sentido, y luego, si lo escuchas, te… Sí, entiende la realidad.

—No entiende la realidad. —Basil Valentine se levantó, agarrándose aún de las solapas, y se quedó mirando la cara inclinada al otro lado de la mesa—. Recktall Brown es la realidad —dijo, y tras hacer una pausa en la que ninguno de los dos se movió, giró sobre la punta de un pie y se puso a pasear indolentemente por la habitación—. Cosa muy diferente —añadió por encima del hombro, y se paró a encender un cigarrillo.

La voz de Recktall Brown les llegaba en frases aisladas de conversación telefónica: «Ni un dólar más, maldita sea…», en determinado momento, y luego: «Maldita sea, ni un dólar menos».

—Pero déjeme contarle el descubrimiento de este Van der Goes. Puede que le divierta. Lo llevaron a Londres, por supuesto en secreto, y lo retocaron con temple antes de volverlo a traer a América, un tosco trabajo de repintado sobre una capa de cola, que pudiera quitarse rápidamente. Era un trabajo tan obviamente malo que hasta los aduaneros lo descubrieron. Y menudo chasco se llevaron, pobres hombres, pues reciben el diez por ciento de cualquier cosa que puedan demostrar que es una copia o una imitación. Pero debajo estaba la obra de arte original, auténtica, libre de impuestos. La verdad es que me llamaron para ayudar a autentificarlo. Ya ve cuánto confiamos en su trabajo. Y, por supuesto, todo el mundo respetó el «secreto comercial» del propietario respecto adonde lo había encontrado. Después de ese incidente la gente estaba predispuesta a aceptarlo.

—Pero… ¿por qué? No existe ninguna ley, verdad, contra…

—No es una cuestión de leyes, mi querido amigo —dijo Valentine, volviendo a la mesa—. Publicidad. Publicidad.

—Pero una cosa como ésa, un… cuadro como ése…

—Un cuadro como ése, o un tubo de pasta dentífrica, o un laxante que provoca colitis espástica. No puedes vender nada de eso sin publicidad. ¡La gente! —Valentine se volvió de nuevo, y empezó a pasearse de un lado a otro. Hablaba con mayor rapidez, con irritada precisión, como si no se atreviera a detenerse por miedo a que le rebatieran un argumento antes de llegar a concluirlo, o a vacilar y desperdiciar un instante precioso antes de que volviera Brown. Hasta el latín brotó con nativa aspereza de su lengua cuando dijo—: ¿Recuerda la máxima *Vulgus vult decipi, ergo decipiatur?* Sí, si quieren que los engañen, engañémoslos. ¿Se ha fijado en sus manos? —preguntó, deteniéndose bruscamente al borde de la mesa—. ¿En las manos de Brown, cuando está ahí sentado con ellas cruzadas sobre la panza? ¿Y esos diamantes? Como un gran sapo blando, «… feo y ponzoñoso, lleva empero una joya preciosa en la cabeza…».

—Pero todo esto…

—Sí, piense en la tradición que tiene usted detrás —siguió Valentine, volviéndole la espalda—. Lucio Mummio, y esa famosa historia en la que advierte a los hombres que llevan su botín de Corinto a Roma que cualquier tesoro artístico perdido o roto habrá de ser reemplazado a expensas del hombre responsable. No tenían más idea de arte que la gente que nos rodea hoy día, ni un ápice de apreciación, pero los trajeron de vuelta a Roma a toneladas. Empezó el coleccionismo privado, algo con lo que los griegos no soñaron jamás. Empezó en Roma, y con él la falsificación. Los mismos amanerados, los mismos idiotas que están dispuestos a comprar un jarrón si tienen que pagar lo bastante por él, la misma gente que acude a Brown, con chalecos grises, quizá, en vez de togas, la misma gente que en Roma, la misma gente, las mismas manos…

—Pero usted, entonces usted, si piensa de ese modo…

—Porque la gente, la gente nos está llevando al punto al que llegó Roma, cuando un tribunal podía adjudicar una pintura al hombre que poseía la tabla, y no al artista que la había pintado. —Valentine seguía de pie, con las rodillas apoyadas contra el borde de la mesa baja—. Sí, cuando se derrumbó la República romana se derrumbó el coleccionismo de arte, y desapareció la falsificación. Y luego qué. En vez de arte tuvieron religión, y todo el talento se dedicó a las reliquias sagradas. La mitad de la gente las coleccionaba, la otra mitad las fabricaba. ¿Un bosque de reliquias de la Vera Cruz? Milagrosa multiplicación. Luego el

Renacimiento, y dejaron los huesos de los nudillos de los santos y volvieron al arte. —Sus ojos, azules y severos ahora, se posaron sobre la radiante figura en el centro de la mesa de los Siete Pecados Capitales—. Falsificaciones astutas e intrincadas, como ésta —añadió, pasando la mano con un destello de oro sobre la mesa entera mientras volvía la espalda—. ¡La gente! —dijo, viendo acercarse a Recktall Brown—. Por supuesto lo odio.

—Pero no lo es. Esta mesa no es una falsificación.

—¿Qué pasa? —preguntó perentoriamente Brown, reuniéndose con ellos.

—Este Bosco, no es una falsificación.

—¿Quién demonios ha dicho que lo sea? Mira, Valentine…

—Escuche…

—¿Ya lo has sacado de sus casillas?

—Escuche, esta pintura del Bosco no es una falsificación.

Basil Valentine se recostó en su sillón y se agarró una rodilla entre las manos.

—¿No lo es? —dijo con calma, con el esbozo de una sonrisa en los labios, y se encogió de hombros—. ¿Ni siquiera una copia?

—Sabes muy bien que no, maldita sea.

—No lo es. No puede serlo.

—¿Por qué no? —les preguntó Valentine. Sus ojos habían recuperado su acuoso azul claro, su afable indiferencia—. Sabéis, la historia que me han contado —siguió tras una pausa— es que el original vino de la colección Di Brescia, una de las mejores de Europa, en su mayor parte primitivos flamencos. El viejo, el Conte di Brescia, descubrió que se estaba quedando sin dinero. Amaba sus cuadros, y nadie de su familia se habría atrevido a sugerirle que vendiera uno solo, aunque hubieran conocido el estado de sus finanzas. Por supuesto, sólo estaban esperando a que se muriese para venderlos todos. Mientras tanto seguían viviendo de la manera que siglos de riqueza les habían enseñado, viendo cómo se llevaban los cuadros para limpiarlos y volvían, sin enterarse de nada. Cuando el viejo noble murió se abalanzaron sobre los cuadros para venderlos, y descubrieron que todos eran copias. No se los habían llevado para limpiarlos, el viejo los había mandado copiar y vender, y fueron las copias las que volvieron.

—Eso es, los vendieron —dijo Brown—, vendieron los originales, acabas de decirlo, y yo conseguí éste. Lo conseguí hace diez o quince años.

—¿Dónde?

—¿Dónde? No importa. Aquí mismo, en América. Lo compré por casi nada.

—La colección de copias también se dispersó, sabes —dijo Valentine—. Inmediatamente después del escándalo, a finales de los años veinte. Y esta…

—Pero esperen, escuchen…

—No te pongas nervioso, hijo mío —dijo Brown, dejándose caer en su sillón; y Valentine miró hacia el otro lado de la mesa con la leve sonrisa todavía en los labios.

—Escuchen, éste es el original, lo es.

—No te excites tanto, maldita sea, hijo mío…

—¿Cómo está tan seguro? —preguntó Valentine con calma.

—Porque, escuchen. Lo que ocurrió fue, según oí decir, lo oí decir en algún lugar del extranjero, sí, en algún lugar del extranjero oí decir que lo que ocurrió fue que un chico, un chico cuyo padre tenía el original, porque lo había comprado él mismo, se lo había comprado al Conte di… Brescia, y el chico… y el chico lo copió y robó el original y dejó la copia en su lugar, y vendió el original, lo vendió en secreto por… casi nada.

—Muy interesante —dijo en voz baja Valentine. La sonrisa había desaparecido de sus labios, y observaba sin moverse, sin ninguna expresión en la cara, la temblorosa figura que tenía delante, al otro lado de la mesa.

—Muy bien, basta ya de eso. ¿No habéis empezado a hablar cuando no estaba aquí de eso nuevo en lo que va a trabajar?

—Por supuesto —dijo Valentine, y su tono había vuelto a su nivel afable, con un deje insinuante cuando se volvió hacia Brown y dijo—: Dado que no existes, hemos decidido escribir una novela sobre ti.

Al oír esto, Brown pareció sobresaltarse. Pero inmediatamente se recuperó, se quitó las gafas y clavó sus ojos penetrantes en Basil Valentine.

—Vamos a empezar a hablar de negocios ahora mismo —dijo.

—Brown no existe, debes admitirlo —siguió Valentine—. Es una ficción de pan tostado con queso derretido que uno toma antes de acostarse. Una proyección de mi subconsciente. Aunque bastante

permanente, debo confesarlo.

—Por Dios —dijo Brown—, si no te callas y te pones serio…

—Pero, mi querido amigo, si lo digo muy en serio. Soy la única persona que existe en esta habitación. Ambos sois proyecciones de mi subconsciente, de modo que escribiré una novela sobre ambos. Pero no sé qué puedo hacer con usted —dijo volviéndose hacia el otro sillón.

—¿Conmigo? —Casi sonrió a Basil Valentine—. ¿Por qué?

—Porque, mi querido amigo, nadie sabe lo que está usted pensando. Y por eso lee novelas la gente, para identificar proyecciones de su subconsciente. El héroe ha de ser tremendamente real, para convencerlos de su propia realidad, de la que dudan bastante. Una novela sin héroe sería sumamente molesta. Tienen que saber lo que piensa, pues si no, cielo santo, cómo van a saber que está inmerso en un conflicto tremendo, que es al fin y al cabo el deber de un héroe.

—Yo pienso en mi trabajo.

—Pero mi querido amigo…

—Maldita sea, Valentine —terció Brown—, yo soy jodidamente real, y dentro de un segundo…

—De acuerdo, a trabajar, a trabajar. Espera, hay algo que quería preguntar. Sus propios cuadros, sin duda tendrá usted obra propia. ¿Hay alguno de ellos por ahí, en alguna parte?

—Pues no, me… los únicos que tenía desaparecieron en un incendio.

—Bien, bien. Si alguien los hubiera guardado… No se puede suprimir todo de uno, ya sabe.

Valentine se quedó mirando la botella de coñac, que había cogido e inclinaba sobre la copa vacía.

—Ya lo sé —dijo, mirándola también. Le temblaba un poco la mano, y la botella tintineó contra el borde de la copa.

—Ten cuidado, hijo mío —dijo Recktall Brown, viendo cómo la apuraba de un trago.

—Antes de seguir con esto —dijo Valentine—, me gustaría saber algo más sobre su trabajo, porque lo que tengo en mente… La superficie dura, por ejemplo. El óleo tarda años en secarse.

—Sí, eso… conseguir la superficie dura, fue uno de los peores problemas. —Se inclinó hacia ellos, con los codos sobre la mesa, agarrándose una mano con la otra, y habló rápidamente pero con esfuerzo—. Lo he intentado todo, todos los diferentes… Intenté mezclar los colores sobre papel secante, para absorber el aceite, y luego mezclarlos con barniz, pero se secaba demasiado deprisa, ¿entienden? Se secaba demasiado deprisa y era inalterable. Intenté una mezcla de aceite volátil y formaldehído, pero no quedaba bien, no era lo que quería. Lo intenté con aceite de lavanda y formaldehído y me gustó más, el aceite con temple al huevo y una capa de barniz. En esos dos cuadros de Bouts, cuando preparé el lienzo puse hilos sobre el gesso todavía húmedo, ¿entienden?, según la forma en que quería que quedase el craquelado. Luego lo cocí, y cuando salió del horno se desprendieron los hilos y dejaron su dibujo. Pero lo mejor fue esto, lo utilicé aquí —dijo señalando la reproducción de Van der Goes, que seguía desplegada sobre la mesa—, una fina capa de gesso una y otra vez sobre el lienzo, hasta que se craquela por sí solo, debido a la atmósfera, los cambios, ¿entienden? Este cuadro es todo huevo y aceite de lavanda, y luego cola, cola diluida y barniz. Este, éste es barniz ámbar, la primera capa de cola diluida se contrae más deprisa que el barniz cuando se secan y lo craquela, ¿entienden? Y un poco de tinta china en las craqueladuras y cuando se seca sólo quedan partículas, como de suciedad, cuando llegan los expertos…

—No te pongas nervioso, hijo mío, siéntate, siéntate.

—Y luego llegan los expertos, ¿entienden? —dijo de pie, y se pasó la mano por los ojos, y por la barbilla, dejando una amplia sonrisa temblorosa cuando la alargó para coger de nuevo la botella—. No hay una sola prueba que no conozcan, y ninguna que no pueda eludirse. Ninguna. Por… por eso no podía usar ese medio de barniz, se secaba tan deprisa que tenía que pintar demasiado deprisa, y no se puede hacer eso, no se puede pintar tan deprisa y controlar esas… esas cosas que hay que controlar, ¿entienden? Y unos rayos X habrían detectado esas pinceladas bruscas —añadió. Alzó la copa y echó hacia atrás la cabeza para bebérsela de un trago—. Entienden, este… controlar este maldito mundo de formas y olores…

—Siéntate, hijo mío —dijo Recktall Brown mientras empezaba a alejarse nuevamente de ellos.

—Pero no les he contado, después de todo ese trabajo, ese… tontear. ¿Saben cuál es el mejor medio? Es tan simple que nunca me he atrevido a utilizarlo, es tan simple. Albura, el líquido que queda en el fondo cuando se bate la clara de huevo, con pigmentos secos en polvo y una capa de clara de huevo limpia encima y el barniz, es tan simple que no necesita nada, no hace falta cocerlo, se craquela de un modo precioso por sí solo, como si hubieran pasado años, centenares de años. Y eso, eso es… cuando llegan los expertos con sus frasquitos de alcohol, para ver si pueden disolver la pintura fresca, pero la cola… Nunca tiene música aquí, verdad. Nunca, en todo este tiempo…

—Vuelve aquí y siéntate. No podemos hablar contigo si estás ahí en el quinto infierno, en medio de la

habitación.

—Esa albura —le dijo Basil Valentine—. Habla de ella como si la considerase prácticamente infalible.

—Sí, ésa es la palabra, infalible.[34] Infalible —dijo, volviendo hacia ellos.

—Eso es lo que necesitamos —dijo Basil Valentine, con las manos juntas bajo la barbilla—. Con quien más cuidado tenemos que tener es con los tontos. La mayoría de los secretos se descubren por sus accidentes, muy pocos por su plan. Muy pocos —repitió, alzando la vista—. ¿Lo bastante infalible, diría usted, para un Van Eyck?

Brown parecía aguardar alguna reacción violenta a este reto, si lo era, según creía por el tono despreocupado de Valentine. Pero cuando levantó la vista no vio más que un encogimiento de hombros.

—Fácilmente, el perfecto medio para él, para Jan van Eyck, pero ya lo han hecho tantas veces…

—Sí, sí —lo interrumpió con impaciencia Basil Valentine—, probablemente hay más Jan van Eycks malamente falsificados que cualquiera de los otros. Hubert, por otra parte…

—¿Hubert van Eyck?

—Podría ser el descubrimiento artístico del siglo, si fuera absolutamente perfecto, firmado y documentado…

—Sí, sí, podría serlo, probablemente lo sería.

—Si pudiera hacerlo…

—¿Si pudiera hacerlo? ¿Si pudiera hacerlo? —dijo levantando la cabeza.

—¿Cuánto? —preguntó perentoriamente Recktall Brown.

—Depende enteramente del cuadro. Quizá tanto como lo que has sacado por todos los demás juntos.

—¡Tanto! Y por qué demonios hemos estado haciendo el tonto con estos…

—¡Si pudiera hacerlo! Claro que puedo hacerlo —dijo con más calma, bajando la vista hacia la reproducción del Van der Goes—. Pero, escuchen, no tienen derecho a hacer esto —siguió, arrugando la reproducción con la mano y arrancándola de la revista—. No tienen derecho a hacer esto —les dijo, mientras Valentine ponía una mano sobre el brazo de Recktall Brown.

—¿A hacer qué, mi querido amigo?

—Esta… estas reproducciones no tienen derecho a intentar difundir la pintura de ese modo. Sólo hay uno de ellos, saben, sólo uno. Este… mi cuadro… sólo hay uno, y estas reproducciones, estas falsificaciones baratas, que es lo que son, diseminadas por todas partes, no tienen derecho a hacer eso. Abarata todo el… es una calumnia, eso es lo que es, algo que calumnia mi obra —dijo, con la hoja arrugada en la mano.

Basil Valentine se quitó el fino cigarrillo de los labios y habló con frialdad:

—La falsificación es una calumnia. Cada cuadro que hace usted calumnia al artista al que falsifica.

—No lo es. No lo es, maldita sea, yo… cuando trabajo, yo… ¿Cree que los hago del modo en que se han hecho todas las demás falsificaciones? ¿Juntando los fragmentos de diez cuadros y formando uno, o tomando un… un Durero e invirtiendo la composición para que el hombre mire a la derecha en vez de a la izquierda, poniéndole una barba de otro retrato, y un sombrero, un sombrero diferente de otro, para que lo miren y reconozcan allí a Durero? No, es… los reconocimientos llegan mucho más hondo, mucho más atrás, y yo… este… las pruebas de rayos x, y ultravioletas e infrarrojos, los expertos con su fotomicrografía y… macrofotografía, ¿creen que sólo consiste en eso? Algunos no son tontos, no buscan sólo un sombrero o una barba, o un estilo que puedan reconocer, miran con memorias que… van más allá de ellos, que se remontan a… adonde se remonta la mía.

—Siéntate, hijo mío.

—Y… cualquier llamada a la puerta puede ser de los inspectores del oro, que vienen a ver si estoy usando malos materiales allá abajo, yo… soy un maestro pintor del Gremio, en Flandes, ¿entienden? Y si llegan y descubren que no estoy usando el… oro, destruyen los malos materiales que estoy usando y me multan, y yo… exigen que… y este exquisito azul de ultramar, ultramar de Venecia, que tengo que llevarles para que lo aprueben, y el pigmento rojo, el pigmento rojo ladrillo de Flandes… porque he prestado el juramento del Gremio, no por los críticos, los expertos, los… ustedes, ustedes no tienen más que ver conmigo que si fueran mis descendientes, nada que ver conmigo, y ustedes… el juramento del Gremio, usar materiales puros, trabajar a la vista de Dios…

—Ya has tomado bastante de eso, hijo mío —dijo Recktall Brown, alargando la mano, demasiado tarde, para coger la botella de coñac—. Necesitas conservar el pulso firme para lo que estás haciendo, todos esos malditos detallitos…

Basil Valentine seguía sentado, observándolo.

—¡El pulso firme! —dijo, y se bebió el coñac de un trago—. ¿Cree que todo consiste en eso, en tener el pulso firme? —Desplegó la reproducción arrugada—. Este… estos… los historiadores del arte y los críticos

hablan de cada objeto y… de que todo tiene su propia forma y densidad y… su propio carácter en los cuadros flamencos, pero ¿es que sólo consiste en eso? ¿Saben por qué es todo así? Porque encontraban a Dios en todas partes. No había nada que Dios no custodiase, nada, y por eso este… y por eso en el cuadro cada detalle refleja el interés de Dios por los objetos más insignificantes de la existencia, por todo, porque entonces Dios no descansaba ni un instante, y tampoco podía hacerlo el pintor. ¿Captan la perspectiva en esto? —preguntó perentoriamente, poniéndoles delante la reproducción arrugada—. No hay ninguna. No hay ninguna perspectiva única, como la del objetivo fotográfico, que es con la que todos miramos hoy y lo llamamos realismo, ahí… yo utilizo cinco o seis o diez… el pintor flamenco utilizaba veinte perspectivas si quería, e incluso en un cuadro pequeño no puedes abarcar todo con tu visión única, con tu único miserable par de ojos, como puedes hacer en una fotografía, como puedes hacer en un cuadro cuando… cuando el cuadro degenera y se vuelve consciente de que lo están mirando.

Recktall Brown se levantó y se acercó a él.

—Como todo es consciente hoy de que lo están mirando, de que lo mira otra cosa pero no Dios, y ése es el único modo de que algo tenga su propia forma y su propio carácter, y… y forma y olor, que sea Dios quien lo está mirando.

Recktall Brown estaba a su lado, la pesada mano vacía en su hombro.

—De modo que cuando trabaja es su propia obra —dijo Basil Valentine—. ¿Y cuando añade la firma?

—Déjalo en paz, maldita sea, Valentine, no…

—Sí, cuando añado la firma —dijo, inclinando de nuevo la cabeza—, eso lo cambia todo, cuando pongo la firma y… lo pierdo.

—Entonces penetra la corrupción, ¿no es eso, mi querido amigo? —Basil Valentine se levantó sonriendo. Encendió un cigarrillo—. Eso es lo único por lo que pueden procesarle, ya sabe, si le atrapan. Por falsificar la firma. A la ley le importa un comino el cuadro. Dios no los vigila.

Puso una mano sobre el otro hombro, la mano del anillo de sello de oro, y sus ojos se encontraron con los de Recktall Brown. Su azul líquido pareció helarse y penetrar en los charcos descentrados tras las gruesas gafas, y sumergirse allí mientras Recktall Brown decía:

—Suéltalo.

Se quedaron así unos segundos, cualquiera de los cuales hubiera podido contener el instante en que uno de ellos lo apartaría del otro de un tirón; hasta que él mismo retrocedió un paso y dijo:

—Lo sé. Lo sé.

Entonces Basil Valentine se encogió de hombros, y salvó lentamente los pocos pasos que lo separaban de su sillón.

—Le preocupa enormemente su propia originalidad, ¿no? —dijo vuelto hacia ellos, detrás del sillón.

—¡Originalidad! No, no, yo…

—Vamos, mi querido amigo, le preocupa. Pero en realidad debería olvidarla, o rendirse a ella y disfrutarla. Todo el mundo lo hace hoy día. Brown está siempre ocupado en pleitos por plagio, ¿verdad, Brown? ¿Lo ve? Lo da por supuesto. Está rodeado de gente sin talento, todos lo estamos. La originalidad es un recurso que la gente sin talento utiliza para impresionar a otra gente sin talento, y para protegerse de la gente con talento…

—Valentine, es la última vez…

—La gente más original se ve obligada a dedicar todo su tiempo a plagiar. Su único problema es que si tienen una chispa de ingenio o sabiduría no se la reconocen. La maldición de la inteligencia. Espera, Brown. Detente. Quédate donde estás y relájate un momento. Todavía tenemos que aclarar un asunto. Necesita hablar o reventará, ¿no es eso lo que me decías antes de que llegara? Bueno, pues déjalo hablar, ya ha dicho cosas muy interesantes. Pero no lo dejes hablar solo, eso es lo único que ha estado haciendo, es lo único que hace cuando te habla y no lo escuchas, sabe que no lo haces. Déjalo hablar, pues, pero escúchalo. Puede que no diga nada inteligente, pero más vale así. La mayoría de la gente es inteligente porque no sabe cómo ser honrada. —Hizo una pausa—. Vamos, mi querido amigo, si no dice nada no podré utilizarle en esa novela, en la que Brown figura de un modo tan monumental debido a que todo el mundo cree que es honrado porque no sabe cómo ser inteligente.

Recktall Brown había echado a andar hacia él; pero cuando Valentine levantó la voz, Brown se detuvo junto a la jarra de martinis y se lo quedó mirando atentamente. En la sien de Valentine se destacaba una vena, y levantó una mano para palparla con la punta de los dedos, un gesto impulsivo, como si alguna vez lo hubiera hecho para suprimirla. Se tocó aquel sitio, y su mano se deslizó hacia la nuca, donde alisó las largas puntas de su pelo.

—Sí, figurará de un modo monumental —prosiguió Valentine—. Ese retrato de ahí —dijo, señalándolo

con un gesto rápido de la mano—, ¿sabe por qué lo conserva? Para humanizarlo, como siempre hace la evidencia de la juventud, por monstruosa que sea.

Basil Valentine se los quedó mirando. Como ninguno de los dos dijo nada, se enderezó y cruzó la habitación, mirándose los pies, hasta el púlpito bajo, donde se volvió y se apoyó, tamborileando con sus largos dedos contra las hojas de roble talladas.

—«Otro día azul», ¿eh? —dijo, mirando más allá de Brown, a los ojos febriles clavados en él—. «Otro día azul» —repitió. Y luego—: Brown me ha dicho que usted tiene otra personalidad. Oh, no se ofenda, no es nada raro, sabe, en absoluto raro. Bueno, basta Brown tiene una. Por eso bebe en exceso de vez en cuando, tratando de pillarla por sorpresa y agarrarla. Recuerde lo que le digo, algún día se acercará demasiado, y ella se volverá y le romperá el cuello. —Cogió la botella de whisky—. ¿Ha oído hablar a Brown de los retratos que vende? Retratos decimonónicos de hombres rubios con fuertes mandíbulas, que vende por diez veces su valor, según me cuenta, a judíos precarios que quieren bonitos antepasados —dijo, sirviéndose whisky en un vaso. Volvió a apoyarse contra el púlpito, levantó un pie y lo balanceó levemente, mientras las botellas tintineaban con el sonido de campanillas lejanas—. Con la misma intención, ¿sabe? Y se lo creen, cuando el retrato lleva colgado suficiente tiempo, antepasado común de sus vulgares personalidades que todos los demás conocen, y esa otra… personalidad más hermosa que… puede hacer más que ellos —terminó, haciendo girar el whisky en el fondo del vaso.

En medio de la alfombra de Aubusson se lamía la perra. Era el único sonido. Luego Basil Valentine dejó el vaso de whisky y lo abandonó allí.

—¿Dónde la guardas, Brown? —preguntó mirándolos, paseando la vista por las paredes, alzándola hacia la galería.

Recktall Brown volvió a su sillón. Levantó la vista hacia el hombre al que ya no separaba con su mole de Basil Valentine.

—Siéntate, hijo mío —dijo, y luego, secamente, a Valentine—. ¿Adónde vas?

—Voy simplemente a lavarme las manos, si nadie tiene nada que objetar.

Recktall Brown sacó un puro. Lo desenvolvió, le cortó la punta con su cortaplumas, se lo embutió entre sus dientes desiguales y lo encendió. Sacudió la cerilla en el aire y la tiró hacia el cenicero. Cayó en la alfombra, y quedó humeando sobre una rosa.

—Cuando la mayoría de la gente pregunta dónde está el baño, en realidad quieren decir que desean ir al retrete. Él sólo entra ahí a lavarse las manos. Siéntate, hijo mío. Acabaremos en unos minutos. —Recktall Brown llenó de humo el aire ante sí—. ¿Qué pasa? —preguntó mientras el humo se elevaba, al ver que la figura que tenía delante seguía sin moverse ni alterarse.

—Oh, me… no sé —dijo, bajando la vista hacia Brown y recuperándose en apariencia—. Supongo que me ha sorprendido que lo dejara largar de ese modo.

—Nunca interrumpas a alguien cuando está diciéndote más de lo que cree, por mucho que te cabree.

—¿Diciéndote?

—Sobre sí mismo, hijo mío. —Recktall Brown dio una fuerte calada del puro, y el humo brotó entre los dientes descoloridos mientras hablaba—. Nunca hago negocios con nadie hasta que no lo he hecho investigar, nunca firmo nada hasta que no he leído el informe de una buena agencia de detectives privados. Sé un montón de cosas de Basil Valentine. Sé lo de los jesuitas, sé lo que pasó allí, y sé lo que pasa ahora, sé cómo es su vida privada. Ten cuidado con él…

—Es… ¿estudió para el sacerdocio?

—Todavía no ha salido de ahí.

—Pero ¿y a mí? ¿También a mí? ¿Hizo que… hizo que unos detectives… investigaran sobre mí?

—Claro que lo hice, hijo mío. Todo está en regla, todo está en regla. Contigo no hay problema, pero limítate a seguir por donde vas —dijo Brown, dejando caer su pesada manaza sobre la muñeca que tenía delante—, no dejes que nadie te estorbe, y ten cuidado, ten mucho cuidado con ese maricón.

—Es curioso, entonces usted… los dos estudiamos…

—¿Qué estáis tramando los dos? —oyeron a sus espaldas—. Querido, ahí sentados sin más, haciendo manitas. Creía que teníamos pendientes asuntos terriblemente urgentes. —Basil Valentine se acercó frotándose las manos. Dio una patada a la reproducción arrugada, que estaba en el suelo, y se detuvo a alisarla con la estrecha punta de su zapato negro—. Aceite de lavanda, ¿eh? —dijo mirándola—. *Mansit odor, posses scire fuisse deam* —dijo apartándola de un puntapié—. ¿Recordarás sin duda a Ovidio, mi querido Brown? —Se tocó la sien lisa y sonrió mientras se sentaba—. «Quedaba en el aire un olor, se adivinaba que había aparecido una diosa». —Apartó los ojos de Brown y miró hacia el otro lado de la mesa —. Pero ¿por qué me mira de ese modo? Vamos, tenemos trabajo. Hubert van Eyck…

—¿Por qué iba a valer un cuarto de millón? —lo interrumpió Brown.

—Estaba a punto de decírtelo: porque nunca existió.

—Pero sí, sí que existió —se oyó bruscamente al otro lado de la mesa.

—De acuerdo, mi querido amigo…

—Sí, sí, claro que existió, ¿quién… bueno, el retablo de Gante, la *Madonna* Steenken…?

—¿Quién demonios, qué es esto? ¿Quién? Nunca existió pero pintó la ¿qué…? «Sting…».

—De acuerdo, como quiera —siguió Valentine, hablando hacia el otro lado de la mesa, sin hacer ningún caso a Brown—. Al fin y al cabo tendremos que hacerlo como usted quiera, ¿no? Si es que va a aparecer un cuadro suyo.

—Pero existió.

—De acuerdo, existió —volvió a interrumpir Brown, inclinándose hacia adelante—. Eso ya está decidido.

—Todavía no está decidido. Pero lo estará.

—Pero ¿cómo se puede decir que no existió, que Hubert van Eyck no existió?

—Vale ya, maldita sea. Deja de discutir con él, Valentine. Sólo intentas sacarlo de sus casillas.

—¿No lo entendéis? ¿Es que no lo entendéis ninguno de los dos? —Basil Valentine levantó las manos ante sí—. Hay autoridades que siguen insistiendo en que Hubert van Eyck es una leyenda, que nunca existió, que Jan van Eyck no tuvo nunca un hermano mayor. De hecho, yo mismo soy una de ellas, pero esperad. —Extendió la mano abierta para detenerlos—. ¿Es que no lo entendéis? Si aparece un cuadro, un cuadro de Hubert van Eyck firmado y completamente documentado, se demostrará que estaban equivocados. Los otros, los… expertos e historiadores del arte que han estado insistiendo en que hubo un Hubert van Eyck, se abalanzarán sobre este nuevo cuadro. No dudarán de él ni un momento, porque demostrará su punto de vista, y eso es lo único que les importa. Demostrará que tenían razón durante todo este tiempo, y eso es lo único que les importa. La propia pintura les trae sin cuidado, lo único importante es su autoridad. ¿Y los disidentes? —Dejó caer las manos, se recostó en el sillón y sonrió hacia el otro lado de la mesa—. Puede que hasta me hagan cambiar de opinión a mí, ya ve.

Recktall Brown gruñó su asentimiento, y Valentine cogió un cigarrillo y pasó la pitillera abierta al otro lado de la mesa. La cerraron de golpe, y la inscripción gastada reflejó la luz.

—¿Y esto? ¿Qué es esto? ¿Puedo leerlo?

—Si puede… —dijo Valentine.

—Sí, es difícil… *Varé tava soskei me puchelas… cai soskei avilara catári*… ¿Romaní?

—Bueno, sí, un dialecto húngaro. —La cara de Valentine mostró casi sorpresa mientras recuperaba la pitillera y se la metía en un bolsillo interior—. ¿Pero no lo entiende? «Pienso mucho en por qué me haces preguntas, y por qué habrías de venir aquí». Un regalo —añadió, se aclaró la garganta, se revolvió en su sillón y siguió hablando como para recuperarse con sus propias palabras—. ¿Van Eyck? ¿Y qué creía que iba a sugerir, otro Jan van Eyck?

—No, pero…

—Sí, otra *Virgen con el Niño y donante*. Podría hacer eso. Pinte a Brown en lugar del canciller Rolin. ¡Precioso! De rodillas en un reclinatorio, ante la Virgen y el Niño. Un monumento piadoso a su cristiana virtud como mecenas del arte. Tendríamos que quitarle las gafas y cortarle el pelo. No te importaría ir por ahí con una tonsura durante una temporada, ¿verdad, Brown? Pero ese anillo… —Su ojo reflejó el doble destello de los diamantes—. Difícilmente podríamos admitir esa ostentosa vanidad…

—¿De qué estás hablando? —preguntó Brown—. Hemos decidido que existe, ese Herbert…

Valentine se encogió de hombros con aire cansado, y siguió hablando con su irritante tono monocorde.

—Sí, supongo que estamos básicamente de acuerdo. Ahora bien, la cuestión es ésta. Hace algún tiempo se descubrió el testamento de un hombre llamado Jean de Visch. Es de dominio público, disponible para fundamentar este… proyecto. El testamento menciona un cuadro de Hubert van Eyck, lo que supuestamente viene a demostrar que ese cuadro se pintó. Otra Virgen de algún tipo. En cualquier caso, es una prueba suficiente para nuestro propósito. Ahora bien, cuando derribaron esa casa de Gante esperaban encontrar alguna obra de Hubert, escondida en algún sitio. No la encontraron. Pero había un trozo de papel. Se consideró una curiosidad, y luego desapareció y se olvidó. Era una carta firmada por Jodoc Vyt, el hombre que encargó el retablo de Gante, en la que encargaba una obra a Hubert van Eyck. Puedo conseguirla por dos mil dólares.

—La puedes conseguir por menos —murmuró Brown.

—Tal vez sí. —Basil Valentine le sonrió—. Nunca me has regateado una comisión, ¿no?

—¿Cómo sé que no está falsificada?

—Tampoco tienes por costumbre dudar de mi palabra. Pero considéralo de este modo: si no es auténtica, ¿por qué habría de existir?

—Y si existe, ¿por qué habría de comprarla?

—Tiendes a simplificar demasiado, ¿no, Brown? Insistes en llevarnos de vuelta a Roma, donde pese a toda su ingeniosa vulgaridad nunca se les ocurrió inventar el chantaje, al menos no hay ninguna palabra que lo designe en la jurisprudencia romana. Dependían tan estrechamente de los griegos, y al parecer los griegos tampoco tenían ninguna palabra para ello. No, han hecho falta nuestras precoces mentes modernas para idear esta delicada relación entre seres humanos. Podrías llamar a esto chantaje a la inversa. Ya ves, si no compras ese trozo de papel lo destruirán.

—¿Y no puede pintar el cuadro sin ese trozo de papel?

—Puede. Claro que puede. Pero acompañado de eso será irreprochable. —Hizo una pausa—. No es algo en lo que se pueda racanear, y tú lo sabes.

—De acuerdo.

—¿Y bien?

Ambos miraron hacia el otro lado de la mesa.

—No es la primera vez que pienso en ello —dijo, contemplando el coñac al que hacía girar en el fondo de su copa—. Una Virgen de Hubert van Eyck.

—Una Anunciación.

—Sí —dijo, sosteniendo la copa en alto—. ¿No es un color exquisito? Jacinto, el color del sexto cielo. Recuerdo una historia que me contó mi padre, sobre el mar celestial. En vez de contarme cuentos, a la hora de acostarme me leía. Las mismas cosas que estaba leyendo él.

—En cuanto a ese cuadro de Herbert… —lo interrumpió Recktall Brown.

—Cuando estuve enfermo, en la cama, me leía la *Otia Imperialia.* El siglo XII, Gervasio de Tilbury, cuando la gente podía creer que nuestra atmósfera era un mar celestial, un mar para la gente que vivía encima de ella. Era una historia sobre unos que salían de la iglesia y veían un ancla colgada de una cuerda que bajaba del cielo. El ancla se enganchaba en las lápidas del cementerio, y entonces veían a un hombre que bajaba por la cuerda a soltarla. Pero cuando llegó a la tierra se acercaron a él y estaba muerto… —Apartó la mirada de la copa y la alzó hacia ellos—. Muerto como si se hubiera ahogado.

—De acuerdo, hijo mío, ¿hay algo más? ¿Algo que necesites para empezar con esto? Hace un par de meses tuve que comprarle una batidora de huevos jodidamente cara —dijo Brown, volviéndose hacia Basil Valentine, que se levantó diciendo—: «Tengo algunas fotografías, detalles ampliados de las pinceladas, ya sabe. Las figuras en primer término del retablo de Gante, la *Madonna* Steenken…».

—O imaginar el cielo y la tierra unidos por un árbol —siguió, mientras Valentine se inclinaba para coger el libro que había dejado ante sí hacía un rato—. El cielo es un tejado, con ventanas para que pase la lluvia. La gente vive allí arriba, ¿entienden? Y si subes lo bastante alto puedes visitarlos. Son iguales que tú —dijo volviéndose hacia Recktall Brown.

—Y un cuerno van a ser —dijo Brown poniéndose en pie—. ¿Quieres hablar más de ese cuadro de Herbert que vas a hacer o…?

—Pero si estoy hablando de él —dijo—. Estoy hablando. —Miró del uno al otro, de Recktall Brown a Basil Valentine, en pie ante él—. Alguien, ¿quién era?, decía que quizá intentan pescarnos…

—Vamos, mi querido amigo. Voy al centro, le dejaré de camino.

—O los siete cielos de los árabes —dijo con decisión, dibujando un hemisferio con una mano, que temblaba mientras la sostenía extendida—. Esmeralda, plata blanca, perlas blancas, luego rubí, luego oro, oro rojo, y luego jacinto amarillo, y el séptimo de luz radiante…

Recktall Brown se quedó mirando su puro. Se había consumido desigualmente.

—Mirad esta mierda —murmuró—. Así hacen hoy los cigarros. Así lo hacen todo hoy —dijo, y lo arrojó a la chimenea—. Todo el mundo menos él —añadió, y, acercándose, le puso una mano en el hombro mientras se levantaba.

—Ese jarrón —dijo él, señalando hacia una vitrina.

—Eso no es una falsificación, es auténtico. Antigua cerámica holandesa.

—¿Puedo llevármelo? Para tenerlo una o dos semanas.

—Para qué lo necesitas, vale un ojo de la cara —dijo Brown.

—Azucenas…

—Azucenas, aquí también son muy caras —siguió Brown, llevándolo lentamente hacia la puerta—. Fuller solía traerlas a brazadas, sostenidas con alambres. No me gustan, me revuelven el estómago. Le dije que lo dejara. A nadie le gustan mucho las azucenas, ¿por qué no utilizas otra clase de flores?

—En una Anunciación…

La perra los seguía a un lado, Basil Valentine al otro.

—Esos marquitos de roble que conseguí, te los enseñaré la próxima vez, los que tienen terciopelo por dentro.

Basil Valentine le tendió el libro que había cogido de la mesa ante la chimenea.

—¿Su Thoreau?

—Ah… ah, sí, me…

—Una lectura no muy apropiada para el siglo XV. Aunque me temo que yo estoy igual de lejos en sentido contrario. —Valentine cogió el libro que estaba junto a su abrigo—. Mi querido Tertuliano —murmuró—. Y supongo que esta Nochebuena harás tu vulgar reunión de costumbre, ¿no, Brown?

—Hago más negocios en esas reuniones que en un mes de oficina. Ese cuadro con el que estás ahora —siguió, volviéndose—, en cuanto lo termines llámame, lo mandaré a buscar. Y ten cuidado con ese jarrón. Va a ser una subasta condenadamente buena —dijo a Valentine—. ¿Recuerdas aquel sofá reina Ana que tenía arriba? Había suficiente taracea en perfecto estado para hacer dos sofás y dos sillas, con parte del original en cada uno. Si algún tío listo dice que es una falsificación, se le enseña la pieza original.

—Algo así como Osiris —dijo Basil Valentine, poniéndose el abrigo.

—¿Qué es eso?

—Cortaron a Osiris en catorce trozos, y luego Isis modeló su cuerpo catorce veces, con un trozo original en cada figura.

—¿Como un santo?

Basil Valentine sonrió, tirándose de las solapas para subirse el abrigo.

—Precisamente, mi querido amigo.

Recktall Brown se había sacado del bolsillo un estuche de piel de cerdo.

—Objetos de vidrio —musitó—, para esa subasta. He conseguido unos vidrios preciosos, los he tenido en un montón de estiércol en el campo, es lo que les da ese brillo tan bonito, colores como los que se ven en las burbujas, como los que tiene el vidrio viejo. Un espagueti me enseñó ese truco.

—Italia irredenta. —Basil Valentine descolgó su sombrero—. Esa fina mano italiana —dijo cansadamente— que nos ha enseñado a hacer antigüedades infligiendo todos los ultrajes y ofensas posibles a objetos bellos.

Se dirigió hacia la puerta de la casa. Brown volvió a meterse el estuche en el bolsillo.

—Oye, ten cuidado con ese jarrón —murmuró—. Y no olvides lo que te he dicho. —Señaló con la cabeza hacia adelante—. Ten cuidado con él.

—Me… me gustaría que no hubiera dicho eso —dijo, mientras Brown le ponía en el hombro la mano de los diamantes—. Sobre ella.

—¿Sobre quién?

—Ella. Esme.

—Vamos, hijo mío. ¿Te parece una buena modelo?

—Sí, sí, se… bueno, se puede pasar tres horas sentada sin moverse.

—Pero no pongas señales de agujas en el brazo de tu Anunciación.

—Pero usted…

—Es un bomboncito, hijo mío, eso también lo sé. Pero no dejes que interfiera en tu trabajo. No dejes que nada interfiera en eso. Toma, no te olvides los huevos.

—Dice que es porque no tiene estómago —dijo sonriendo.

—¿Quién?

—Esme. Dice que por eso es buena modelo, porque no tiene estómago.

Recktall Brown se quedó en el vestíbulo, dando golpecitos en el suelo con el pie, hasta que se cerró la puerta de la casa. Luego se volvió y regresó a la inmensa habitación de la que acababan de salir. La perra lo vio venir, y se levantó cuando se acercaba, moviendo lentamente el muñón de su rabo; pero él se detuvo antes de llegar a su altura, y ella se sentó. En medio de la habitación, Recktall Brown sacó un puro y miró a su alrededor. Miró el vasto tapiz de lana colgado en la pared a su derecha, pero todos sus ojos miraban más allá de él, en la otra dirección. Miró la mesa de refectorio, cubierta de libros y publicaciones ya despachados, donde nada se movía. Luego se volvió bruscamente, como si alguien que hubiera estado con él en la habitación hubiera salido en el instante en que volvía su ancha espalda; pero su retrato de juventud seguía allí colgado, tan silencioso como todo lo demás. Levantó la cabeza y miró hacia la galería, donde vio la parte trasera de un arca de palo de rosa, y la erguida armadura, pacientemente a la espera de la hazaña que llevaba siglos esperando acometer.

—¡Fuller! —gritó.

Luego se volvió hacia la chimenea, y se embutió el puro entre los dientes desiguales que habían enmarcado su grito. Miró la inscripción en latín que había sobre la chimenea, y cortó de un mordisco la punta del puro. A sus pies estaba la reproducción arrugada de la *Gaceta del Coleccionista.* Reparó en ella, como reparaba en todo lo que alteraba el dibujo de las rosas de Aubusson, e inclinándose con cierto esfuerzo la recogió. En cuatro pasos llegó a uno de los sillones de cuero, en cuyo brazo se sentó y levantó la pierna lo suficiente para poner encima el papel arrugado. El puro sin encender describía movimientos erráticos según lo cambiaba de sitio entre los dientes, mirando fijamente a través de sus gruesas gafas mientras alisaba la foto contra su amplia rodilla y su holgada pernera con un ancho pulgar, que de pronto cambió por el borde de la mano.

Su grito se había elevado hasta la galería y más allá, penetrando en otras habitaciones, y al encontrarlas vacías había perdido fuerza, y se había deslizado por un pasillo para estrellarse contra la pared y rebotar, hecho añicos, hasta la última grieta donde halló refugio, aprehendido, aunque de mala gana, por la conciencia de Fuller. Tras escribir REKTIL BROWN en un trozo de papel y guardarlo en su cajón hacía un rato, Fuller estaba sentado en el borde de su cama, en su habitación sin ventanas, en ropa interior blanca dada de sí, frotando una figura amarillenta (encogida contra la perspectiva de una cruz) con su palma húmeda en la oscuridad.

—No me diga que ha salido sin abrigo.

—Sí, me… debo de habérmelo olvidado.

—O no tiene, ¿no es así?

Caminaban hacia la esquina. Era casi de noche. Basil Valentine iba hablando.

—Había un obispo español del siglo XVIII, llamado Borja, que decía «No hablo francés» cuando se dirigían a él en latín. Me acuerdo de él cada vez que veo a nuestro notable benefactor. Ese retrato, ya sabe. ¿Se ha fijado en las orejas? Qué erectas y puntiagudas son, tan prominentes. Hace años intentó que se las arreglaran, acercándoselas a la cabeza. Una operación barata, y ahora va al cirujano plástico cada semana, se está allí sentado horas y horas bajo una lámpara verde. Ha perdido el cartílago. Es completamente inútil.

Se calló mientras pasaban dos jóvenes. Uno de ellos iba diciendo: «Un gran logro espectacular…».

—¿Entiende lo que quiero decir? —Valentine detuvo un taxi—. Parece bastante coherente —siguió mientras montaban— que la gente tan aferrada a la realidad tenga generalmente algo físico estropeado.

Con los zapatos negros juntos en el movedizo suelo del taxi, se le acercó y agarró el jarrón.

—Es una falsificación, sabe —dijo sosteniéndolo en alto con las dos manos—. ¿Le sorprende?

—En cierto modo, es… pero es bello.

—¿Bello? —Valentine lo bajó a su regazo—. Sugiere la belleza, quizá. —Al sentir una súbita corriente de aire levantó la vista—. Sí, baje la ventanilla. No tiene muy buen aspecto.

—Sólo… necesitaba que me diera el aire.

—¿Está libre para cenar?

—Bueno, generalmente yo no… ¿no ha quedado con nadie?

—Mi querido amigo, sólo hay un compromiso que no se puede romper, y no pienso contraerlo durante algún tiempo. Así que venga a cenar conmigo a casa y así podrá recoger esos detalles fotográficos.

El taxi paró, arrancó como si fuera a recorrer una milla en un minuto y se detuvo bruscamente veinte yardas más allá, donde el taxista intercambió juramentos crepusculares con el conductor de un autobús. El mar de ruido entraba a raudales, golpeaba los asientos de cuero, invadía a los ocupantes con embestidas de caos, los ruidos del mundo batallando con la noche, sonidos de épocas primordiales, antes de que se descubriera la música en la tierra.

—Su nombre me suena. No consigo acordarme de qué.

—¿De la *Gaceta del Coleccionista? —sugirió* Basil Valentine con aire despreocupado; pero volvió unos ojos penetrantes, inquisitivos.

—No. De algo anterior. Más lejano que eso. Pero se me ha olvidado.

—¿No se referirá al papa del siglo IX? —Valentine se recostó en el asiento, relajado, hablando en un tono cordial—. Hubo uno con ese nombre, pero ¡ay! —dijo, volviéndose para sonreír—, su pontificado apenas duró cuarenta días. —Sacó la pitillera, que se abrió en su mano—. ¿Y bien?

—Brown me ha dicho, sabe, ha mencionado que usted estuvo… que estudió con los jesuitas.

—¡Cielo santo! —Basil Valentine contuvo una carcajada—. Para Brown, eso tiene probablemente las más fantásticas connotaciones, las más espantosas implicaciones. Mi querido amigo…

—Pero ¿lo hizo…, estudió un tiempo para el sacerdocio?

—Por así decirlo. Usted también tiene algo de cura, sabe.

—Muy poco, maldita sea.

—Bastante más que de pintor renegado.

—Es que… ¿son tan distintos?

—Mi querido amigo, el sacerdote es el guardián de los misterios. El artista está obligado a desvelarlos.

—Una semejanza fatal, pues.

—Una disensión fatal, y una atracción fatal. Dígame, ¿le paga bien Brown?

—¿Si me paga? Supongo. El dinero se amontona allí.

—¿Por qué?

—¿El dinero? Eso… ratifica el contrato. Es lo único que entiende.

Los claros ojos de un azul diluido ya no destellaban con fingido placer, sino que brillaban de modo uniforme, como agua rápidamente helada. Valentine llevaba agarrado a Tertuliano en su estrecho regazo.

—No le cae mal, ¿verdad?

—No.

—No. En realidad le cae bien. ¿Y ese contrato?

—¿El contrato? Sí, una deuda… es imposible saldar una deuda cuando tu acreedor se niega a reconocerla.

—¿Y el dinero…? —Valentine estudiaba atentamente los rasgos de la cara que tenía al lado, detalles súbitamente alterados por un sonido constreñido como la risa:

—¿El dinero? No… puedes gastar el amor.

El taxi se había detenido en un semáforo y la gente pasaba a su alrededor; se oyó la voz de una chica con claro acento bostoniano: «¿Somerset Maugham? Jaja, jajajajaja, Somerset Maugham, y una mierda…».

—El dinero compra la intimidad, mi querido amigo —dijo Basil Valentine, inclinándose sobre él para subir la ventanilla—. Lo libera a uno de ese torbellino de circunstancias que el vulgo confunde con la necesidad. Y la necesidad, después de todo… ¿De qué se ríe?

—De algo de antes, algo en lo que pensé antes, pero entonces no me reí, cuando lo pensé, cuando usted estaba hablando de ¿una novela? De escribir una novela. «No sabemos lo que está pensando», dijo. Entonces me acordé de Momo y Vulcano, y me acordé de mi mujer. ¿Recuerda el homúnculo que hizo Vulcano?, y Momo dijo: «Deberías haberle puesto una ventanita, para que pudiéramos ver sus pensamientos más secretos». Y me acordé… escuche.

—¿Está casado?

—¿Qué pasa? En esa novela.

—¿Qué pasa? —Basil Valentine volvió la cara entera.

—Qué me pasa a mí.

El taxi se detuvo con una sacudida.

—¿Cómo, a usted? Cielo santo, no tengo la más mínima idea. —Valentine soltó una breve carcajada, mirando de nuevo al frente—. Estaba diciendo que la necesidad… pero, dígame, cuando era niño…

—La necesidad, sí. Sí, ¿un héroe? John Huss…

—¿Huss? Hoy día parece difícil, ¿eh? ¿John Huss? Sabe, alguien ha dicho que quien acepta hoy día el papel de mártir es un cobarde. ¿Y usted? ¿Qué le pasa a usted? —siguió apresuradamente—. Supongo que… bueno, digamos que se come a su padre, canoniza a su madre y… ¿qué le pasa a la gente en las novelas? Yo no las leo. Se ahoga, supongo.

—Eso es demasiado romántico.

—Las novelas son románticas.

—Como si la muerte acabara con todo, ¿no?

—Como quiera, entonces hay algo después de la muerte. —Valentine se recostó y se agarró la rodilla con las manos cruzadas—. Al fin y al cabo, mi querido amigo, usted es un artista, y no le puede ocurrir nada. Un artista no existe, salvo como vehículo de su trabajo. ¿Acaso no vive usted únicamente en un mundo de formas y olores? Pues está abocado a convertirse sólo en eso. Vamos, su vida, la forma en que vive…

—Sí, yo no vivo, soy… soy vivido —susurró.

Al volverse, Valentine lo vio agarrándose la cara con una mano abierta, cuyos dedos se había vuelto blancos por las puntas en la sien.

—Pero ¿sabe cómo me siento a veces? —Dejó caer la mano para agarrar el brazo de Valentine, y Valentine levantó la vista hacia sus ojos febriles—. Como si… como si estuviera leyendo una novela, sí. Y sigo leyéndola, pero el héroe no termina de aparecer, no termina de elaborar un plan de comedia o

¿desastre? Todos los materiales están ahí, sí. Los sonidos, las imágenes, teléfonos y números de teléfonos, ¿no? Los barcos y los metros, los… los…

—¿Las personas medio conocidas —lo interrumpió con soltura Valentine—, que pierden el metro y extravían los números de teléfonos de los otros? Que retozan de acá para allá vestidos con los absurdos disfraces de la caótica imaginación del autor, hablando unos de otros…

—Sí, mientras yo espero. Espero. ¿Dónde está? Escuche, está ahí todo el tiempo. Ninguno de ellos se mueve sin reflejarlo, ninguno de ellos… reacciona, sino para reaccionar con él, ninguno de ellos odia sino para odiar con él, para odiarlo, y amando… ninguno de ellos ama, sino amando…

—¿Amando?

El taxi dio un viraje repentino. Basil Valentine se vio arrojado contra la ventanilla de su lado, donde se golpeó con el codo. El hombre que habían estado a punto de atropellar había parecido suspendido en el aire ante ellos, la cara vacía con una terrible expresión de desnudez.

—*¡Idiota!*

La cara de Basil Valentine mostraba de perfil la vena prominente latiendo bajo el ala del sombrero, una cara firme, incompasiva, cargada con toda la fuerza que le falta a la compasión, con facciones (en sombra ahora bajo el ala negra de su flexible) que desmentían la infancia y la juventud.

—Idiota —repitió, recostándose en el asiento, sin reparar en la mirada febril clavada en él.

Entonces el taxista le espetó por encima del hombro:

—Intenta conducir un taxi, hombre, si crees que es tan jodíamente fácil.

Basil Valentine se inclinó hacia adelante. Estaba lívido, pero controló la voz.

—No tengo la menor intención de perder un instante en plantearme un pasatiempo tan absurdo. Ahora vuélvase y ahórreme sus obscenidades antes de que atropelle a alguien tan estúpido como usted.

—Oye, hombre, no me vengas con ésas, quién demonios te crees que eres, éste es un jodio país libre…

—Pare aquí, conductor.

El taxi paró en seco. Basil Valentine miró el jarrón, los huevos, los libros, y escogió los libros para que le viesen llevándolos por la calle. Leyó el taxímetro mientras se apeaban, y estaba hurgándose en el bolsillo en busca del dinero cuando el taxi arrancó con un rugido.

—Pero usted… usted odia realmente a la gente, ¿no? —oyó una voz a su lado.

—¿Ve? —dijo Valentine, sin escucharlo. Sacó su pitillera—. Cuando exclamé «Idiota» me refería por supuesto al… idiota al que casi atropellamos. ¿Ve? Todos son iguales, los que preparan sus propios desastres tan hábilmente, de acuerdo con las partes más profundas de su ignorante naturaleza, y luego los llaman accidentes.

Se quedó mirando el taxi que se alejaba, con una cerilla encendida bajo su cigarrillo.

—Pero… realmente odia a los demás.

—Mi querido amigo, recuerde el consejo de Emerson —dijo Basil Valentine, y se detuvo. Se oyó un topetazo en la esquina. Desde donde estaban pudieron ver que el taxi había chocado contra un autobús—. Nos aconseja que tratemos a los demás como si fueran reales —dijo entonces, encendiendo el cigarrillo—, porque quizá lo sean.

—Yo… tengo que irme.

—Entonces, ¿no vamos a cenar?

—No, yo… tengo que ponerme a trabajar, yo… es tarde.

—Claro, mi querido amigo, lo entiendo muy bien. Y los detalles de Van Eyck, ¿puedo llevárselos a su casa algún día?

—Oh, no, no, no venga allá abajo, no se moleste, yo… adiós, adiós…

—Adiós, no —dijo Basil Valentine, tendiendo la mano—. La gente ya no dice adiós. Levantas la vista y se han ido, desaparecen. Te enteras de que están en un país con exóticos sellos de correos, o de que han muerto en el mar. Le veré muy pronto.

Sonrió, y retuvo la mano en la suya como si fuera un animal que fuera a asfixiar.

Un minuto después, en otro taxi, Basil Valentine encontró dos libros en su regazo, en vez de uno. Cogió el ejemplar de Thoreau y miró por el parabrisas trasero; pero allí, a casi una manzana de distancia, la gente se mezclaba viniendo de todas partes, y lo único que pudo ver en el punto donde se habían separado fue las corolas de unas azucenas en lo alto de un carro de flores, parado bajo el resplandor de neón de un bar.

Volvió a mirar hacia adelante y se puso a hojear el libro, y el oro brillaba en su puño cuando se detenía aquí y allá a leer una frase. El taxi había girado hacia el este. Cuando paró en una esquina, asomó a sus labios la sonrisa de un gran placer privado, y miró por la ventanilla cerrada. La gente que pasaba, pasaba rápida y silenciosamente, dejando tras de sí una figura apenas más alta que el organillo montado en un palo

cuyo manubrio hacía girar él, su único movimiento, el de la mano, en el sentido de las agujas del reloj, apenas más duradero que los sonidos que lanzaba al aire nocturno, sonidos sin la vanidad de la música, sonidos sueltos, chillidos y jadeos forzados, patetismo en clave menor y luego el alarido ensimismado de la soledad, como el aullido del viento en la chimenea que queda en pie entre los escombros de una casa quemada y arrasada.

Cuando el taxi arrancó de nuevo, volvió los ojos a las palabras subrayadas en la página que tenía delante: «Lo que buscas en vano durante media vida lo encuentras un día de golpe, cenando con toda la familia. Lo buscas como un sueño, y nada más encontrarlo te conviertes en su presa». Y aún seguía mirando estas líneas, y aún seguía sonriendo, cuando el taxi se detuvo en la puerta de su casa.

—¿Siete azucenas?

Siete fábricas celestiales, siete esferas, los colores de los siete cuerpos planetarios: todo esto girando en lo alto del carro de flores. Pero encima del séptimo cielo, según nos han contado, hay siete mares de luz, y luego los velos que separan las Esencias, siete de cada clase, y luego el Paraíso: siete pisos, uno encima del otro, coronados por el Trono del Compasivo, discretamente alejado del tumulto que bulle aquí abajo, en segundo término. Cambiaron los semáforos, avanzó el tráfico, y olas de figuras crestadas con caras mudamente impávidas, o manchadas con la espuma de la confusión, o quebrando sus superficies con el habla, fluyeron y refluyeron sobre un mar de ruido, desdeñando la música de las esferas.

El momento de pérdida vespertina viene sugerido por fragmentos restringidos del cielo que sólo sugieren infinitud, y esa intimidad es posible cuando algo se eleva desde dentro, para quedar prendido de los pináculos o seguir elevándose sin trabas: un momento desesperado para los que no tienen ningún sitio adonde ir, los que pierden el equilibrio cuando levantan la vista, dirigiéndose a todas partes, invitados a ninguna, sin disfrutar de la bebida ni de aquellos con quienes beben sino repentinamente desolados, mirando hacia arriba, bajando a solas de la acera para buscar en cualquier parte (pues han olvidado concertar una cita para un «cóctel», refugio de cristal, palabras quebradizas, aceitunas de allende el mar y cromo) un lugar donde poder eludir esta transición del día a la noche: una hora grotesca de soledad, pues lo que se ha buscado es casi visible, y quizá sólo hace falta un sacerdote para sacarlo a la luz. Restringido sobre las siete azucenas, el cielo sólo extiende un fragmento como el que podía haber trazado con su vara el sacerdote etrusco cuando, al construir el templo, dibujaba en el cielo el contorno de los cimientos que tenía a sus pies, confiando a la tierra la residencia de la deidad.

Siete días, siete sellos, siete novillos en ofrenda incinerada; siete veces se inclinó Jacob ante Esaú; siete estrellas los ángeles de las siete iglesias, siete lámparas que son los siete espíritus, siete estrellas en su mano derecha; siete años en el Edén, y siete veces siete años hasta la trompeta del jubileo; siete años de abundancia, siete años de escasez; así, Nabucodonosor mandó calentar el horno siete veces más de lo que calentarse solía, para castigar a los tres que se negaban a inclinarse ante la estatua de oro de sesenta codos de altura (contando desde la punta del cordial) y seis de ancho; y cuando salieron ilesos y sin chamuscar, el rey exclamó: «Bendito sea el Dios de Shadrach, Meshach y Abednego», y de modo muy sensato se les unió en su temerosa adhesión a una Hostilidad que no permitía ante Sí ningún otro dios, y que parecía haber vencido en aquella gresca que tuvo lugar no muy lejos de la India, donde todo quedó tan silencioso, que muchos oyeron una voz serena que decía: «Hasta aquellos que adoran a otros dioses me adoran a mí, aunque no lo sepan».

—¿Un sacerdote?

—Te acuerdas de mí.

—Cuidado, amigo. Quítese de en medio —dijo el hombre del carro de flores.

—¿No te acuerdas de mí?

—Espere, me… ¿me puede vender esas azucenas?

—Pues dese prisa, viene un poli. Le dejo las siete por un dólar —dijo el hombre del carro de flores.

—Tu cara, sí, tu cara, pero…

—Vamos, oiga. Hable con su amigo o deme un pavo. Viene un poli —lo interrumpió el hombre del carro de flores.

—Conozco tu cara, pero el cuello redondo…

—Pues yo te he reconocido a media manzana de distancia. Pero así, de cerca, no pareces tú en absoluto. Debe de hacer dos años… ¿no?

—¿Dos años?

—Desde que te encontré aquella noche, la noche de fin de año, con tu mujer en la calle —John volvió a

coger su maleta. Era una maleta Gladstone grande, y aparentemente pesada, que había dejado en el suelo para dar la mano, quedando con la palma abierta, extendida, hasta que la retiró cuando la confusión que su gesto había provocado amenazó con un percance entre el tropel de gente que pasaba, la amenaza de huevos rotos, azucenas caídas y un jarrón hecho añicos, que ahora protegía con su corpulenta figura vestida de negro, lastrada por la pesada maleta—. Pero tengo que coger un tren —dijo. Retrocedió medio paso. Entonces su cara se volvió carmesí: durante todo un segundo, sus grandes facciones quedaron inmovilizadas por la sorpresa, oscilando bajo el crudo resplandor de las tres letras de neón que tenía encima. Luego recuperó su medio paso, dejó la maleta dando otro hacia adelante y levantó un brazo para sostenerlo—. ¿Qué te pasa? ¿Estás bien? —Sus ojos cayeron bajo la sombra del ala de su sombrero negro, y quedaron ocultos mientras la parte baja de su cara, con los labios en movimiento, brillaba lívidamente bajo las letras bar refulgiendo en verde—. ¿Estás bien?

—Sí, buenas noches. Buenas noches.

—Pero no puedo dejarte así…

—Tu tren, tu tren.

—Pero ¿qué tienes? Estás temblando. —Las facciones de John no mostraban ahora forma alguna, su cara entera en sombra bajo el ala del flexible negro mientras sus hombros y sus dos brazos extendidos reflejaban de nuevo el resplandor de las letras, y una mano vacía, y luego dos, cuando la figura cargada se desasió de su apoyo—. Pero aquí…

—Buenas noches. Tu tren. Y no puedes entrar ahí. Es un bar.

—¿Un bar? Claro que puedo, te ayudaré.

John cogió la maleta con una mano, y un codo con la otra. Cayó una azucena.

—¡Espera!

—¿Qué pasa?

—La azucena.

—Yo la cojo. Vamos, entra… cuidado con la puerta.

En el rincón penumbroso del bar, las sombras se retorcían bajo la efervescente iluminación de la *jukebox,* que además estaba tocando «Hagámoslo». John se aclaró la garganta y habló con un tono esforzadamente jovial:

—Qué haces con unas azucenas y… ¿son huevos?

—Sí, un poco de coñac.

—¿Demasiado trabajo? Toma. ¿Te sientes mejor? Aprende la lección de los lirios. —John sonrió, y extendió una mano—. No trabajan… —La muñeca apoyada en la barra se apartó bruscamente de él—. ¿Estás bien? —volvió a preguntar, buscando alguna señal en el perfil de la cara que le rehuía, y no encontró ninguna, y miró también al frente. Sus ojos se elevaron hacia el espejo que había tras la barra, donde una mirada febril los apresó durante un instante.

—Eh, chicos, alguno de vosotros… perdone, padre, ¿ha pedido alguno de ustedes una conferencia con Miami? —se interpuso el camarero entre ellos y el espejo.

John negó con la cabeza, y cuando el bulto del camarero se apartó, vio el reflejo de su cara bañada de juventud en la cercanía de aquella otra que parecía doblarle en edad.

—Cuando hablé con tu padre… —empezó.

—¡Mi padre!

—Sí. Mencioné que te había visto, no dije…

—¿Has visto a mi padre?

—Pues sí, en un viaje. Por asuntos de la Iglesia, tuve que detenerme en tu pueblo, y lo vi.

—¿Qué dijo?

—¿Qué dijo? Bueno… —repitió John—. No dijo… hablamos de asuntos de la Iglesia, y de poco más.

Volvió a sonreír, pero se apartó un poco.

—Pero ¿y mi padre?

—Asuntos de la Iglesia —titubeó John, y volvió a aclararse la garganta—. Viajo mucho, ¿sabes?, por parroquias apartadas donde la feligresía ha descendido, es parte del renacimiento del… interés religioso que se extiende por todo el país, que en buena medida es interconfesional…

—Pero ¿y mi padre? ¿Qué dijo?

—Bueno, a decir verdad —empezó John, y volvió a bajar la vista, sujetándose el puño contra el abrigo para apartarlo y mirar la hora—, a decir verdad… es bastante mayor, ¿no? Y no… cooperó mucho. Las necesidades apremiantes de los tiempos…

—Pero ¿qué dijo?

Cuando levantó la vista, la cara de John se sobresaltó más aún al verse descompuesta en el espejo.

—Fue extraño —dijo, y antes de seguir se detuvo ante la resonancia aparentemente desconocida de su propia voz—, llegué allí un domingo, un domingo por la mañana. Pensé: «¿Por qué no entrar a oír el sermón?». Esa es siempre una buena forma de formarse una idea de los problemas de una congregación… algún pastor se puede molestar, pero… Fue extraño. Cuando entré en la iglesia tuve casi la sensación de que la luz del sol se había apagado. Es un hombre grande, pero era su voz. Cuando entré estaba inclinado sobre el púlpito, agarrado a él con las dos manos, y luego miré las caras a mi alrededor… El sermón, su sermón era sobre una primitiva religión australiana, pero ¿sabes?, a decir verdad…

—¿Qué?

John levantó la vista. Sobre la barra, las azucenas amarilleaban por los bordes. Movió levemente los ojos en busca de la imagen que la suya tenía al lado en el espejo, pero sólo encontró una mirada de continencia febril perdida bajo el marco del espejo.

—Recuerdo al dedillo esa… leyenda australiana, el paralelismo que estaba haciendo con… el cristianismo, no puedo quitármelo de la cabeza. —John se había agarrado al borde de la barra, bajando la voz y espaciando las palabras—. «Boyma gran hombre, hombre muy bueno. Él sentado en gran piedra de cristal. Su hijo Grogoragally puede ver todo, ir a todas partes. Ve hombre bueno, como él; ve hombre malo, muy mucho diablo diablo. Gusta hombre bueno; no gusta hombre malo: gruñe muy mucho. Hombre bueno muere, Grogoragally dice Boyma; Boyma dice: “Llévalo camino de Ballima, lugar muy bueno”. Hombre malo muere; Boyma dice: “Llévalo camino de Oorooma, muy mucho calor, él gruñe allí”. Grogoragally muy fuerte, no tan fuerte como Boyma…».

Había varios clientes del bar mirando hacia ellos. Uno se apartó del grupo y se les acercó lentamente, con el cuidado de un navegante. Llevaba delante las manos formando una bitácora temblorosa para lo que le servía de brújula en aquel viaje, un vaso de whisky, peligrosamente sostenido entre los cardanes de sus dedos.

—Fue extraño, era como si pudiera llevar a todo buen protestante allí… camino de Oorooma si quería. Y luego, cuando lo acompañé a casa, apenas quería hablar de ello, apenas quería hablar de ninguna de las cosas que un… hombre con las responsabilidades apremiantes…

—Escuchen, señores —dijo una voz a su lado—. Me ha gustado su sermón.

Era la figura del fondo del bar, un barco realmente desvencijado que ahora se acercaba a la costa buscando un fondeadero.

—Pero… ¿y yo? ¿No preguntó por mí?

—Bueno, a decir verdad… apenas mencioné… dije que te había visto, y preguntó con aire distraído… ese aire distraído que parecía tener siempre, salvo cuando lo vi en la iglesia. Le estaba hablando y al volverme descubrí que se había parado, se había quedado mirando directamente al sol…

—Señores, yo también tengo una religión —dijo la voz—. Soy un borracho. ¿Quieren unirse a mi iglesia?

—Pero tú —dijo John, levantando la mano, y la muñeca apoyada en la barra junto a las azucenas no se apartó a su contacto—, necesitas descansar, ¿no? —Mientras levantaba la mano se le había subido la manga mostrando la esfera de su reloj—. Tengo que darme prisa, pero me gustaría… a decir verdad, al verte en la calle he creído reconocerte y luego he pensado: «No, no puede ser, es un viejo».

—Señores…

—Ahora tengo que darme prisa, tengo que coger ese tren. ¿Estás mejor?

—Señores, yo también tengo una religión…

—Si pudierais venir a vemos, tú y tu mujer, ¿eh? Podríamos hablar como antes, cuando estábamos… porque me he estado preguntando por ti, pensando en ti, deseando que no hubieras cambiado de idea en lo…

—Señores…

—Toma, no te olvides los huevos. ¿Estás mejor ahora?

—¿Quieren unirse a mi Iglesia?

Los escalones del metro descendían bajo la superficie de la tierra, una creación bajo la otra: la tierra sobre el agua; el agua sobre la roca; la roca sobre el lomo del toro; el toro sobre el lecho de arena; la arena sobre el pez; el pez sobre un sofocante viento inmóvil; el viento sobre un valle de oscuridad; la oscuridad sobre una bruma.

¿Y debajo de la bruma? El Gehena, que tiene siete pisos, uno debajo del otro.

—La historia de esa santa, ¿te acuerdas? Esa tan bonita que me contaste. Me contaste tan poco —dijo Esme—, tan poquito… —pasando los dedos por el borde de un estor bajado, de espaldas al sótano. La desnuda bombilla eléctrica en el centro del techo bajo arrojaba su sombra ante ella sobre el estor; movía la mano siguiendo el contorno de aquella forma oscura proyectada allí por la luz—. La santa a la que seguían al convento, pues dejaba a su paso un dulce olor pegado a las losas. El olor de la santidad. Eso es lo que me contaste —dijo volviéndose, de modo que su perfil se hizo casi visible en la sombra—. ¿Qué haces? ¿Qué estás haciendo ahora?

El aire nunca entraba en aquel sótano; pero ahora, detrás de ella, un nuevo olor fresco penetraba el peso de los otros que habían llenado el aire durante tanto tiempo, posándose sobre el denso olor del aceite fijo hervido que salía de lo que parecía un tarro de miel, para afianzar el aroma de lavanda que ahora mismo estaba siendo disipado por algo más fresco y acre.

—Este color —murmuró.

—¿Qué color?

Esme cruzó rápidamente la habitación para mirar en la cacerola donde se calentaba la trementina de Venecia con el cardenillo.

—El verde, el verde que se está formando aquí.

—Es un verde precioso. Un verde precioso de hace mucho tiempo, anterior a nosotros. Y anterior a mi madre, pero no es el azul. Qué tranquilo es para ahora —siguió—. ¿Cómo se llamaba? —Vio cómo apartaba la cacerola del fuego y la dejaba en la mesa que había junto al caballete vacío, cerca de otra pared donde se amontonaban los lienzos, unos sin preparar y otros empezados; tras ellos había dos tablas de roble envejecido, y detrás los espejos—. Y todo lo que tocaba retenía el delicioso olor de santidad días después de que lo hubiera tocado. ¿Cómo se llamaba?

Esme se sentó en un taburete frente a la chimenea, la barbilla en la mano, observándolo. Él casi nunca le hablaba; ahora estaba sentada donde había estado sentada en silencio innumerables veces mientras la estudiaba bajo la intensa luz artificial, no (había explicado una vez) para descubrir lo que había allí, sino para descubrir lo que podía poner y quitar de allí: pues al principio, queriendo esconder la cara, temiendo un atento escrutinio, ella se había comportado como si alguien de fuera pudiera hallar en ella algo de sí misma que no conocía, tan poco preparada estaba para ocultarlo o protegerlo. Pero descubrió que los cuadros que hacía de ella no eran en modo alguno retratos suyos; y ahora seguía sentada, observando cómo movía en silencio los labios, mientras ella movía en silencio los suyos. No eran en modo alguno retratos suyos, «sino que mis huesos y mis sombras son de otra que lleva muerta mucho tiempo, muerta como si nunca hubiera vivido». Esme abandonaba enteramente aquella imagen suya, permitiendo que lo que mostraba fuera en realidad una criatura falsificada: las cosas que llevaba puestas no las habría llevado nunca Esme; ahora, de medio perfil, con un paño de terciopelo azul terciado sobre el hombro y los pechos, y el pelo liso bien estirado, estaba a una distancia segura, su cara inhabitada expuesta con austera perfección para que él la examinase con clínica frialdad, «pero no para descubrirme a mí aquí»; más bien con desinterés académico, con intensidad técnica, «no con los ojos de un amante».

—Santa Catalina de Ricci —dijo en voz alta, pronunciando las palabras de la pauta que habían ensayado sus labios—. Una dominica. Estaba estigmatizada —añadió con un murmullo.

—¿Es-tig-ma-ti-za-da? Santa Catalina de Ricci, una estig-matizada.

Dispersos por la habitación había detalles de cuadros, reproducciones ampliadas de fragmentos de Bouts, Van der Weyden, Van der Goes; y algunas fotografías tan ampliadas que pocos expertos habrían podido adivinar a quién pertenecían aquellos detalles de pinceladas.

—No me has contado de dónde vienen esas viejas flores. No puedes pintarlas. Están casi muertas. Pero me gusta el jarrón que has traído. Es un jarrón muy bonito.

—Puedes… puedes quedártelo —dijo rápidamente—. Sí, cuando haya terminado con él puedes quedártelo si quieres.

Estaba junto al extremo de la mesa que le servía de paleta.

—Y las flores también. ¿Sí, las flores también?

—Entonces estarán muertas.

—Sí, lo estarán. ¿Dónde las has encontrado? ¿Cómo?

—Me las vendió un hombre. Un hombre que tenía prisa por que le dieran un dólar. Viene un policía, me dijo. Viene un poli.

—Entonces, ¿es ilegal vender azucenas? —Esperó. Apartó la vista de ellas para mirarle. Sólo había murmurado al responderle, atareado sobre la mesa. Volvió a mirarlas—. Es la flor de la pu-re-za.

Él se detuvo y alzó la vista.

—Lirios de la India —dijo con claridad—. Grandes hojas acorazonadas con un tallo de catorce pies, y una docena de flores blancas salpicadas de morado…

Se interrumpió y siguió con lo que estaba haciendo.

—¿Por qué fuiste a la India?

—No. No, nunca he ido.

—¿Y los lirios de allí?

—Los recuerdo —dijo sin levantar la vista.

—Lo sé, como yo recuerdo «A mí y a bebé nos cocieron en un pastel». Y a veces intento escribir un poema y no puedo, así que copio algo que recuerdo. Es la misma sensación. Copié el poema sobre «A mí y a bebé nos cocieron en un pastel» ¡y un chico tonto creyó que era un poema mío! —Entonces dijo—: He soñado contigo. —Se detuvo—. Soñé que venías a hacerme una visita. Pero cuando llamabas a la puerta, abría la puerta y no había nadie allí. No había nadie allí.

Él estaba moliendo algo en un mortero. No se detuvo.

—Pero luego volví a soñar contigo. Fue un sueño terrible y te lo voy a contar ahora porque los espejos están tapados. No vuelvas a colgarlos.

—¿Por qué no?

Levantó la vista, pues incluso desde el otro lado de la habitación la sintió estremecerse, y la ruidosa mano de mortero se detuvo.

—Porque tienen una memoria terrible. Estabas ahí, como estás cuando pintas. Estabas con un manto largo de basta tela parda sobre los hombros, sosteniendo un palo que era el largo mango de una pala, y también con la cara sin afeitar, saltando de un espejo a otro que te retenían cada vez que te parabas a fijarlo en el cuadro, la carne tensa sobre los duros huesos, fijando sólo algo perdido y curioso de verse encontrado de nuevo, mirando afuera cuatro veces desde el cuadro, reflejándose en edad y en vacuidad, tan curioso de verse rescatado cada vez que te parabas. Ese espejo grande estaba casi detrás de ti, no dejabas de mirarlo por encima del hombro como siempre haces, persiguiéndote allí, y luego te atrapó, quedaste atrapado en el espejo. Y yo no podía ayudarte a salir. ¿Puede ocurrir eso? ¿Puede ocurrir eso? No podía ayudarte a salir.

Dejó el mortero, con la mano de mortero dentro, y se llevó la mano a un ojo, y se frotó el ojo con el dorso de la mano.

—¿Puede ocurrir eso? —susurró ella.

El caballete, erecto entre ambos, estaba vacío. Miró por encima hacia ella y dijo:

—¿Por qué te has puesto ahora esa… esa cosa azul?

—Para que trabajes —dijo ella—. Para ser la dama del cuadro.

—Pero yo… ya no estoy trabajando en eso. No, ¿no está terminado? ¿No está terminado? —dijo de repente, alzando la voz. Se acercó a la pared, y apartó con el pie dos libros que había en el suelo, para dar la vuelta a la amplia superficie del cuadro—. Sí, sí. Sí lo está, creía que lo estaba. Dios santo, creía que lo estaba. —Lo apartó de la pared y lo dejó en el suelo, apoyado contra el caballete—. Ahora… ahora tengo que trabajar en él. Pero está terminado. —Levantó la vista hacia ella—. No… no me había dado cuenta de que tú… de que tú creías que ibas a posar esta noche. Sí, sí, por eso me sorprendió que vinieses. Cuando viniste pensé que quizá no estuviera terminado.

—¿Entonces ya no voy a volver a ser la dama del cuadro? —La tela azul resbaló de su hombro, arrastrando consigo el tirante de su combinación. Se lo volvió a subir lentamente—. Y entonces tengo que… vestirme como se visten ahora.

—Haz… haz… lo que quieras —dijo, volviéndole la espalda para buscar un cuchillo en la mesa.

—Tocarte el laúd —dijo ella, levantándose de repente—, como dijiste que hacían por él. En el convento adonde llegó intentaban aliviarlo y consolarlo tocando el laúd —dijo dulcemente, de pie a su lado. Él alzó la vista—. Me lo contaste —dijo dulcemente, como para defenderse de los ojos que clavó en ella.

—¿Y sirvió de algo su maldito laúd? ¿Sirvió de algo?

—No, me lo contaste —dijo. Dio tres pasos alejándose de él—. Entonces, ¿no me necesitas?

—No te necesito.

—¿Debo irme?

No contestó.

—¿Debo irme?

Entonces dijo:

—¿Hay alguien allí, esperándote?

—¿Si no hay nadie allí, y no hay nadie aquí?

No dijo nada, sino que se quedó ante el cuadro con un boceto del mismo en una mano, un boceto en el que aparecían señaladas grandes manchas. Ella cogió un libro del suelo.

—Puedo leerte —dijo. Él separó los labios, pero no habló. Dio un golpecito con el pulgar en la hoja del cuchillo. Ella se sentó en el borde de la cama baja, pasando las puntas de los dedos por las líneas de la página. Luego empezó—: «In den alten Zeiten, wo das Wünschen noch geholfen hat, lebte ein König, dessen Töchter waren alle schön, aber die jüngste war so schön, dass die Sonne selber, die doch so vieles gesehen bat, sich verwunderte, so oft sie ihr ins Gesicht schien». —Alzó la vista, sonriendo.

—Pero lo lees de un modo precioso. No… no sabía que supieras.

—Ni yo —dijo ella.

—¿Cuándo aprendiste a leer alemán?

—Ahora mismo —contestó.

—¿No lo entiendes?

—Las palabras, no —contestó—. Es muy bonito.

—Yo aprendí con este libro —dijo, cogiéndoselo, y se quedó mirando la cubierta—. *Die Brüder Grimm*… —Se lo devolvió—. ¿Quieres que te diga lo que significan las palabras?

En respuesta, le sonrió.

—«En los viejos tiempos, cuando aún se cumplían los deseos, vivía un rey cuyas hijas eran todas bellas, pero la menor era tan bella…».

Los labios de Esme seguían su voz desde la página, «aber die jüngste war so schön, dass die Sonne selber…».

—«Que el mismo sol…». —Se inclinó sobre ella, mirando hacia su hombro, y se detuvo—. Espera —dijo —. ¿Tienes… tienes que… no tienes que irte ya?

—No —dijo ella alzando la vista, con los ojos muy abiertos—. Estoy aquí.

—¿Quieres sentarte ahí un minuto? —Señaló hacia el taburete y se acercó a la pared, donde se puso a apartar un lienzo tras otro.

Ella se sentó, con la cabeza vuelta a medias, y su cara se vació de la curiosidad y la viveza que mostraba un momento antes. Si le quedaba algo de vida era una vaga expresión anhelante, pero sin expectación. Lo único que se movía en la habitación eran los ojos de él, y su brazo, retocando con un lápiz la monocromía de la sucia superficie de gesso, deteniéndose, borrando los trazos con el pulgar.

De pronto ella se volvió.

—¿Qué es eso?

—No te muevas. ¿Qué?

—Eso. Estabas trabajando en una tabla de madera y ahora es un lienzo de lona.

—De lino —dijo—. No te muevas. Echa la cabeza hacia atrás. Como la tenías. Como la tenías, maldita sea.

—¿Cuándo?

—Así. Sí, sí —dijo con un ronco susurro.

Se quedó callada, más allá de los rasgos a los que se acomodaba de un modo lo bastante perfecto como para haberlos plasmado allí en un rápido reflejo hecho sin intención, sin saberlo. Pasó un rato. Con cada movimiento de su mano, la forma asumía debajo una realidad que excluía a ambos, que vaciaba de contenido sus palabras si hablaban, o si respiraban, su aliento de ese detalle fugaz del vivir medido hasta un extremo; pero los dejaba aparte, sus movimientos sólo eran afirmaciones de aquella presencia que proyectaba allí en una forma que imponía, en líneas que dictaba y colores que asumía, y en los accidentes de la carne que desdeñaba.

—Súbete el paño —dijo—. Ahí, súbetelo basta ahí. Justo esa parte.

Ella se volvió, con tanta rapidez como una cosa que se deja caer y se rompe. Él tenía los ojos entrecerrados, como si estuviera mirando bajo una luz intensa.

—Una parte cada día —exclamó ella, riendo, pues el brazo había dejado de moverse—. Así es como te lavas cuando no tienes bañera, te lavas una parte cada día, el lunes es para los pies, el martes es el día de las rodillas, el miércoles es el día de los muslos…

Dejó de hablar, y apartó la cara de él con turbación. No había estado mirando su brazo o su hombro, o la línea del hueso en torno a su ojo, no a una sola parte sino a ella.

—¿Y el jueves? —preguntó, sonriendo, desde el otro taburete donde estaba sentado.

Ella se levantó, dejando caer el paño de tela azul al suelo sucio entre ambos. Se acercó y se detuvo ante él. Se quedó así, inclinada sobre él, con una mano apoyada en su hombro, apretándoselo, mientras su pecho breve se vencía hacia él, perdiendo blandamente su forma.

—¡Es mi retrato! ¡Estás pintando mi retrato!

—¿Tú crees? —preguntó en voz baja.

—¿Por qué parece tan viejo? Un retrato mío que parece tan viejo.

—Es un estudio. El próximo cuadro, la próxima… pintura que voy a hacer, esta… pequeña…

—Tú…

—Yo…

Ella le había pasado ambos brazos por los hombros, y la respiración negada por la forma que tenían delante se aceleró. Él se enderezó y se puso en pie, la levantó y se apartó de ella.

—Eso es todo —dijo—. Lo dejaremos por hoy —de modo muy parecido a como lo decía siempre. Quitó el lienzo sucio del caballete—. Tengo que trabajar en esto —dijo, acercándose al gran cuadro terminado que estaba en el suelo casi entre ambos—. ¿Me ayudas a levantarlo?

Se lo quedó mirando, como para detener sus movimientos con la presión de sus ojos.

—¿Esme?

Ella agarró el otro extremo del cuadro, y lo levantaron. Él volvió a coger el cuchillo.

Kinder und Hausmärchen yacía ante ella, uno de la media docena de libros que había en la habitación.

—Qué hermosa es, ya no soy yo —dijo Esme, mirando la figura alargada del cuadro—, porque está muerta.

Sobre el enérgico dibujo y la primera capa de pintura, los translúcidos colores estaban fijados con íntimo detalle sobre las formas establecidas, colores añadidos por separado, sin mezclarlos en la paleta, capa sobre capa, construidos desde dentro a medida que la necesidad disponía aquellas caras vaciadas en ese instante perfecto de la violencia fugaz de la vida.

En torno a los ojos cerrados de la Virgen, donde ahora miraba ella, los toques de luz no eran colores opacos en la superficie, sino surgidos de la primera capa ligera de azul de ultramar.

—La muerte antes de que la muerte fuera difamada —dijo ella—, como la difaman ahora los que mueren a nuestro alrededor, muriendo absurdamente, sin razón, turbados de que el secreto, el sucio secreto guardado durante tanto tiempo, sea revelado, y no pueden evitarlo, no pueden seguir ocultándolo, ni fingir, como han hecho durante toda su vida, que no existe. Sí, el azul, el hermoso azul de Su manto ahí. Qué avergonzados están de abandonarnos, buscando excusas y pidiendo disculpas con el último suspiro, tanta vergüenza nos da morir solos. Qué sobresalto será ver nacer de nuevo el día, lejos de donde están, donde la ley no permite vender azucenas.

Se apartó para ponerse un vestido, y un abrigo, y pisando el paño de tela azul volvió a acercarse a él por detrás, hacia donde estaba parado bajo la intensa luz con el cuchillo, que levantó hacia la cara tendida con los ojos cerrados en la parte superior de la composición.

—Antes de que la muerte fuera deshonrada —dijo ella—, como la estás deshonrando ahora.

Siguió trabajando. Durante unos minutos no se oyó más ruido que el que hacía al raspar su cuchillo. Luego se volvió en redondo, alzando las cejas con leve sorpresa ante la habitación vacía, frunciendo la nariz ante el delicado aroma que había vuelto y perduraba (pues la breve acritud de la trementina de Venecia se había posado y extinguido), tan asertivo de reconocimiento como la vista de la sangre, como la sangre que brotaba a borbotones cada viernes de los estigmas de Francesca de Serrone, una sangre que olía a violetas.

En la puerta, cerrada con llave y cerrojo, había colgado un letrero:

NO
ME MOLESTEN
ESTOY
TRABAJANDO
ESME

. Qué habría podido ocurrir, peor que lo que había ocurrido aquella mañana. Había escondido la aguja, la buena aguja de plata (n.º 22) con la jeringuilla de cristal, en la caja negra de metal que había en la pared sobre el fregadero. ¿A quién se le habría ocurrido mirar allí? A quién, sino a un hombre de uniforme. Entró con una linterna en la mano, pasó de largo a su lado y abrió sin vacilar la caja negra que había en la pared sobre el fregadero. Alumbró con la linterna dentro de la caja, anotó algo en una libreta, y luego sacó la jeringuilla y se la tendió. «No debería meter cosas ahí dentro, señora. Podría estropear el contador». La saludó llevándose la mano a la gorra y se fue.

Ahora estaba sentada con una hoja de papel delante, con la punta del portaplumas en la boca como una niña a quien han mandado escribir una carta a casa, una niña a quien vigilan mientras la escribe, una carta

que leerá su carcelera familiar antes de enviarla a casa. Seguía sobre el papel la ruta de una hormiga, persiguiendo su frenética huida con la punta escrupulosamente cruel de la pluma, dejando tras de sí un trazo negro que cruzó y recruzó la hoja hasta que la hormiga escapó al brazo color de orín de su sillón.

¿Cómo podían estar todos tan seguros al llamarla «Esme»? Sabían que era Esme mientras que ella no sabía quién era ella ni quién Esme, si ambas eran la misma en todo momento, cuando ellos estaban allí, o cuando estaba sola, si ambas eran ella. Pero no podía negar que tenían razón, pues ¿quién haría esa negación?, y si ese *quién* no podía ser *nadie,* debía ser Esme. Ahora pensó en desnudarse, y la idea resultó demasiado insoportable, desnudarse a solas, y quedarse allí desnuda a solas, sin nada que la cubriera, ni siquiera sombras en aquella habitación vacía.

Al pie de la hoja donde se había dibujado el terror de la hormiga escribió: «Una hormiga que no vive en ningún sitio camino de casa».

Peor había sido dos noches antes, cuando alguien le había preguntado su edad y la había dicho: veintinueve. (Así lo hacía, añadiendo un año a aquel lento número cuando llegaba mayo, y pasaba, llevándose otro año consigo). Luego, a solas por la noche, había pensado en el indeleble año de su nacimiento, lo había restado de aquel año cuya cifra compartía con todos, y le habían salido treinta. ¿Un año perdido? Encendió la luz y cubrió tres páginas de números: el año, con su edad al lado; y luego el año y el mes y su edad; luego el año, el mes, su edad y dónde había estado y qué había hecho. Pero seguía faltando un año, pasado por alto. Y cuando apuntó el año del nacimiento de su hija y volvió hacia él desde el pasado y el presente, resultó que *aquél* era el año que faltaba. ¿Acaso no había nacido su hija? ¿De dónde faltaba el año?, ¿de su vida?, ¿o del tiempo? Inexplicado, se convirtió en parte de aquel mundo donde yacía sola, en vela por la noche, con los miembros fríos y los pies casi azules (aunque la habitación no estaba fría) que vio antes de apagar la luz: sin mover nada de su cuerpo (pensando en otras cosas) y luego con brusco horror recordó su cuerpo que no podía sentir, perdida toda conciencia de sus piernas. ¿Estaba una apoyada contra otra?, ¿o separada? El menor movimiento ¿le habría dicho dónde estaban?, se lo habría dicho inmediatamente, si se hubiera movido inmediatamente después de que lo asaltara la duda. Pero como en aquel instante de duda no había torcido un pie, ni retirado una mano, la duda creció, se ahondó y quedó hundida en un terror paralítico, incapaz de ver en la oscuridad si aquellos miembros se habían fundido en una masa amorfa, o en nada; incapaz de encender la luz, sin moverse, después intentaría pensar en otra cosa, y moverse inconscientemente; pero fue incapaz de engañarse de ese modo, incapaz de moverse hasta que una de sus extremidades se movió por sí sola de puro agotamiento.

Esme se quedó mirando una nueva hoja de papel en blanco. Su cara, cada vez más olvidada a medida que el esfuerzo la estremecía, adquirió un aire mohíno: una expresión de miedo, al recordar ahora una escultura de su cabeza y busto que había hecho una vez un estudiante, que no sabía que cuando el yeso se secara encogería la décima parte del tamaño en que lo había modelado, de modo que tensó la cuerda que sostenía el cuello, y cuando se secó encontraron la viva imagen de la muerte en su cabeza pendiente, oscilando levemente con la corriente que entró cuando abrieron la puerta. Se odiaba por el miedo que la atenazó y sofocó en aquel instante, el mismo terror que la asaltaba otras veces cuando, casi dormida, se despertaba de pronto con una profunda inspiración de vida, y con la certeza de que no había estado respirando, de que se había recuperado al inspirar en el último instante posible de vida, y luego odiándose por su inmediato agradecimiento al verse recuperada, ella que nunca quería recuperarse.

Escribió despacio, sin esfuerzo aparente sino como de memoria, con la confiada seguridad con que se escribe poesía:

> ¿Quién, si grito, me oiría entre los órdenes
> angélicos? Y aun si alguno de ellos
> me estrechara de pronto contra su corazón,
> me desvanecería en la fuerza de su existencia
> más fuerte. Pues la Belleza no es más
> que el comienzo del Terror que aún podemos soportar,
> y si tanto la admiramos es porque serenamente
> desdeña destruirnos. Todo ángel…

Entonces sonó en la puerta una llamada, que la hizo encoger bruscamente sus fríos miembros, sobresaltada y temerosa.

Segunda Parte

I

> «Mil accidentes pueden interponer e interpondrán un velo entre nuestra conciencia actual y las inscripciones secretas de la mente; otros accidentes del mismo tipo descorrerán a su vez ese velo; pero velada o no, la inscripción permanece para siempre, como las estrellas que parecen retirarse ante la luz común del día cuando en realidad, según sabemos todos, es la luz la que ha corrido un velo sobre ellas, que esperan para aparecer a que se retire la oscurecedora luz diurna».
>
> THOMAS DE QUINCEY

El señor Pivner salió del edificio de su oficina a la calle. Andaba con precaución, pues no hacía mucho había estado a punto de atropellarlo un taxi. El cielo decembrino estaba gris, y el aire se diluía en lluvia. Sin embargo, hacia el sur se veía un pequeño fragmento de forma casi rectangular y extravagantemente azul. Estaba listado de una arrogante raya púrpura. Se sumergió en la calle sin molestarse en comprobar el color del cielo, exponiendo su cara y el apretado nudo de su corbata a la lluvia que oía tamborilear en el ala de su sombrero. A las tres de la tarde Eddie Zefnic, el botones que en verano comentaba a diario el marchito cuello de la camisa del señor Pivner con el saludo «¿No le molesta el calor, señor Pivner?», se había parado con aire melancólico ante una de las largas ventanas de la oficina. Se quedó mirando la ciudad hasta que el señor Pivner llegó a ese punto crítico de su firma, la «P» mayúscula, que le gustaba hacer con un trazo de gallarda personalidad incluso en hojas de pedidos. En el preciso instante en que la pluma tocaba el papel, «Ahí fuera hace un auténtico día invernal, señor Pivner», lo interrumpió. Levantó la vista, sobresaltado, estropeando irremisiblemente la inicial. En otras partes del mundo, tan irreales como Nueva York, era inevitable, el cielo podía estar cargado de nieve, cellisca, cumulonimbos y nubarrones, u ofrecer el dibujo consolador de un cielo aborregado, o presentarse solo, habitado por el sol en la vastedad de un azul uniforme y tan inmenso como si nunca hubiera existido la oscuridad. Pero cuando el señor Pivner volvió a su firma, el cielo le había quedado claro. Era un gris en descenso pero aún remoto, sin brillo ni conciencia.

Por eso, cuando salió de aquel edificio de oficinas, no tenía ninguna razón para quedarse ociosamente parado bajo la lluvia, mirando a su alrededor y contemplando el cielo. De poco le habría servido si se hubiera molestado en hacerlo. Toneladas de hormigón y otros opacos materiales de construcción se interponían entre él y aquel insolente fragmento azul.

En el retazo de cielo que los edificios permitían ver por encima de él estaban arriando banderas. Durante el día entero habían ondeado todo lo que les había dejado la lluvia, emblemas heráldicos de maravilloso poder, mucho más imponentes que una cruz flamígera, o que las seis bolas de los Médicis. Una gran campana representaba a una compañía telefónica que era omnipotente. Tres relámpagos blancos sobre fondo azul aclamaban a una compañía eléctrica que contaba con la lealtad de una fuerza oficinesca pareja a la población del ducado medieval de Mantua. La escena entera estaba iluminada por la electricidad, que brotaba estáticamente de bulbos incandescentes y, con una fluidez espléndidamente coloreada que añadía una nota de hilaridad metafísica (bergsoniana) al aire de contenida excitación, de tubos de cristal hábilmente retorcidos para deletrear sílabas cacofónicas de palabras de una lengua acuñada, y nombres nacidos en los cafetines de Amberes. Cualquier luz natural que llegara del cielo, pálido de impotencia, era compasivamente desdeñada; pero aquel cielo, como ya se ha indicado, estaba a una distancia segura.

Bajo aquellos lánguidos estandartes, aquellas abatidas enseñas que pendían hacia la tierra bajo su propio peso empapado, el señor Pivner caminaba por las calles con la cabeza cubierta pero inclinada. A su lado pasaban maravillosas construcciones: un camión ennegrecido con hombres y baldes ennegrecidos colgados de todos los salientes, que arrastraba un furgón ventrudo donde ardía un fuego bajo un cubo de asfalto fundido, estuvo a punto de pasarle por encima de los pies. Apenas le echó una ojeada. Los nombres de
ÁYAX
y
HÉRCULES
grabados en oro pasaron retumbando al alcance de su mano, pero el señor Pivner no pareció leerlos. Retrocedió un paso, respetuoso como todas las épocas ante la expedición de los héroes.

Había hecho aquel trayecto, una distancia nunca medida en millas sino en minutos, centenares de veces.

Afortunadamente lo había convertido en un hábito, pues lo recorría sin pensar por un momento adonde iba, dejando su mente vacíamente cordial a los reflejos de vacuidad de las caras que se quedaban mirando la suya con la misma ansiedad desprovista de curiosidad. Si no hubiera repetido aquel trayecto muchas veces, habría podido acabar fácilmente entre los llameantes montones de desperdicios de un cercano basurero municipal, que estaba a una distancia similar pero mucho más fácil de recorrer, y cuya planta central de incineración había ganado un premio de arquitectura funcional hacía sólo diez años.

Por encima y por debajo del suelo se apresuraba hacia el lugar donde vivía. En ninguna parte se desperdiciaba un solo fragmento de tiempo ni de espacio, cada instante y cada centímetro cúbico se abalanzaban en tropel presionando sobre el siguiente con la concentrada actividad de un continente desgastándose contra una isla rocosa, creaba para sí un mundo donde ningún presente existía. Cada minuto y cada pulgada cúbica eran arrojados contra el que los seguiría, medidos en sus mismos términos, dictando un futuro tan inevitable como el pasado, acuñados sobre ocho millones de monedas falsas que se movían con el peso macizo del plomo bañado con la frenética esperanza del azogue, protegiendo a cada paso la preciada falsedad de sus bordes estriados contra la amenaza de dureza de sus vecinas mientras circulaban juntas, caídas de la Mano que temían pero ya no sabían nombrar, sobre la mesa despiadada que se extendía por todas partes a su alrededor, dando tumbos por ella con toda la desesperada variedad de que es capaz la falsificación, desde la perfecta aleación refundida bajo peso hasta la sorda pesadez del plomo, y el terror quebradizo del cristal metalizado.

El metro se detuvo bajo un río. Permaneció allí varios minutos, mientras los viajeros se miraban subrepticiamente entre sí, valorando la compañía con la que estaban atrapados para afrontar el desastre. Uno o dos, que no iban solos, iniciaron explicaciones del parón: «Vías mojadas…», «Ha debido de tirarse alguien…», y dejaron de hablar, azorados por el sonido de su propia voz. Permaneció allí varios minutos, como para recalcar en su conciencia que estaban desprotegidos, que no se les conocía, que no existían individualmente sino sólo como masa, material para titulares. El señor Pivner se quedó mirando un anuncio que, como el noventa por ciento de los anuncios que leía, no tenía aplicación posible en su vida. No tenía ningún sumidero, pero leyó con vidriosa atención: «Mira, querido, encontró mi collar», dicho por una señora del hombre del Servicio de Desatascación Radical, que se ofrecía a dejar «radicalmente limpio ese sumidero atascado… Si fallamos no cobramos…». El metro estuvo allí parado el tiempo suficiente para poner histérica a una mujer (que parecía extranjera, dijeron luego en la mesa mientras cenaban) que se quejaba de que se le estaba hinchando la cabeza y se aflojaba el ceñido cintillo del sombrero, corriendo por el vagón para meter la cabeza en la cara de la gente, ¿es que no veían que se le estaba hinchando? Y la gente se apartaba, avergonzada de aquella articulación de su propio terror. Luego el metro arrancó y penetró velozmente en roca firme.

Al salir a la calle, el señor Pivner vio una multitud que se reunía en la esquina del fondo. Volvió a subirse el cuello del abrigo y se caló el sombrero. Cuando llegó a la multitud miró hacia donde miraban todos, hacia arriba: a un hombre de pie en una cornisa a ocho pisos de altura. Las luces lo enfocaban. Varias figuras se asomaban por las ventanas cercanas. La multitud se agitaba con impaciencia. «¿No sabe que está lloviendo? Me gustaría que lo hiciese de una vez, si es que va a hacerlo», dijo un hombre al señor Pivner. El señor Pivner se quedó mirando sin más. Mientras miraba, el ritmo de la voz de la multitud cobró forma. Salmodiaban: «Salta… salta… salta…», y la figura de arriba se echó hacia atrás. «
SALTA
…
SALTA
…
SALTA
…», salmodiaban. En la ventana más próxima a él apareció un sacerdote. «SALTA… SALTA… SALTA…». La figura retrocedió un poco más hacia el sacerdote. Un joven asomado a la puerta de un coche con una tarjeta de *Prensa* en el parabrisas dijo a su compañero: «El muy hijoputa no va a saltar…».

Dos manzanas más allá, el señor Pivner se detuvo a comprar un periódico. Había alguien discutiendo con el quiosquero, un hombre sin sombrero, que se tambaleaba ligeramente. Se iba ya cuando se volvió a decir: «No empieces a ofender ahora…».

—Hola, Jerry —dijo el señor Pivner, cogiendo su periódico.

—¿No le molesta la humedad? —dijo Jerry.

—¿Qué le pasa a ese tipo? —dijo el señor Pivner.

—¿Ese? Ah, a veces los borrachos se sienten solos. Le trae sin cuidado lo que dice, sabe usted, sólo quiere hablar con alguien.

—Eres todo un filósofo, Jerry —dijo el señor Pivner, y siguió su camino, deteniéndose por inquieto hábito en los bordillos, doblando esquinas, echando ojeadas a los zapatos que pasaban, a las piernas enfundadas en medias y en pantalones. Luego, con la subitaneidad de la ciudad, alguien caminaba a su lado. Sus pasos marcaban con los suyos un contrapunto preciso, una ordenada síncopa de perdición sobre el pavimento mojado. El señor Pivner apretó el paso, ¿por miedo, quizá?, ¿o por repugnancia?, y el hombre siguió caminando, a un lado y justo detrás de él. ¿Podía pararse a encender un cigarrillo?, ¿o a atarse un zapato? Pero la lluvia caía a su alrededor y siguió andando, avivando de nuevo sus pasos mientras los otros les hacían eco muy de cerca. Al doblar la esquina de su calle miró hacia atrás. El otro siguió su camino, con el sombrero calado para protegerse de la lluvia.

Aquella calle era tranquila. No había hojas secas rodando por los bordillos, porque no había árboles que pudiera esperar azotar el viento más tempestuoso. Pero había trozos de papel abandonados, envoltorios de dulces, periódicos y bolsas de papel, tan satisfactoriamente muertos y desamparados como la parda hojarasca invernal de cualquier calle lateral de pueblo.

Como los otros, el señor Pivner pasaba poco tiempo al nivel del suelo. Generalmente estaba moviéndose con rapidez por debajo de él, o practicando sus espurios desahogos varios pisos por encima. Subió en el ascensor, salió al pasillo y abrió su puerta con una de las llaves que llevaba, una satisfacción que no puede conocer quien no guarda un yo secreto y privado encerrado al margen de ocho millones de otros. Se quedó parado un momento junto a la puerta abierta, como siempre hacía, iluminando las habitaciones con los interruptores que tenía a mano y registrándolas con la vista durante ese instante de ansiedad que siempre esperaba que se prolongase en pleno terror al encontrar la casa saqueada, al encontrar bajo la mano del descuidado ladrón la íntima carnicería de su yo secreto. Pero todo estaba en orden, esperando silenciosamente para afirmarlo, manteniendo el sentido de lo medio conocido a la espera del descubrimiento eventual en un reconocimiento definitivo de sí mismo. Se quitó el sombrero y lo sacudió (había venido a casa tan deprisa como si lo esperara su propia coronación), y se movió ahora con la lenta deliberación de la gente solitaria que tiene tiempo de sobra para satisfacer las exiguas exigencias de su vida. Se quitó el abrigo, lo sacudió, y se quedó mirando los puntitos que había dejado en el papel de la pared.

El pisito era tan inofensivo como él. Como la burda mezcla de colores, retadoramente carente de dibujo, que llevaba en la corbata, enseña de su individualidad para las corbatas que encontraba chillando la misma pretensión de independencia desde el cenagal innominado de sus portadores, las pretensiones de distinción del apartamento eran grabados de flores y escenas de caza fabricados en serie, llenando una necesidad que ellos mismos habían manufacturado, y un mobiliario pesado sin la seductora fealdad de los muebles funcionales ni la aislada belleza muda de algo elegido por sí mismo: al hacer juego cumplía su primer requisito, como lo cumplía el estilo imposible de sus pantalones marrones plisados que hacían juego con su chaqueta marrón, cruzada sobre un pecho resignado a estar siempre escondido como algo vergonzoso, palideciendo con los años del blanco al amarillo de tal modo que enseñarlo ahora habría sido realmente ofensivo. Era una parte de su cuerpo que nunca había aprendido a usar, pues nunca había sido tan pobre como para verse obligado a sentir la tensión y el crecimiento de sus músculos en la expansión del trabajo, ni lo bastante rico para sentirlo liberado en esos juegos (campos reservados, recorridos de dieciocho hoyos, caminos de herradura) a los que juegan los ricos. Totalmente inconsciente de sí mismo salvo cuando algo iba mal, aquel cuerpo servía sólo para mantener su identidad intacta, y lo mantenía tapado, como aquella habitación, para no ofender a nadie.

Encendió la radio, y graduó el volumen hasta oír sólo una reconfortante confusión de sonidos. Una lámpara eléctrica de lectura, capaz de ofrecer tres grados de intensidad con un giro del dedo, estaba (justo fuera del alcance) junto a un gran sillón. Detrás había un escritorio chapeado de siglo anónimo y diseño inconfesado, que albergaba protegida tras cristal una colección de libros editados por centenares de millares, tratados sobre el cultivo del yo individual, prescripciones de alteraciones superficiales en la vulgaridad leídas con penosa avidez por hombres solos en grandes sillones, la lámpara de tres intensidades graduada en su brillo más violento mientras manoseaban esos desesperados blasones de individualidad atados a sus gargantas con nudos mezquinos, sujetaban con tanto mayor firmeza pasadores de corbata con monograma, balanceaban llaves pendientes de llaveros bañados en oro con monograma («personalizados»), apretaban sus brazos contra carteras guardadas en bolsillos interiores donde llevaban los papeles que demostraban su identidad más allá de toda duda a los otros y en momentos de Duda a sí mismos, papeles de tal variedad que el propio portador se convertía en su accesorio, cada uno contemplando sobre las palabras de un libro (que había vendido cuatro millones de ejemplares: «Cómo hablar con eficacia»; «Vencer el miedo»; «Aumentar sus ingresos»; «Desarrollar la confianza en sí mismo»; «“Venderse” usted y sus ideas»; «Mejorar su memoria»; «Aumentar su capacidad para tratar con la gente»; «Ganar más amigos»; «Mejorar su

personalidad»; «Prepararse para el liderazgo») el Yo que había dejado de existir el día en que dejaron de buscarlo en solitario.

«Sabía que no podía salir bien. Sabía que él era demasiado bueno. Debería haberlo sabido…», dijo una voz de chica en la radio. «Oh, Dios, qué he *he-choustedes.* No esperen, no se retrasen, no duden. Y recuerden, no tienen absolutamente ningún compromiso…», dijo la radio.

El señor Pivner volvió a la habitación con un frasco y una jeringuilla hipodérmica, que dejó junto a un álbum de fotos. Nadie había abierto el álbum desde hacía meses. Guardadas en él había fotos de tamaño mezquino, instantáneas de él y de otros refugiados tomadas en vacaciones. Algunas vistas cercadas de agua, fragmentos de montañas, rincones de cielo, tomadas para recordarle en momentos como aquél un mundo exterior cuyas maravillas se le permitía ver quince días de cada cuatrocientos. Pero él había olvidado, no que existían las puestas de sol, sino qué era una puesta de sol; o el vuelo de un pájaro; el movimiento del agua contra la costa; el frescor del aire conscientemente respirado; distancias vistas sobre la tierra; el sonido del viento en un árbol verde; o el increíble avance silencioso de un caracol.

Y sus fotografías, que habían registrado estos fenómenos en informes y estáticas configuraciones grises, no le recordaban nada. Allí encerradas, esperando en una oscuridad unidimensional, servían de testigos: de que hacía doce años tenía más pelo; de que había empezado a usar gafas (sin montura) hacía nueve años; de que su traje marrón tenía siete, y no cinco, años de uso.

«Señoras, éste es el momento de ahorrar y ahorrar. Las mujeres acuden en tropel a…».

Se sentó, y antes de llenar la jeringuilla se sacó del bolsillo una carta que dejó en el brazo del sillón y no leyó. Había leído suficientes veces aquella breve carta, en su despacho y en los servicios de su oficina, mientras tomaba café y mientras comía. La volvería a leer después de cenar, examinaría su propio nombre con firma falsificada al final. Otto escribía para decir que llamaría para decidir un lugar de encuentro; pero no daba ningún número donde se lo pudiera localizar. Por tanto, no podía hacer más que esperar. Hacía meses había recibido una llamada de teléfono, la voz de un chico borracho preguntando a gritos por Otto, preguntándole dónde demonios estaba a fin de cuentas. El señor Pivner cogió el frasco y leyó las indicaciones. La diabetes es una enfermedad grave. Nadie puede permitirse correr riesgos; no hay razón para correrlos, cuando las maravillas de la ciencia médica resuelven basta el problema más insignificante, volviendo despreciable la idea del azar, sólo con que uno siga las indicaciones del frasco. Es cierto que en los últimos siete años había tenido cuatro ataques, quedando repentinamente desvalido en público, desplomándose con la tambaleante caída de un borracho: pero aquéllos habían sido momentos de excitación. Sólo hacía falta tener cuidado, dominarse. Esa pobre mujer en el metro esta noche, por ejemplo… (De momento había olvidado al hombre de la cornisa). Uno sólo podía culparse a sí mismo de una catástrofe, cuando la Ciencia concentraba sus enormes esfuerzos en mejorar la especie humana. (¿No había leído algo, hacía tan sólo una semana, en un periódico, sobre una medicina que prolongaría la vida humana? Los hombres vivirían hasta doscientos años, quizá desnudos y hambrientos porque habría tantos, pero la Ciencia se ocupaba de los detalles cuando surgían —¿no había leído esta misma semana que estaban sacando alimentos muy sabrosos de las algas, el carbón y el algodón? Y la ropa: el mismo artículo decía que podían hacerse tejidos muy duraderos con semillas de soja, extractos de carne y productos vegetales—. ¡Doscientos años de edad!, y, según lo entendía, vivo).

Tras la inyección cogió su periódico. La edición dominical, todavía a su lado en el revistero, había exigido cincuenta acres de bosque para su mágica transformación de naturaleza en progreso, beneficios de los avances modernos en transportes, comunicaciones y libertad de prensa: información pública. (Es verdad que mientras hojeaba el periódico sus páginas, por término medio, tenían media columna de noticias y cuatro columnas y media de anuncios). Siniestro ferroviario en la India, 27 muertos, leyó; un autobús cae a un barranco en Chile, un norteamericano y 11 nativos; alud en Suiza, el número de víctimas asciende a… Aquella edición vespertina había requerido sólo unos cuantos acres de grandiosidad natural para cumplir su misión (pues llevaba menos anuncios). El señor Pivner leía con atención. «Mata a su padre con un hacha de carnicero». «Condenado por tres asesinatos». «Cristo murió de asfixia, opina un médico». «Mujer dos días muerta, hija inválida incapaz de pedir ayuda». Nada escapaba al ojo del señor Pivner, ni penetraba en su mente; nada eludía su atención, como nada alcanzaba su corazón. «El cadáver decapitado». «El amor mata a un pingüino». «Un cerdo tiene reúma». «Lector de la Biblia importunado mata a esposa». «Un hombre fabrica su propia silla eléctrica,
25 000
voltios». «“Avergonzado del mundo”, se suicida». Temeroso de perderse algo, seguía leyendo, lleno de esa anticipación que era a medias terror, la de dar con algo que lo afectara, no sólo que lo afectara sino que lo elevara y lo arrebatara.

Cada instante de aquella sensación de espera que había conocido durante toda su vida, aquel esperar a que *sucediera* algo (algo bastante dudoso, lo que incluía el Segundo Adviento), lo aplicaba a su lectura del periódico, embelesado y voraz. «Hombre lucha con león en zoo a puñetazo limpio». «Vaca mata mujer». «Gallo mata mujer». «Perro come esquimal». Mientras volvía las páginas, doblándolas pulcramente sobre el grueso del periódico, se relajaba un poco considerando la relativa seguridad que lo separaba de las noticias, sacaba consuelo del siniestro ferroviario (no había estado en él), del accidente de autobús en Chile (ni en aquél), del homicidio con el hacha de carnicero (él no lo había hecho), del cadáver decapitado (no el suyo); y para eso le servía el periódico, para externalizar en la agonía de otros los terrores y tentaciones inadmisibles en él. Aunque el periódico vespertino repitiese las del periódico matinal, volvía a leer atentamente, escritas con otras palabras, las noticias sobre la búsqueda del desconocido que estaba soltando pájaros en un zoo de la parte alta de la ciudad; sobre el descubrimiento de dos tesoros artísticos invaluables, cuadros originales de Dierick Bouts, en una casa de empeños de la Cocina del Infierno; sobre el juicio por asesinato en Mouth, Misisipi, donde aquella misma mañana se había mostrado en la sala el corazón del marido. Tendía a creer que todas aquellas maravillas civilizadas las había reunido el periódico expresamente para él. Es verdad que lo ponían en tal estado que a menudo compraba ediciones tardías del mismo periódico al ver titulares diferentes de los que llevaba doblados bajo el brazo, sólo para encontrarse con la historia de la sexta columna repentinamente elevada a un titular sensacionalista que ocupaba de la primera a la cuarta. Es verdad que a menudo la única forma que tenía de averiguar si había leído un periódico era buscar las tiras cómicas, donde la vida fluía en un continuo; y al reconocerlas, sabía que debía de haber leído atenta y ávidamente todo lo demás, que nada había eludido a su ojo ni penetrado en su corazón, alrededor del cual había erigido ese muro llamado objetividad sin el cual habría podido volverse loco. Mientras los relatos de violencia parecían aumentar cada día, apenas se le ocurría que vivía en una densidad de población tan antinatural que cada día soportaba desastres suficientes para un continente. A esto se añadía la sangre procedente del mundo entero, que llegaba conducida por telégrafos, radios, teletipos y cables submarinos, y sin que se perdiera una gota en el camino salpicaba al señor Pivner, que se quedaba sentado, duro, paciente, inflexible, se la enjugaba de los ojos y esperaba más.

El señor Pivner se elevó levemente sobre una estrecha nalga y ventoseó, un suave sonido interrogador que quedó sin respuesta. Luego se arrellanó y se quedó mirando el periódico, sin que se le pasara por la cabeza la idea de que aquello podía haber sido un demonio abandonando su residencia en su interior. Aunque azorado, no sólo se habría burlado de esta realidad medieval sino que podía creer, con toda la razón, que si hubiera vivido entonces también se habría burlado. Íncubos y súcubos, el alarido de la raíz de la mandrágora al arrancarla del suelo, que volvía loco al hombre que lo oía, el cloroformo, un señuelo de Satán, la viruela, un castigo de Dios: podía creer que no hubiera creído en todas esas cosas, ni en muchas otras, sino que habría seguido adelante, confiado, como ahora estaba sumergido, en la Razón. Era verdad, había cosas que no entendía, terrenos donde la Ciencia avanzaba por las provincias de Dios, donde se sentía bastante incómodo, aguardando secreta y esperanzadamente el día en que la Ciencia lo explicara todo, o justificara la Duda que guardaba oculta por si no lo hacía.

Con el pulgar sobre el titular «Campanario Veneciano en Peligro», sus ojos parpadearon tras las gafas que los debilitaban constantemente, hasta que un día le servirían tan poco a la luz como ahora le servían en la oscuridad: su dolencia había sido diagnosticada como nictalopía, causada, según le dijeron, por una deficiencia vitamínica (y no, «como solía creer la gente», por dormir a la luz de la luna). Tenía un estante lleno de frascos (etiquetados con los nombres de Afaxin, Pancebrin, Natola, gotas Multi-Vi, píldoras Vi-Dom-A y otros) para ayudar a corregir esta dolencia; pero se había decidido a llevar gafas «sólo para asegurarse». Sin embargo, seguía tropezando en la oscuridad.

Ahora los titulares habían empezado a mezclarse ante sus ojos. Había leído las cartas al director (escritas por el director) y las columnas de los columnistas, una partida de ulcerosos agresivos, autoridades nombradas a sí mismas que escribían íntimamente sobre gente que nunca habían visto y lugares donde nunca habían estado, o articulistas con el «toque común», que simulaban y estimulaban la falta de inteligencia, talento y sensibilidad del lector medio. Pero ahora, «El Espíritu Santo prohíbe el psicoanálisis…», «Robot gigante enloquece…», «Lobotomía para curar a un hombre de firmar cheques sin fondos…», las letras negras bailaban ante sus ojos, y empezó a cabecear sobre la noticia de que el campanario de San Marcos estaba en peligro de derrumbarse, agrietado en las frescas noches de verano tras el sol abrasador de los días.

«La compañía Raizsicola les da ahora la hora correcta. Son las seis de la tarde. ¿Han probado Raizsicola? Raizsicola sabe mejor *y* es mejor para ustedes, y recuerden, amigos, Raizsicola conserva su sabor el doble de tiempo, y con la gran botella familiar tendrán el doble de cantidad de Raizsicola…».

(«¿Mejor que qué?», se preguntó débilmente. «¿El doble de tiempo que qué? ¿El doble de cantidad que qué?»).

«Raizsicola. Eso es, amigos. Recuerden la raíz. Raizsicola, para conseguir una sonrisa de felicidad…», siguió la voz desarraigada, brotando con agresiva vitalidad, convirtiendo el cansancio del señor Pivner en decrepitud crónica. Es cierto que era a él a quien todos se dirigían, y que él intentaba, con toda la atención que su conciencia podía recabar bajo el agotamiento de la monotonía de sus palabras, mantener su responsabilidad como ciudadano. Escuchaba la radio durante las épocas de fervor político, el discurso en el que un senador contaba la verdad sobre otro (esto se llamaba «campaña difamatoria»), y luego las reuniones estridentes donde la gente recibía cinco dólares por gritar, aplaudir, desfilar y manifestar por demás el carácter totalmente irracional de su entusiasmo por un hombre al que no conocían, y que querían ocupase un cargo y los gobernase. Es verdad que a veces el señor Pivner escuchaba estas convenciones con un espíritu muy similar a aquel con que los miembros ignorantes de algunas culturas latinas escuchan el sorteo de la Lotería Nacional; pero incluso cuando desaparecía esta expresión le resultaba tan difícil reconciliar su sentido del deber y responsabilidad pública con su sensación de total desamparo como le resultaría a un indio centroamericano al que dijeran que compartía la responsabilidad del número premiado en Panamá el domingo por la tarde; y aun así el indio podía invocar poderes de los que nada sabía el señor Pivner, sueños y hechizos, números mágicos y falsas deidades, una pobre pandilla para invocar donde reinaba la Razón, por muy leales que pudieran resultar como aliados allí donde el indio estaba sentado en silencio con su radio, en un risco de Darién.

La Ciencia nos asegura que «Si se extinguiera el hombre, es sumamente improbable que alguna vez volviera a surgir algo muy similar». Amenaza y consuelo: sólo necesitamos considerar esa partícula de la corteza terrestre mostrando tal ávido orgullo para preferir ser cualquier otra. Aquí en los escombros avanzados del tiempo resistía el señor Pivner, heredero de ese coloso de la autojustificación, la Razón, uno de cuyos primeros logros fue separarse efectivamente del caos absurdo, irracional y contaminador del pasado. Imponiéndose durante siglos de gestación aparecía este aborto triunfal: la Razón suministraba los medios, y eliminaba los fines.

Lo que vino después fue enteramente razonable: los medios, tan bruscamente puestos al alcance, se convirtieron de suyo en fines. Y sustituir el crecimiento de la propia cuenta corriente por el crecimiento de la propia personalidad resultaba muy bien. Lo había resultado casi hasta llegar al señor Pivner, pues mientras los medios habían podido seguir expandiéndose de forma interminable, aquellos fines de otras épocas (que nunca se habían revelado muy estables) habían sido arrinconados como abstracciones para justificar los medios, y la idea confiadamente racional de que la paz, la armonía, la virtud y otros andrajosos componentes de la Regla Áurea los acompañarían por sí solos se daba, de modo muy razonable, por supuesta.

¿Jubilación? La palabra lo agitaba huecamente, lo dejaba en un vacío donde nada quedaba por hacer. Cuando la supervivencia era un triunfo, los propios medios se convertían en un fin constantemente inalcanzado; y ahora el espectro de la jubilación formaba su expresión, sonriendo maliciosamente a la vista. Se veía rodeado por los derechos de otros que habían dejado de crecer después que él, que habían adquirido ese derecho en el preciso instante en que dominaron alguna técnica fundamental de ganarse la vida, que llamaban educación. Seguros de que no tenían ninguna obligación, y de que les iría muy bien como eran, avanzaban para ocupar su puesto y revivir su dilema.

«… y se sienten decaídos al final del día? ¿Esa sensación de flojedad y embotamiento que parece invadirles? Bueno, amigos, la ciencia moderna ha desarrollado…».

Era a él a quien se dirigían estas voces, alineándose con él en esta conspiración contra sí mismo, citándolo espléndidamente satisfactorio tal como era, proclamando sus privilegios, valorando la masa de su opinión concurrente con garantía de su protección contra los disidentes, justificando sus limitaciones, y demostrando así, con su propia existencia exitosa, que él no estaba obligado a buscar más allá de sí mismo para encontrar la autoridad que los justificaba a ambos, prometiendo en fin asegurarlo y defenderlo en todas estas cosas, que llamaban sus derechos.

El periódico estaba ahora abierto por un reportaje especial («exclusiva») sobre la inminente canonización de una niña española, especial no porque la niña fuera a convertirse pronto en santa, sino porque había sido violada y asesinada. Se lo quedó mirando, lo empezó a leer y de repente se palpó el bolsillo en busca de las llaves, aterrorizado siempre de que, en caso de perderlas, quien las encontrara supiera de quién eran, qué guardaban. El periódico osciló en su mano y quedó inmóvil en su regazo, mientras el tic que le contraía el labio cuando estaba cansado le desencajaba la boca. Sus ojos entreabiertos se encontraron con los de las dos caras que tenía delante, ambas fotos borrosas porque habían sido enviadas

por radio, no porque hubiera ninguna prisa, sino para demostrar que aquel periódico ofrecía a sus lectores el más moderno posible servicio de noticias. Fijó la atención para leerlo, pues era en aquellos reportajes «especiales» donde encontraba la satisfacción que la vida nunca ofrecía, la de un comienzo, un medio y un fin. (Aunque a veces un comienzo se confundía con otros medios y otros fines, sabía que aquellos hechos estaban sucediendo realmente; e incluso tenía la sensación de que iba ligeramente por delante de ellos, con periódicos vespertinos que salían por la mañana, y periódicos matinales del día siguiente que salían aquella noche).

Sus ojos se encontraron con los ojos penetrantes del asesino, hundidos en una cara redonda cuya textura fofa y débil desmentían un primoroso bigote y una marcada raya en el pico de viuda de pelo negro. Leyó el nombre de aquel hombre, y el de su víctima, confusiones de sílabas extranjeras que no intentó alinear, y luego detalles del crimen tan remuneradoramente horripilante y encarnizado que habría podido ocurrir el día anterior, en vez de hacía cuatro décadas. «Poco después de su muerte, el pueblo de San Zuinglio, con las paredes salpicadas de vino, donde los campesinos viven en mezcolanza con sus cabras, pollos y asnos, se convirtió en el escenario de una serie de milagros. Hubo curaciones milagrosas entre campesinos enfermos que insistían en atribuírselas a la niñita, que se les aparecía en visiones, en medio de una bruma, llevando azucenas de pureza…». Hasta el criminal atestiguaba: «La veo a contraluz, acercándose a mí con azucenas en las manos. Pero cuando me las ofrece se convierten en llamas. Es en esas llamas donde encuentro remordimiento y penitencia, ¡y paz!». Mientras se le cerraban los ojos, el señor Pivner avanzó a trompicones hasta una entrevista con el sacerdote que había promovido el reconocimiento de la santidad de la niña: «Una vela parpadeó mortecinamente e iluminó su cara, del color y la textura del pergamino antiguo, coronada por el bonete de raso negro…». Con un gesto de «sus pálidas manos, como de El Greco…», siguió: «El abogado del diablo recibió la información y, tras dos años de estudio, la pasó a la Congregación Preparatoria, que se reunió en presencia de los cardenales. Al año siguiente el papa estuvo presente en la Congregación General, con sus cardenales, prelados y padres consultivos. Todos ellos votaron a favor del Martirio… Empezamos sin una sola lira, y hace falta una gran cantidad de dinero para promover a un santo. Aparte de los gastos de traer a Roma a los testigos y redactar los documentos, alquilar la basílica de San Pedro para una canonización cuesta tres millones de liras…».

Allí estaba la niñita con largas medias blancas ante el señor Pivner, mirando con aire pensativo su cara cabeceante, pues la tosca reproducción del periódico, enviada por radio, la hacía parecer bizca.

«Amigos, fíense de nosotros. Se lo deben a su salud…».

El periódico resbaló hasta el suelo, y el señor Pivner se incorporó como si lo hubieran llamado. En la cocina aguardaba media libra de carne de vaca para su cena. («¿Es todo carne magra?», había preguntado con insistencia; y una vez le hubieron asegurado que sí, no preguntó cuánto tiempo llevaba allí, y, por tanto, no le dijeron que habían conseguido su suculenta rojez frotándola con sulfito sódico el día anterior, cuando se volvió de un tóxico color gris).

«Pruebas científicas exhaustivas han demostrado…».

Respiró, suspiró y se recostó en el sillón con los sentidos vidriosos, insultado y ofendido, un hombre valiente, atacado por todas partes, que apoyaba con su último centavo aquellas cosas que le arrancaban el último rincón sagrado de su intimidad, y con él la dignidad que los sacerdotes llamaban su alma.

«Eminentes especialistas médicos coinciden…».

Volvió a mirar aquella carta, en el brazo del sillón, y sus ojos se ensancharon mientras la mancha de metal perfecto en su aleación pedía a gritos perfección.

«… sabe mejor, parece mejor, huele mejor y es mejor para usted…».

Y aquella partícula perfecta se sumergió, satisfecha de nuevo con cualquier falsificación de sí misma que representara su valor entre las demás. Mientras se le volvían a cerrar los ojos, la carta resbaló del brazo del sillón al suelo, y con ella el metal precioso de la juventud que había sugerido, aleado por la edad con cansancio, duda y temor, circunstancias constantemente impropicias para cualquier aproximación a la perfección. Nunca se veía el oro, nunca pasaba de mano en mano, ya no era moneda de curso legal, no sólo algo inesperado sino ilegal: sólo los compromisos gastados que los Cambistas ni siquiera se molestaban en hacer tintinear sino que hacían circular, dando *y* recibiendo o perdiendo y tomando recíprocamente sus equivalentes en plomo.

Tasado su peso en oro, el señor Pivner habría valido setenta y cuatro mil cuatro dólares (al cambio oficial;
105 720
dólares en el mercado negro). Pero en algún lugar del oscuro pasado, en esa penumbra de la Ciencia llamada química, se tenía la certidumbre de que su cuerpo valía noventa y siete centavos: un débil suspiro

lo acercó más al sueño, un sonido de anticipación, como si estuviera esperando el momento estratégico para vender.

Aun dormido esperaba, un poco tenso, como quien espera junto al teléfono a que suene. Y, sin embargo, aun dormido, sabía que habría tiempo. Al fin y al cabo, Adán vivió novecientos treinta años.

Junto al soporte vacío del teléfono blanco, un jarrón albergaba erectas sobre fondo verde seis flores ave del paraíso, *Strelitzia reginae,* también llamadas plátanos silvestres en Sudáfrica, donde crecen espontáneamente con profusión, exóticas protuberancias naranjas de lenguas azules que brotan del profundo pico verdimorado, acoplándose allí silenciosamente entre la blanca pera nativa, el marfil rojo, el negro árbol hediondo y el umzimbiti.

Mickey Mouse señalaba las cuatro en punto.

—¿Que si estoy yo en estado de gracia? Pero querido… —Agnes Deigh se detuvo para alargar la mano más allá de la miniatura con marco oval de un joven de uniforme y coger el paquete de cigarrillos que tenía sobre la mesa. Sacó uno y se lo puso en la boca en un ángulo extremado, y mientras lo encendía, escuchando, pareció por un momento un rostro de cartelera entre cuyos labios alguien hubiera puesto un cigarrillo—. Sí, lo sé, qué encanto, pero yo no puedo rezar por ti —siguió, meneando el cigarrillo—. Ya lo sé, querido, en otro momento. Pero gracias de todas formas por esas flores tan divinas.

Tras colgar, se quedó sentada, mirando por un momento el recorte de prensa que una de las chicas le había pasado en broma: «Presenta como prueba el corazón del marido. Una mujer llamada Agnes Day, de Mouth, Misisipi, estaba siendo juzgada por apuñalar mortalmente a su marido». No era gracioso. Hizo una bola para tirarlo a la papelera y se puso a buscar en su bolso; sacó una dedalera francesa esmaltada, la puso a un lado, y siguió mirando hasta que encontró otro pastillero. Luego, mientras se servía agua de la jarra, se quedó mirando la miniatura de marco oval. Era su hermano, a quien sólo había tratado en la absorta intimidad de la infancia, antes de que se fuera de casa, antes de que a ella la mandaran al colegio; y se encontró de nuevo contando los meses que habían pasado desde que lo habían dado por desaparecido en una guerra de la que nadie hablaba sino como de un patinazo político. Apartó la silla de la mesa para tomarse su píldora.

Al otro lado del patio del despacho de Agnes Deigh había dos ventanas por las que podía ver directamente los interiores. Una, estaba segura, era de un psicoanalista. Las persianas solían estar bajadas, pero había visto el sofá, y la vista de su conocida longitud la había turbado. Su psicoanálisis había durado tres años, dirigido por uno de los mejores analistas (se había hecho un nombre con un artículo que había publicado sobre una de sus pacientes, una monja, que cuando acabó con ella se hizo domadora de osos). Pero había momentos de quietud, cuando pensaba en su marido, o cuando miraba el retrato de marco oval, en los que Agnes Deigh no estaba segura de si había vuelto a reunir correctamente las partes que había esparcido ante sí, como cuando un aprendiz desmonta una máquina y al montarla de nuevo descubre que le sobran varias piezas, cada una con una forma curiosamente ajustada a algún fin preciso.

La otra ventana era de un dentista. Cada tarde aparecía a última hora en camiseta para afeitarse ante el espejo colgado en el marco de la ventana. Por alguna razón, cuando lo veía allí enfrente se acordaba siempre de Harry, su marido. Pero él nunca advertía su presencia, nunca miraba hacia el otro lado del patio, nunca había apartado los ojos del espejo, ni siquiera cuando un día, exasperada por su negligente terquedad, se había puesto ante la ventana con la blusa desabrochada, fingiendo, con un pecho llamativamente visible mientras lo observaba con el rabillo del ojo, que se estaba arreglando una prenda íntima. Ni la había mirado ni había parecido evitarlo conscientemente, sino que había seguido afeitándose, con la carne de los brazos pendiendo flojamente, los tirantes colgándole hasta las rodillas. Cada vez que alzaba la vista estaba allí, absorto en alguna actividad del cuerpo, del suyo o del de otro, lavándose las manos, secándoselas, hablando con alguien al que no se veía.

Volvió a su mesa para dejar el vaso de agua, cogió una nuez de macadamia de un tarro que tenía allí y se sentó mostrando una cara donde el tiempo pesaba inconsciente de mostrarse, una cara que ni siquiera ella había visto nunca en el espejo. Entonces sonó el teléfono.

—¿Sí? —susurró, y luego, recuperando la voz—: Dile que pase.

Otto había dejado una copia de su obra para que la leyese (una de cuatro hechas a un precio alarmante por un mecanógrafo público, que llevaba en una cartera de piel de cerdo proporcionalmente cara). Cuando llegó, a última hora de aquella tarde, oyó su voz a uno o dos despachos de distancia, repicando en las paredes verde oscuro, rebotando en las aproximaciones de yeso blanco a plantas tropicales que eran los apliques del alumbrado indirecto, saltando de una incompasiva superficie moderna a otra, escabullándose

por los bordes de otros sonidos para tratar de escapar por las celosías de las persianas, haciendo carambolas por los absurdos ángulos de los sombreros de otras mujeres que infestaban el lugar y que, también ellas, rebotaban entre teléfonos. La escena entera, sobre la alfombra verde oscuro de pelo largo, sugería una parodia grotesca de aquellas caricaturas más antiguas de la Naturaleza auspiciadas por las sombras del Rey Sol, en las que mujeres de exhausta sofisticación francesa se vestían de pastoras para practicar cansados pecados entre sedas nuevas sobre alfombras de hierba falsa.

—*Simpótico*[1] —decía aquella voz—. Digo que son tan *simpótico*… ¿qué? ¿Harry? Oh, Dios, no, hace meses que no, aún sigue en Hollywood, donde están filmando su novela… sí, la han cambiado un poco. ¿Qué…? Sí, al chico homosexual lo han convertido en negro, y al judío en tullido. Minorías sensibles… Por supuesto que me interesa la política… No seas pesado, me importa muy poco que Harry me saque en ese libro horrible, pero eso de que me ponga un nombre como Seraphina… No, claro que no necesito el dinero, lo he demandado simplemente porque el dinero es el único lenguaje que entiende…

—Está terriblemente ocupada —dijo a Otto uno de los sombreros—. Ahora está hablando por teléfono, y tiene a alguien ahí dentro. ¿Tiene usted una cita?

Minutos después, durante los cuales Otto estuvo a punto de prenderse el cabestrillo tratando de encender un cigarro, apareció Agnes Deigh precedida por un joven inmaculado, al que decía:

—Pero ¿te darás prisa en acabarlo? El tercer libro de Buster Brown saldrá en primavera, y solo tiene veintitrés años.

—¡Buster veintitrés! Agnes, tiene veintiocho bien cumplidos. Y la verdad, no sé cómo pretende escribir sobre la depravación, vamos, si el otro día le hablé de Leda y el cisne, ¿y sabes lo que dijo? «Los zerez humanoz no pueden copular con pájaroz, tonto…». La verdad, es un chico muy malo. ¿Vas a venir a la fiesta de esta noche? Te diré de qué voy a disfrazarme, o nunca me reconocerás: ¡de Cleopatra!

Otto la siguió a su despacho, tras la sonrisa y la ojeada poco curiosa que no le dirigió a él, sino a su bronceado descolorido. El de ella relucía exquisitamente.

—Bien… —Se detuvo tras su mesa—. ¿De qué se trata? Usted es…

—*La vanidad del tiempo,* mi obra, yo me llamo…

—Ah, sí. ¿Quiere sentarse? —La encontró debajo de otras cosas y se quedó mirándola durante un largo silencio. Cuando él se aclaró la garganta para hablar, ella dijo—: Bueno, *a mí* me ha gustado mucho, ¿sabe? —como para indicar que no le había gustado a nadie más—. Pero hemos hablado de ella… —Por lo visto, nadie más lo había hecho—. En realidad no es que no sea una buena obra, tiene usted un ojo admirable para la situación dramática, y algunas percepciones muy agudas. Pero… puede que el tema sea un poco ambicioso para alguien de su edad, ¿no? Cuando haya vivido realmente estas cosas… tal como ocurren… en realidad no es nada actual, ¿entiende? Si estudia atentamente las obras y novelas que ahora tienen éxito… —Sonó el teléfono blanco—. ¿Sí? ¿El lunes?, ¿hacia las seis? Sólo copas, sí, quiero hablarte de ello. Se fue hace un momento, dijo que tendría una copia para ti dentro de dos o tres semanas, y creo francamente que se merece diez mil sólo en anuncios de prepublicación, al fin y al cabo es el tipo de cosas que hemos hecho populares. ¿Yo…? No, todavía no he tenido ocasión de leerlo.

Mientras hablaba se inclinó de lado hacia adelante, mirando más allá de él, con los labios torcidos para recibir el cigarrillo que le ofrecía eludiendo la emboscada de estrelitzias. Pero antes de que pudiera encendérselo, colgó y le tendió un encendedor de plata.

—Debo mencionar algo más —siguió, mientras él se reclinaba en su asiento—. Todos hemos tenido la impresión de que algunas partes nos resultaban familiares, no sé muy bien cómo decirlo… —Tosió, miró el cigarrillo y lo apagó—. No, no pretendía decir que lo haya plagiado, en absoluto, pero da la impresión… algunas frases resultan muy familiares… —Sonó el teléfono—. Gracias por dejárnoslo leer —dijo, cogiendo el auricular, y luego, bajando los ojos al vacío mientras él se levantaba—: Claro que tengo tu llave, querido, ¿la de tu baúl…?, pero me dijiste que no te la diera… —Sonrió distraídamente—. Ah, ¿para la fiesta de esta noche? —Alzó la vista, y habló a un lado del teléfono—: Pero nos enseñará cualquier otra cosa que haga, ¿verdad…? —lo siguió su voz más allá de la verja, sobre el césped donde aquellas pastoras gesticulaban con sus cayados telefónicos, por el sendero del jardín.

Una de ellas se cruzó con él, llevando una carta al despacho del que acababa de salir, una carta que momentos después temblaba, abierta, en la mano de Agnes Deigh. Era del Departamento de Guerra, para informarla de que el cuerpo de su hermano había sido recuperado e identificado. ¿Lo quería? Por favor, conteste *sí* o *no.*

—¿Pasa algo, querida?

—Por favor… sólo…

—¿Qué…?

—Déjame sola… un minuto.

Luego, el leve sonido de la carta temblando en su mano quebró el entumecimiento que se había extendido por todas las partes sensibles de su cuerpo. «No de un modo tan cruel —murmuró— pero… ¿cómo pueden ser tan estúpidos?». Luego giró bruscamente su silla hacia la ventana, para evitar que la conocida habitación, y el retrato que tenía sobre la mesa, la vieran enjugarse los ojos. Lo hizo, y se quedó sentada mirando por el cristal.

Conteste sí o no.

Aunque no podía oír desde el otro lado del patio, era evidente que el dentista estaba gritando. Distinguió a una chica de unos veinte años. Entonces Agnes Deigh se inclinó hacia adelante. Se levantó, se acercó a la ventana y se quedó mirando. La había golpeado. Había golpeado a la chica y la volvió a golpear. Tenía en la mano el suavizador de navajas, y lo descargaba contra los brazos que protegían su pecho. La mano de Agnes Deigh temblaba cuando se volvió y cogió el teléfono blanco, abriendo la guía con la otra mano, para decir: «Póngame con Spring siete tres cien… ¿Diga? Sí, quería denunciar un caso de crueldad perversa. O sadismo. Sí, sadismo. ¿Qué? Por supuesto, me llamo Agnes Deigh…».

Mientras hablaba se quedó mirando las estrelitzias; y mientras hablaba, las palabras de una conversación anterior se repitieron en su mente. «Tus flores son preciosas, ¿son por Navidad?».

(«Sí, Agnes, pero te las he mandado porque sabía que te divertirían, ¿no son un encanto?, son tan *obscenas,* pero Agnes, querida, sabes que soy un mercenario, bastante venial en realidad, y quiero que alguien pida algo por mí, querida, ¿*estás* en estado de gracia…?»).

Nada más colgar se levantó, se puso lentamente el sombrero, rápidamente el abrigo y salió por la puerta. *Conteste sí o no.* «¿Hace cuántos años —pensó— que no me manda nadie flores por amor?».

Se había encaminado directamente hacia los ascensores, pero de repente se volvió hacia la figura que estaba tras una mesa cercana, y sin aliento, aturdida, logró decir no las palabras que esperaba, no «¿Eres católica?», sino:

—¿Crees en Dios?

—Bueno, sí, querida… en cierto modo…

—¿Puedes ir a San Vicente Ferrer…?, y hacer que digan… ¿puedes, puedes ir mañana, sí, a la hora del almuerzo…? —A su espalda se abrieron las puertas del ascensor, y mientras se volvía dijo con voz más clara por encima del hombro—: Y cárgalo a tu cuenta de gastos.

Una vez en la calle caminó rápidamente, sin una puntada ni una arruga descolocadas, el maquillaje aplicado como una máscara. Un tullido sin afeitar, que se había adelantado con la mano abierta, y al que evitó caritativamente con un giro de caderas, se apartó diciendo a un transeúnte: «A ésa no la sacas un día de lluvia».

Entró en un bar, y pidió un martini.

—¿Con semillas de calabaza?

Se lo quedó mirando sin decir palabra. La chica que estaba junto a ella tenía uno al lado. Estaba leyendo *El pescador completo.*

«¿Qué es mío, pues, y qué soy yo? ¿No es mía ni una sola curva de este pobre cuerpo mío (al que amas, y por el cual sueñas ciegamente que me amas), ni un solo gesto que pueda hacer, ni un solo tono de mi voz, ni una sola mirada de mis ojos, no, ni siquiera ahora cuando hablo al que amo, sino que han pertenecido a otras? Otras, muertas hace siglos, han pretendido a otros hombres con mis ojos; otros hombres han oído las súplicas de la misma voz que ahora suena en tus oídos. Las manos de los muertos están en mi pecho; ellas me empujan, tiran de mí, me guían; soy un títere cuyos hilos mueven, y no hago sino dar nueva forma a gestos y atributos que llevan largo tiempo apartados del mal en el sosiego de la tumba…».

Las azucenas marchitas estaban a su lado en un tarro de fruta, mientras leía despacio, como si fuera ella quien estuviera trabando armónicamente por primera vez aquellas palabras.

El letrero colgado en su puerta decía:

NO
ME MOLESTEN
ESTOY
TRABAJANDO
ESME

; y había cerrado con cerrojo aquella puerta, encantada de estar sola. Pero a medida que pasaba la tarde se movía con menos excitación y menos frecuencia. Durante unos minutos se dedicó a coser un vestido que se

estaba haciendo, cantando una de sus canciones. Luego se levantó con un cigarrillo y se paseó por la habitación doble, poniendo cosas en su sitio. Luego volvió a coser, sentada como se sienta a coser una niña de cinco años, y cantando en sordina como una niña de cinco años. Pero antes de acabar aquella costura volvió a levantarse y se puso a reordenar sus libros, clasificándolos únicamente por el tamaño. En realidad, poco más tenían en común sus pequeñas hileras (salvo el color de las cubiertas, por el que los había ordenado, y por lo que los había comprado también bastantes veces). Su variedad era tan fortuita como la de unos libros abandonados en una pensión; y aquel libro de cuentos de Stevenson, que no tenía idea de dónde había sacado y que llevaba años sin abrir, ahora no podía dejarlo, y para ella era el único libro que poseía. Aun así, nunca había leído por las razones que la mayoría de la gente se da a sí misma para leer. Los hechos importaban poco, las ideas expuestas, explotadas y destruidas, menos aún, y la narración, nada. Sólo algunas agrupaciones de palabras retenían de cuando en cuando su atención, y entraba a habitar en ellas durante un rato, hasta que se sumergían, hallando refugio en aquella parte de sí misma que atisbaba con reserva y temor, una residencia tan ajena y distante, real o irreal, como aquellas que la turbaban con tan profunda compunción cuando los rasgos de los otros los traicionaban. Un pesar infinito, simplemente por haberlo visto, brotaba entonces de ella, pues había visto demasiado de lo que no se ve; y la hacía bajar los ojos enseguida. Era la expresión de Otto, cuando su cigarrillo había hecho una quemadura en su mesa, y lo había cogido alzando bruscamente la vista para ver si ella se había dado cuenta. Era la expresión de Max, cuando había cogido una hoja escrita por ella, fuera lo que fuera; no lo sabía, pero la había cogido de la mesa y se la había metido disimuladamente en el bolsillo, arrebatándosela, sonriendo mientras alzaba la mirada para ver si lo había visto, con la sonrisa fija y apenas vacilante mientras empezaba a hablar de forma atropellada, mirándola con unos ojos que la hicieron bajar los suyos al suelo para no llorar por la mentira que ocultaban.

A menudo, cuando estaba trabajando en un poema, le parecía que la única forma de utilizar las palabras con sentido sería escogerlas por sí mismas, e investirlas de su propio significado: no el de ella, quizá, sino el significado que estaba implícito en su forma, y que con demasiada frecuencia no tenía nada que ver con la definición del diccionario. Las palabras que le ofrecía la tradición de su arte estaban a estas alturas en un estado caótico, forzadas por los contextos de un millón de necedades, convirtiendo en todas partes la página impresa en un narcótico, línea tras línea de estupideces convincentes dispuestas de modo que provocasen sopor, coma, convulsión necrótica; y cuando llegaban a sus manos estaban frágiles y quebradizas, deformadas y agrietadas; a veces se rompían bajo el peso que su tiempo verbal las imponía, y se veía aferrada a sus fragmentos, intentando de nuevo con aquellos avíos raídos su incursión en lo inarticulado.

Así, por ejemplo, había robado «comatulideo», y su latrocinio había pasado desapercibido para la ciencia, que había decidido que significaba «un crinoideo nadador sin aletas…»; y «crinoideo»: con forma de lirio (aunque esta palabra pertenecía también a los científicos, *Crinoidea,* una gran clase de los equinodermos). Y dejaba muy atrás el tronco *Echinodermata*, dejaba que las estrellas de mar, los erizos y sus semejantes tanteasen en paz su camino por las oscuras aguas del mar. Sobre el papel, bajo su pluma, estaba «comatulideo», mientras ella luchaba por alcanzarlo a través de los escombros amontonados por su memoria.

Era a través de esta acumulación de caos impuesta donde luchaba ahora por moverse: más allá estaba la simplicidad, inconmensurable, residencia de la perfección, donde nada era creado, donde la originalidad no existía, porque era el origen; donde, una vez llegaba, no existían el trabajo ni el pensamiento en secuencia causal y vacilante, sino sólo la transcripción: donde el poema que conocía pero no podía escribir existía, ya formado, esperando su recuperación en ese momento en que escribirlo resultaba imposible, porque ella era el poema. Su mano se acercó al papel, la pluma dejó allí un trazo negro, pero solo ese trazo, línea de incertidumbre. Invocó a su memoria, la llamó a gritos, tratando de gritar a través y más allá de ella, aquella maldita acumulación que la confinaba en el tiempo: *mi* memoria, *mi* cama, *mi* estómago, *mi* terror, *mi* esperanza, *mi* poema, *mi* Dios: la mezquindad del *mi.* ¿Tendrían las llamas del infierno una altura de noventa pisos?, ¿o serían simplemente esas pequeñas lenguas de fuego afiladas que mordisquean y empiezan a devorar, que saborean los bordes y luego consumen, barridas por el viento del terror a exponerse uno mismo, perdiendo el conjunto de mezquindad que constituye la identidad, con soflamas que nunca llegan a alzarse en plena llamarada rugiente, sino que chamuscan durante toda una vida como el fuego en la hierba, en el mundo del tiempo que regula el reloj? Cada tic, sincronizado, arranca un fragmento de las vidas regidas por ellas, las agujas giratorias reflejadas en esos ojos que observan su repetición con una ansiedad que encoge la cara entera hacia los huecos con pupilas, y finalmente deja allí arrugas, trazos inciertos entretejidos en la carne, el tejido de la ansiedad, una doble membrana en torno a gelatinas de centros oscuros que no reflejan nada. Sólo ese tejido permanece, urdido sobre el patrón del

cautiverio que tiene un comienzo y un fin, con mezquindad científica por mor de los detalles, la trama de millares de cosas que no debían haber ocurrido y ocurrieron; de miríadas de hechos mezquinos que debían haber ocurrido y no ocurrieron; esperada, negada, hasta que la vida se vive en fragmentos, inconexa hasta la muerte, y el reloj de pulsera se detiene.

La pluma tembló sobre el papel, añadió «so» a «comatulideo», *y* luego tachó cuidadosamente aquel sufijo gratuito; luego metió «comatulideo» en la maraña de tinta negra, mientras avanzaba hacia aquel mundo no mundo adonde la llevaba la aguja. Era el vacío incircunscripto, intolerable, infinitamente extendido e indefinidamente divisible donde nadaba en el orgasmo, internándose en una vastedad que la alejaba de la agitada indignidad de la postura que compartía; el mundo de la música conocido de un modo tan intenso que no existía nada más que la música; era el mundo del éxtasis al que todos se acercaban por diferentes senderos, un mundo en el que está prohibida la residencia temporal, como atestiguan las angustias del recuerdo: «dardo de amor» que hiere pero no mata; el mal que se lamenta, pero que se valora por encima de todo gozo y bien terrenal; el «cauterio suave», el «corazón robado», el «entendimiento arrobado», la «violación del amor»: *conoscenza* en provenzal. Así santa Teresa, *quadrupedis*, muriendo por no poder morir.

¿Qué enseñó el diablo a Gerbert, arzobispo de Rávena, a cambio de su alma, que Gerbert vendió para aprenderlo todo y llegar a papa? El diablo le enseñó álgebra y relojería, para un mundo donde no hay espacio, sólo distancias; donde no hay tiempo, sólo minutos y horas; donde las cosas están numeradas, y hasta Cristo se inclinó con finito cuidado cuando dio a Elizabeth Matilda Bridget un recuento escrito de las patadas, golpes y heridas que había recibido, cifrando en 100 las fracturas de cráneo, y en
38 430
las gotas de sangre (aunque otra muchacha recibiría más tarde una carta, por medio de su ángel de la guarda, en la que se cifraban esas gotas de sangre en
3 000 800
). El mundo en que los títulos de la Virgen se cifran en 305, y sir Arthur Eddington decide que el electrón no está sujeto a las leyes de la ciencia. El cosmos de sir James Jeans, regido por una deidad cuyo símbolo es la raíz cuadrada de menos uno, donde en habitaciones cerradas discuten si el peso del hombre crucificado basta para provocar la estrangulación, y el matemático irlandés sir William Rowan Hamilton calcula que Jesús, en la ascensión, elevándose por el espacio a una velocidad moderada, todavía no habría alcanzado la más cercana de las estrellas fijas.

Cuando el diablo se apareció a Gerbert para reclamarle su alma, Gerbert se resistió, y desapareció en medio de una llamarada.

La punta rastreadora de la pluma se movió sobre el papel y se desvaneció, Esme lo había perdido, y se sumió en el angustiado agotamiento de esta recuperación de suyo temporal. Inmóvil al borde del abismo al que no podía caer, Esme se estremeció a la espera de un sonido que interrumpiese, esperando temerosamente la señal que la retirase de aquel borde. En el silencio de la espera se recuperó, retrocedió despacio, empezó a hablar calladamente consigo misma; inmóvil, se movió exageradamente como si la estuvieran observando, como si de pronto necesitara que la observasen, que hubiera otra persona presente, consciente de ella, abarcándola, para convencerla de su propia existencia. No había nadie. Hasta su voz sonó con un tono incorpóreo que la asustó. Se quedó allí sentada, callada de nuevo con la pluma sobre el papel, reducida a la desesperación, su cara expresando sólo la vacía confusión de estar sola.

Más allá de su ventana cerrada, al otro lado del pozo de ventilación, una mujer planchaba sobre una tabla. A su lado apareció un hombre en ropa interior, habló silenciosamente durante un momento y desapareció. Luego, sin cambiar de expresión, Esme empezó a llorar y apartó la cara de la ventana por la que había estado mirando sin ser advertida. Escribió en el papel:

> En un apartamento lindamente
> Encalado hay una butaca de ópera
> Abandonada contra la pared
> Que se disfraza para un baile,

un ejercicio tan significativo como aquellas ceremonias que se celebraban ante la insistencia del pueblo durante los interdictos papales en la Iglesia medieval, cuando estaba prohibido decir misa, pero «sólo hacía falta que los hermanos agitasen sus campanillas y tocasen el órgano en el coro para que los ciudadanos, en la nave, se quedaran tan contentos creyendo que estaban diciendo misa tras la cortina».

Esme escribió con pesar, haciendo pucheros:

En algún lugar lejano alguien a solas
En una habitación dice tu nombre
Sin que lo oigas

pero se había agotado. ¿Y el milagro de la transubstanciación? Sólo un vislumbre, y sólo perduraba la fragancia de su muerte, la fragancia celestial, como de azucenas, que se elevó del cuerpo de san Nicolás de Tolentino, después de que reprendiera a sus afligidos hermanos por traerle un plato de palomas a su sofocante lecho de muerte, y de que, con un pase de su mano, les devolviera el plumaje y las hiciera salir volando por la ventana de su celda; sólo el aroma de las azucenas, pudriéndose a su lado en el tarro de fruta.

Encendió una lamparilla de alcohol, y se quedó sentada un momento a su lado antes de buscar una cucharilla de té donde licuar una inyección de heroína, mirando a la llama, y a las azucenas que había detrás. «Si no soy real para él», dijo en voz alta, contemplando las azucenas marchitas, «entonces, ¿dónde soy real?». Y el libro de Stevenson, que había dejado abierto junto a la lamparilla sobre una pila de libros, estuvo a punto de prenderse. Lo cogió y volvió a leer: «Sois un hombre sabio, y yo no soy más que una cría. Perdonadme si parezco instruiros, yo que soy tan ignorante como los árboles del monte; pero los que aprenden mucho no hacen más que rozar la faz del conocimiento; asimilan las leyes, conciben la dignidad del designio, pero el horror del hecho viviente se desvanece de su memoria. Somos nosotras que nos quedamos sentadas en casa con el mal las que recordamos… y estamos prevenidas, y nos apiadamos…».

Toc, toc, toc, sonó en su puerta, con la implacable precisión de la llamada del tiempo en su aséptica sucesión de instantes inoportunos. Apretó los labios.

—¿Quién es? —preguntó.

—Chaby.

—Jesucristo, ¿por qué no enciendes alguna luz? —preguntó cuando lo dejó entrar, pasando junto a ella hacia el cordón de la luz.

—Porque estoy sola —dijo Esme.

Su peso se colgó de él, y sin decir palabra la tumbó.

Hacia el final de la tarde, Otto caminaba solo, hacia el sur, por Madison Avenue, expresando con su cara un extremo de la concentración de vacuidad que se cruzaba con él por todas partes a su alrededor, las caras de mensajeros de oficina, de mecanógrafas expulsadas al aire nocturno, de jóvenes lúgubremente triunfantes, de odiosos triunfadores de mediana edad, de mujeres que perseguían la elegancia y alcanzaban la mediocridad, que habían pasado la tarde gastando el dinero que sus cansados maridos habían pasado la tarde ganando, y de los propios maridos, que llegarían a casa minutos después que ellas, se servirían una copa y se sentarían mirando hacia otra parte. Cargado con su cartera, y con un pensamiento poco amable para todos sus conocidos, Otto llevaba la cabeza alta. Aunque se jactaba de desdeñar la soledad, miraba la impía diversidad que se cruzaba torrencialmente con él como si confiara en identificar a alguien, en rescatar alguna cara del anonimato de la multitud con un reconocimiento inmediatamente lamentado, y rescatarse así a sí mismo. Hasta lo tentaba con fuerza la idea de entablar conversación con desconocidos, y al pensarlo se acordó bruscamente de su padre, a quien había quedado en llamar por teléfono para acordar un lugar de cita para su primer encuentro. Esto le hizo interesarse de pronto por todos los hombres de mediana edad y aspecto opulento que pasaban, codiciando pasadores de corbata de diamantes, un sombrero hongo, un pañuelo de Ascot, e incluso (aunque le hubiera chocado bastante que aquel fuera «papá») unas polainas gris perla. Era un problema que hasta ahora había resultado más fácil dejar sin resolver, y maldito fuera Edipo y todos los demás. Por el momento, el padre podía ser cualquiera que eligiera el hijo. En el preciso instante en que sus ojos se encontrasen con forzoso reconocimiento, aquello se acabaría.

«Debo llamar al hombre de Sun Style Films —pensó de repente—. Perú, y el norte de Bolivia…». A su lado alguien le preguntaba por dónde se iba a la calle Vesey. Otto retuvo a aquel hombre impaciente con una larga e intrincada explicación de dos rutas alternativas, y estaba empezando una tercera cuando el pobre hombre se retiró a sotavento, dándole las gracias, y se acercó a un policía para preguntarle el camino a la calle Vesey.

En la esquina había un negro alto con un paraguas, tocado con un sombrero de paja fuera de temporada, aunque en él no resultaba más desusado que el atuendo permanente de una estatua. Se mantenía apartado de la caniche negra todo lo que le permitía la correa, atolones de un formidable arrecife que rechazaba a uno y otro lado las crestas blancas de las olas.

—Es muy bonito —dijo Otto de aquel animal extrañamente familiar.

—La llevo al veterinario —dijo Fuller, sin mirar a aquel joven que no conocía sino a la perra—. Parece que tiene lombrices —añadió con fruición, mirando a la perra que no le hacía caso.

—Es una pena —dijo Otto—. Hermoso perro.

—Sí, hombre —dijo Fuller, alzando la vista y clavándola de nuevo en la caniche—, parece que tiene lombrices —repitió mientras observaba su cara, como esperando verla nublarse de malestar y desconcierto.

Cambió el semáforo, y el mar avanzó reuniendo sus corrientes, alejando hacia el norte el arrecife y a Otto hacia el sur, hacia Esme. La noche anterior la había dejado tarde tras lo que habría podido ser una discusión, si no fuera porque no veía forma de discutir con Esme. Se había esforzado durante tanto tiempo en desarrollar su escasa capacidad dialéctica para adaptarla a un juego complejo que ahora se sentía inerme ante su llana sencillez. Cuando le pidió que no pasara la noche con ella «porque es tan del Greenwich Village…», se dio cuenta de que ninguna de sus ingeniosidades la haría cambiar de opinión. Pero seguía bastante celoso de ella: tenía una forma de inclinar un hombro hasta rozar casi la mesa y alzar la vista hacia él, riendo, que le vino ahora a la cabeza y le hizo apresurarse hacia la boca del metro.

—Espera un momento —gritó Esme, una vez hubo subido cansinamente sus escaleras. Chaby estaba aún vistiéndose cuando llamó.

Otto y Chaby no intercambiaron ningún saludo. Habían llegado a comportarse entre sí como dos animales de diferentes clases zoológicas en un zoo privado, cada uno admirándose de que su guardián conserve al otro. Otto dio a entender claramente que estaba esperando. Esme los trató como si los tres fuesen amigos bien avenidos, o con la misma jovialidad, unos completos desconocidos, mientras Otto fumaba laboriosamente. Chaby se fue, tras retener a Esme en la puerta con una conversación lo bastante audible como para provocar que Otto encendiera la radio, lo que hizo con un aire de hábito inveterado. Una vez se fue Chaby, Esme se sentó en el sofá junto al truculento fumador. Él sugirió que fueran a cenar, haciendo la invitación con un tono cansado pero obligado, como un caballero, un concepto que tenía gran predicamento en su mente, como en la de muchos otros que encuentran en él el último refugio de la insipiencia.

Ella aceptó de buena gana, con lo que él se amohinó de modo aún más opresivo. Cuando se quitó el vestido para cambiarse, trató de abrazarla.

—Eso no se hace con una dama que se está vistiendo —le dijo ella—. Además, ese vendaje tan gracioso te estorba.

—Quizá tenga que irme a Bolivia y al norte de Perú —dijo Otto sobriamente, a modo de respuesta directa—. Dentro de poco —añadió de forma un tanto amenazadora. Mientras ella buscaba otro vestido, abrió su cartera y sacó la obra con metódica aversión. Pasó rápidamente las páginas hasta llegar al segundo acto, Escena Tercera, e inmediatamente encontró el parlamento. Lo había encontrado bastantes veces con una sonrisa indulgente. Ahora sacó la pluma y tachó enteramente:

> PRISCILLA *(con trágica brillantez):* Pero ¿es que no lo entiendes, Gordon? Es en estos momentos cuando el alma ansía que la tomen súbitamente, que la arrebaten del seno de alguna tímida alegría y la presenten ante su Hacedor destocada, desmelenada y gozosa, con el espíritu intacto.

En su lugar escribió:

> ¿Es que no entiendes la súbita liberación que me ha sobrevenido?

y se quedó sentado, arrojando humo sobre la tinta húmeda. Una vez en la calle, Otto dijo:

—¿Cómo te sientes saliendo con un caballero, para variar?

—Ot-to.

—Pero si es que ese Chaby es un tipejo inmundo. No sé cómo puedes soportarlo.

—Mira que es malo, ¿eh? —dijo ella riendo, colgada del brazo de Otto—. ¿Sabes lo que hizo el día que lo conocí? Tenía las manos ocupadas, y me dijo que buscara unas cerillas en el bolsillo de su pantalón, y cuando metí la mano resulta que había cortado el fondo del bolsillo, y mi mano siguió entrando y entrando. ¿No fue eso malo?

—Sí. ¿Qué hiciste entonces?

—No hice nada.

—Bueno, ¿qué hizo él?

—No lo recuerdo.

—¿Dónde quieres cenar?

—¿En el Viareggio?

—Esme, ese sitio está siempre lleno de… bueno, no sé, todos los desechos de más abajo de la calle Catorce. Es como los Testigos de Jehová, cuando te sientas en una mesa se te acerca todo el mundo. En cualquier caso, ¿por qué vas tú allí?

—Yo no voy allí.

—¡Esme!

—La gente me lleva allí —dijo. Y para entonces ya estaban en la puerta del Viareggio, un pequeño bar italiano de nepotista honradez antes de que lo descubrieran los exóticos. Los vecinos del barrio seguían yendo, en grupitos derrotados y casi siempre por la tarde, antes de que los dos pequeños comedores y el bar fueran tomados al asalto por las clases educadas, un grupo de intrusos malvestidos, infraalimentados y sobreembriagados, con mentes tan altamente desarrolladas que se les dispensaba de buenos modales, gustos tan refinados en una dirección que se les dispensaba de tener alguno en cualquier otra, emociones tan cultivadas que la única aberración era la normalidad, todos flotando allí sobre saturados charcos de depravación calculada sólo para manifestar el valor inapreciable de lo que derrochaban, los tres sexos en dos colores, un grupo de gente mental y físicamente de tamaño equivocado.

El humo y la voz humana componían una sola textura, soldando en ella a aquella gente para la que Dante había rejuvenecido el infierno seis siglos antes. La conversación era de una intensidad intelectual olvidada desde que Laberio recomendó a un personaje de una de sus obras que buscase muestras de filosofía en las letrinas públicas. Allí había poetas que pintaban, pintores que hacían crítica musical, compositores que reseñaban novelas, novelistas inéditos que escribían poesía: pero si hubiera entrado un poeta se habría acordado quizá de Petrarca, cuando describió la corte papal de Aviñón como una «cloaca de todos los vicios, donde se considera la virtud como prueba de estupidez, y la prostitución conduce a la fama». No obstante, Petrarca tenía una razón para estar irritado, pues su hermana había sido seducida por un papa: aquí nadie tenía tal pretensión, aunque muchos se habrían atrevido si se les hubiera ocurrido, incluso, y tanto más alegremente, los que tenían hermanos pequeños.

—¿Aquel de allí es realmente Ernest Hemingway? —dijo alguien cuando entraban.

—¿Quién?

—Ese de la barra, ese tipo grande, el que necesita un afeitado, ¿lo ves?, el que está dando las gracias a ése por una copa, ¿lo ves?

—Supongo que podrías considerarme un negativista positivo —dijo otro.

—Max parece tener un gran sentido de los valores espaciales —dijo un joven a su derecha, apartándose para dejar pasar a Esme—, pero sus sólidos no pueden compararse con los sólidos de Uccello, por ejemplo. ¿Y dónde está lo abstracto sin sólidos, os pregunto?

Mientras Otto asaeteaba el local con los ojos en busca de Max, Esme se internó en él con fluida facilidad, su cara delgada encendida de placer en tanto sonreía a una persona tras otra con graciosa familiaridad. «Allí está», dijo Otto mientras se sentaban. La *jukebox* estaba tocando «Retorno a Sorrento». Otto se arregló el cabestrillo y se alisó el bigote. Esme se quedó sentada sin más, paseando la mirada por aquella marea espectral con la serenidad de una mujer en un cuadro; y con bastante frecuencia, como los visitantes de un museo, las caras que se volvían a mirarla se la quedaban contemplando con expresiones vacías hasta que, irreconocidos, recuperaban la timidez y apartaban la vista, uno para decir «A *ella* la conozco, pero Dios sabe quién es él»; otro para decir «Hace un par de años estuvo encerrada varios meses»; y otro para escuchar el chiste de Carruthers y su caballo.

En la mesa de Max, entre los suyos y otros seis codos, varios vasos de cerveza húmedos, un libro titulado *Bobo Bobo Bobo* y un ejemplar de *Mamá Oca,* estaba *La vanidad del tiempo.* Max se levantó y se acercó con ella.

—¿Qué te ha parecido? —preguntó Otto afablemente, sin levantarse. Rescató las páginas, y enjugó un par de manchas que todavía estaban húmedas.

—Bueno, Otto, está bien —dijo Max con aire poco convencido.

—Pero ¿qué? ¿Qué te ha parecido?

—Bueno, te diré la verdad. Leerla resultaba curioso a veces. Como si ya la hubiera leído. Había algunas frases…

—¿Quieres decir que *crees* que es un plagio? —Otto dijo la palabra.

—Bueno —dijo Max, riendo como un amigo.

—Mira, la tenías a la vista, quiero decir ahí, en la mesa. La han… quiero decir, ¿la han visto todos ésos?

—Le estaban echando un vistazo. No creí que te importase, y ya sabes, quería preguntarles qué

pensaban sobre lo de… reconocerla.

—¿Y bien? —Otto abrió la cartera, apartándola para que no se viese que la obra iba a reunirse con sus copias.

—¿Qué les ha parecido? Prácticamente lo mismo, creo —admitió Max—. George dice que le daba la sensación de que casi podía terminar una de las… una de las frases. Y Agnes…

—¿Agnes Deigh? ¿Quieres decir que has hablado de eso con *ella?*

—Bueno, salió en la conversación. Estuve en su oficina esta mañana, hablando con ella de mi novela. Va a salir en primavera. Ahora está negociando los derechos de la edición francesa.

—Y de *dónde* creéis que está plagiada, si estáis todos tan seguros de que la he robado.

—Nadie ha dicho que la hayas robado, Otto. Es sólo que algunas de las frases resultan un poco… familiares.

—Sí, pero ¿de *qué*?

—Eso es lo curioso, nadie ha podido descubrirlo, uno de nosotros parecía tenerlo en la punta de la lengua y luego se nos escapaba. Pero no te preocupes por eso, Otto. Es una buena obra. —Entonces se enderezó, apartando las manos de la mesa, donde las tenía apoyadas, y dijo—: Esta semana expongo unos cuadros, ¿puedes venir a la inauguración?

—Sí, pero…

—Gracias por dejármela leer, Otto…

—Hay una frase que tomé prestada, quiero decir que la puse sólo para ver cómo quedaba… —Otto lo llamó mientras se alejaba, pero Max estaba ya en su mesa, hablando a los que estaban allí con él. Alzaron la vista hacia Otto.

Esme comía tranquilamente frente a la silenciosa furia de Otto, convertida ya en hosquedad por obra de cuatro vasos de whisky antes de que apareciese su ternera con pimientos.

—Hola, Charles —dijo Esme amablemente, alzando la vista—. Tienes muy buen aspecto esta noche. —Charles sonrió tristemente. La plata brillaba entre su pelo. Tenía las muñecas vendadas, el vaso vacío—. ¿Quieres mi vaso de cerveza, Charles? Porque no puedo beberla. —Se lo tendió, y murmurando algo, sin una ojeada a Otto, Charles se alejó.

—La verdad, Esme.

—¿Qué pasa, Otto? —dijo ella alegremente.

—Bueno, quiero decir que no puedo invitar a cerveza a todo el mundo que hay aquí.

Ella sonrió.

—Eso es porque no quieres —dijo.

—Tienes razón, maldita sea, no quiero —dijo él mirando a su alrededor, y volvió a concentrarse en su plato.

—Claro que sé que estamos casi en Navidad —dijo alguien a su espalda—. Por el amor de Dios, ¿qué quieres que haga al respecto, que me ilumine?

Al fondo del bar se oyó un gañido, y algunos, que sospecharon que era inhumano, se volvieron para ver a un dachshund al extremo de una correa tirante sacando sus cuartos traseros de una escupidera. El Gran Hombre Sin Afeitar se echó aun lado.

—Lo siento de veras, puñeta —dijo.

—Oh —dijo el chico que sostenía el otro extremo de la correa—, señor Hemingway, ¿puedo invitarle a una copa? Usted es Ernest Hemingway, ¿no?

—Mis amigos me llaman Ernie —dijo el Gran Hombre Sin Afeitar, y volviéndose hacia la barra—: Un martini doble, chico.

Aunque el local parecía lleno a rebosar, no paraba de entrar gente de la calle, gritando saludos, pisoteando pies, excusándose con gruñidos, debatiéndose por alcanzar la barra.

—Elixir de hidrato de terpina con codeína en un poco de zumo de uva, sabe igual que el curaçao. Para qué crees que fui ayudante de un farmacéutico.

—Cuando estaba en la Armada bebíamos Aqua Velva, esa cosa para el afeitado. A bordo podías comprar toda la que quisieras.

—¿Sí? Bueno, ¿alguna vez has bebido pis de pantera, el combustible líquido de los torpedos?

La *jukebox* tocaba «Retorno a Sorrento». Un chico con una afilada barba negra se sentó junto a Esme. «¿Tienes algo de hierba?», le preguntó. Ella meneó la cabeza y levantó la vista hacia Otto, que no había oído y ni siquiera reparado en la persona sentada de lado a su espalda.

—A veces odio de verdad a Max —dijo, y luego reparó en la barba—. Quiero decir que no me fío de él.

No hubo pre sentaciones.

—Ese pobre cabrón —dijo la barba—. Lo tiene claro, tío. Ella también.

—¿Quién? —preguntó Otto sin curiosidad.

—Su chica, la están jodiendo de verdad. El año pasado quiso casarse con él, pero antes quiso que lo analizaran. Max no tenía dinero, de modo que ella se lo pagó. Ahora su psicoanalista dice que está enamorado de ella por todas las neuróticas razones que vienen en el libro. Qué mal rollo, tío. Ha acabado con ella, pero no puede dejarla porque no puede interrumpir su análisis.

—¿Lo sabe ella?

—¿Quién, Edna? Ella…

—¿Edna qué?

—Edna Mims, una rubia de la parte alta. Se la traía aquí para que flipase, y luego se la llevaba a casa y se la tiraba…

—*¿Edna?*— dijo Otto, sin poder creérselo—. ¿Con *ése*?

Todo el mundo se calló un momento al oír un chirrido de frenos en la calle, previendo la satisfacción de un choque estrepitoso. Se llevaron un chasco. En vez de ello, mientras su conversación conglomerada volvía a elevarse, Ed Feasley se abrió paso sobre su oleaje. Lo seguía una rubia ajustándose una liga con paso agitado, como un pez gallo arrastrado por la estela de una yola en un mar revuelto. «Consigue una copa», fue todo lo que pudo decir Ed Feasley mientras se sentaba a la mesa de Otto.

También estaba allí el señor Feddle. Permanecía de pie con dificultad, apoyando la mano en la cadera de una chica alta de pelo claro, cuya cara delicadamente modelada y cuyo acento de Nueva Inglaterra daban fe de su buena crianza. «Su madre es la mujercita más dulce de Boston —decía—, terriblemente interesada en perros, terriblemente antiviviseccionista». Miraban a Anselm, que parecía a punto de caer de rodillas. Tras ella, Don Bildow dijo: «Es un poeta excelente, cuando se lo propone. Ha estado cuidando a mi hija cuando salimos, mi esposa y yo. Desde que me casé no he vuelto a mirar a otra mujer». Luego, con la mano en el hombro cubierto por una camisa de hombre de la chica de pelo claro: «¿Me encuentras atractivo?».

La barba de la mesa de Otto dijo: «¿Es ése Hemingway?». Ed Feasley echó un vistazo al Gran Hombre Sin Afeitar, que acababa de decir: «En la Historia no ha habido ningún marica que haya producido gran arte». Feasley parecía distraído, pero dijo: «Hay algo en él que me resulta familiar».

—Es la cosa más demencial que he oído en mi vida —dijo Otto mirando a Max, parcialmente recuperado. Pidió por señas otra copa. Cuando la terminó dijo—: Tengo que hacer una llamada. Quizá tenga que irme a Perú y al norte de Bolivia.

—¿Esta noche? —preguntó Ed Feasley—. ¿Vas a volar hacia el sur? Me gustaría ir contigo, pero… Oye, ¿no puedes esperar hasta mañana por la tarde…? Mañana tengo que ir a una boda, pero…

—No, ahora sólo tengo que llamar a mi padre —dijo Otto con aire despreocupado, como si conociera a aquel hombre de toda la vida.

—Saluda de mi parte al viejo cabrón —le gritó Ed Feasley mientras se alejaba.

Otto llamó, y concertó una cita para una semana después con la ansiosa voz al otro extremo de la línea. Se encontrarían en el vestíbulo de un hotel del centro, a las ocho. «Podrías llevar puesta esa bufanda verde que te mandé por Navidad hace dos años, Otto, yo tengo una igual. Así nos reconoceremos. Y uso gafas… —dijo la voz con un murmullo, después de que colgaran el teléfono al otro extremo de la línea—. ¿Debería de haber dicho gafas *sin montura*?». Otto había asentido rápidamente; no sabía dónde estaba su bufanda verde, pero prolongar el asunto habría sido demasiado: bastante penoso resultaba ya tener que echar mano de semejante recurso para reconocer a tu propio padre.

Cuando volvió a la mesa había siete personas sentadas. A los pintores se los podía identificar por sus uñas sucias; a los escritores, por su conversación en elaborados monosílabos y las agresivas vulgaridades que disfrazaban sus mentes.

—Sí, estoy psicoanalizando esto —dijo uno de ellos, dando golpecitos en la mesa con *Mamá Oca*.

—Te digo que hay una conspiración de maricas para dominarlo todo. No tienes más que mirar a tu alrededor —dijo el chico de la gorra de caza roja—. Los maricas dominan la literatura, dominan el teatro, dominan el arte. Intenta encontrar una galería donde puedas exponer tus cuadros sin ser marica —añadió, levantando un cigarrillo con dedos embadurnados de pintura—. ¿Por qué puñetas crees que las mujeres tienen hoy esa pinta tan tonta? Porque los maricas diseñan su ropa, los maricas dictan las modas femeninas, los maricas las peinan, los maricas hacen todas las fotos de las revistas de moda. Se han propuesto que las mujeres tengan un aspecto cada vez más idiota, hasta que nadie quiera acostarse con una. Es una conspiración.

Cerca de su mesa, la chica alta y morena que había estado hablando con Anselm dijo a alguien que conocía:

—¿Conoces a esa chica? Quiero que me la presentes.

Con la mano en el hombro de Esme, Otto se inclinó para decir:

—Vámonos de aquí.

—¿Quieres ir a una fiesta? —dijo Ed Feasley alzando la vista—. Es un baile por todo lo alto que una panda de maricas da en Harlem.

—¿Travelos? —preguntó alguien.

—¿Qué es «travelos»?

—Cuando van todos vestidos de mujer.

—Ese baile es de travelos —dijo otro—. Muy travelos.

Se oyó un fuerte gañido. Anselm, a cuatro patas, se había encontrado con el dachshund, y tenía una de sus orejas en la boca. La chica alta y morena miró hacia la puerta y vio a un tímido chico italiano sin barbilla que intentaba entrar y era rechazado. «Dios», dijo, «ahí está el cretino de mi primo. Voy aquí al lado». «Le he encontrado un médico», decía un joven. «Lo hará por doscientos cincuenta, pero no consigo hablar con ella. Cada vez que llamo sólo se pone Rose, la chiflada de su hermana Rose».

Otto y Ed Feasley, con Esme entre ambos, se dirigieron hacia la puerta. El Gran Hombre Sin Afeitar volvió la cara cuando pasaba Feasley. «Claro que le conozco. Qué puñetas, el señor Memling es un pintor estupendo», decía, sacándose del bolsillo una petaca de litro. «¿Te importaría llenar esto de martinis? Sí, lo que has leído sobre mí es verdad, me gusta llevar algo encima. Claro, le echaré un vistazo a tu novela en cualquier momento», terminó, mientras el chico tendía un billete de diez dólares por encima de la barra.

—Crissto, estoy seguro de que lo conozco de algo —dijo Feasley.

—Eso es porque es Ernest Hemingway —dijo una voz cercana.

—¿París? —dijo la chica de pelo claro—. Me paso la ciudad entera por el culo.

Delante de ellos sacaban a empujones al señor Feddle. En la calle se encontraron con Hannah. «¿Está Stanley ahí dentro?», preguntó. «No lo hemos visto». «Tiene que ir al hospital a ver a su madre», dijo Hannah. «No termina de morirse». Luego se fundió en aquel horno, donde la *jukebox* tocaba «Retorno a Sorrento».

—¿Dónde está Adeline? —preguntó Otto.

—No lo sé. Que se vaya al infierno —dijo Feasley.

Encontraron a Adeline dormida en el coche. Afortunadamente era un nuevo modelo, con el chasis bajo y el centro de gravedad bajo, lo que evitaba que volcase en las curvas. Tuvieron algún problema para entrar en la fiesta, cuando Ed Feasley se ofreció a pelearse con quien quisiera dejarlos fuera. Los salvó la aparición de una crapulosa Cleopatra, que saludó a Esme y Adeline con un áspid de goma, creyendo reconocerlas, chillando como entusiasta bienvenida que sus disfraces eran *divinos*.

Era toda una fiesta. Debía de haber unos cuatrocientos.

Llegaron cuando una preciosidad con un traje de noche blanco sin tirantes terminaba una canción titulada «Soy un trocito de cuero», seguida en escena por un *striptease* en dos partes. La primera artista era demasiado obviamente una mujer, entrada en carnes. Se bamboleó a la luz de los focos, meneó una gran extensión flácida de trasero y derramó sobre el público una delantera monstruosa, entre burlonas carcajadas, para abandonar al fin el escenario con un revuelo de horrendas lorzas. Luego apareció una espigada belleza, se inclinó ante los aplausos atronadores y moviéndose de forma perfectamente acompasada se despojó de una prenda tras otra para descubrir unos miembros exquisitos (sin vello, pero un pelín musculosos) entre prolongadas ondulaciones de pelo rubio, que le llegaba hasta la cintura, y sinuosas caricias en torno al sostén de lentejuelas. Ed Feasley, que había murmurado con repugnancia viril ante la primera, contempló esta exhibición con perplejo placer, hasta que, para terminar, el sostén fue agitado en alto dejando a la vista un pecho desierto, dejando a Feasley inclinado hacia delante en su asiento con pasmada indignación, dejando el escenario en medio de una salva de aplausos frenéticos.

—¿Eres *realmente* una chica? —preguntó a Esme un joven Bronzino enfundado en terciopelo, palpando con incredulidad su pequeño pecho. Ella se echó a reír, y Otto se volvió blandiendo su cabestrillo; como Infessura, quizá, escribiendo de la corte papal de Sixto IV «puerorum amator et sodomita fuit», se pidió una copa.

En aquel festival había de hecho una atmósfera religiosa; religiosa en el sentido de devoción, adoración, celebración de la deidad, el que tenía antes de que la religión terminara confundiéndose con sistemas de ética y moralidad, para convertirse en una dolorosa aflicción para las mismas cosas que una vez había exaltado. Aquellas salas resultaban tan festivas como las procesiones dionisíacas, en las que chicos griegos vestidos de mujeres llevaban los *ithyphalli* por las calles, entre los gritos regocijados de todos los sexos presentes, y estaban todos; como la época gloriosa del santuario de Hércules en Cos, donde los sacerdotes

vestían con atuendos femeninos; del santuario de Venus en Chipre, donde los hombres vestidos con ropa de mujer distinguían inmediatamente a las mujeres, pues llevaban ropa de hombre: el día dorado de la novia desflorada por el *lingam*, abriéndose de piernas ante la estatua de Priapo para ofrecer su virginidad a aquel dios que, como todos los dioses, hasta la deidad cristiana que lo ejerció con María en la forma del Espíritu Santo, tenía *jus primae noctis*, y no permitía ningún subterfugio. Así, bastantes de aquellos jóvenes novios habían reculado sobre la imagen priápica y dejado allí sus flores. Así, una voz dijo ahora: «Pues vámonos a Viena, han anunciado que puedes ir de travelo por la calle ¡si no ofendes la moral pública! ¿No es encantador?». A lo que contestó una persona morena con un traje de noche de muaré verde: «Más de una vez me he vestido de cura, para no molestar a nadie llevando faldas. A veces casi no puedo *respirar* con pantalones».

Así, a lo largo de todas las épocas los sacerdotes han llevado faldas, en respetuosa imitación de las deidades andróginas que reinaron antes de que se adorase a Baal como un pilar, antes de que Osiris ostentase una erección, antes de que los hombres conociesen su papel en la generación, cuando creían que las mujeres con faldas procreaban por sí solas. Cuando hicieron este descubrimiento, el sol sustituyó a la luna como todopoderoso, y las *Lupercalia* llegaron a Roma, mujeres desnudas azotadas por las calles que rodeaban la colina del Palatino, y la cruz se convirtió en un símbolo tan glorioso de la tríada masculina que muchas religiones la adoptaron, de modo tan notorio que cuando la nueva religión que ensalzaba al hombre impotente y a la mujer estéril triunfó sobre un imperio estupefacto, los primeros padres con faldas de la Iglesia prohibieron su uso.

Así, todavía ahora, bajo una palmera en maceta con frondas plateadas, un joven que hacía una solemne declaración tenía cogido a otro joven de aquella parte donde los primitivos hebreos ponían la mano al prestar juramento, porque representaba a Yahvé.

Ed Feasley tenía una mano sobre un terso hombro achocolatado que brotaba de un traje de noche de organdí lavanda, al amparo de la sombra de una columna.

También había mujeres allí. Una que estaba sentada en una gran mesa cercana a la pista de baile, con un traje sastre de anchas hombreras, solapas planas de gro, pelo corto y manos pesadas (se parecía bastante a George Washington sin su peluca, por la época en que se casó con Martha Dandridge —Custis— por dinero), había tenido problemas recientemente, según dijo alguien, por secuestrar a una foca con intenciones inmorales. Llevaba dieciséis años sin hablar con un *hombre.* Sumido en algún lugar de su niñez había un nombre de niñita que en tiempos había sido suyo. Ahora sólo lo conocían sus banqueros. Los amigos la llamaban Popeye. Ahora, hablando con una criatura exquisitamente engominada conocida por miles como héroe de la escena, la pantalla y la radio, decía: «Me gustaría ser un chiquillo para poder bailar *contigo*». Los interrumpió la Gran Anna, que iba de esmoquin.

—*¿Habéis* visto a Agnes? —dijo el sueco—. Querida, tiene la llave de mi *baúl,* y tengo absolutamente *todo* allí guardado. Un vestido de lo más delicioso que me hizo especialmente Jacques Griffes para esta *noche,* y he tenido que venir con este absurdo esmoquin, sencillamente todos creen que soy una *mujer*…

Junto a ellos estaba el segundo artista del *striptease,* ahora vestido de lamé plateado.

—¡Rudy! —dijo el sueco—, tu baile ha sido una verdadera tortura.

—Me siento horriblemente mal —dijo Rudy—. Llevo toda la noche con escalofríos. Qué perfume tan divino. ¿Habéis visto un libro que tenía por aquí?

—Esto es sólo *Mi pecado,* se lo he cogido prestado a Agnes. ¿Es éste tu libro? —Rudy alargó la mano para cogerlo—. Pero ¿qué haces *tú* leyendo a Tertuliano?

—Para mi trabajo, por supuesto. Estoy diseñando trajes deportivos para una orden de monjas, y un amigo muy querido me ha dicho que deben llevar las orejas completamente tapadas. Me ha dejado este libro —dijo Rudy, acariciando a Tertuliano—. *De Virginibus Velandis,* sobre la necesidad de velar a las vírgenes. Val me ha contado esta tarde unas historias de lo más divinamente absurdo. ¿Sabes por qué deben llevar las monjas tapadas las orejas? ¡Para no concebir, querida! La Virgen concibió de ese modo, el Logos penetró por sus orejas. No tengo ni idea de lo que es un *logos,* pero no suena nada bien, ¿verdad? Val citaba a Virgilio y a todo tipo de muertos. Vaya, todo el mundo creía que todo tipo de animales concebían de ese modo. Pensaban que las yeguas quedaban preñadas por el viento. Así que tengo que leer esto para saber realmente qué demonios estoy haciendo y taparles las orejas, porque hay ángeles malos esperando para hacerles unas cosas de lo más asqueroso. ¿Te imaginas concebir en la cancha de bádminton?

—Suena realmente celestial —dijo la Gran Anna—. Pero ¿qué perfume te has puesto?

—La verdad es que no sabría decírtelo. Lo hace un amigo mío muy querido. *Fuisse deam,* así lo llama. Flotaba una fragancia, se adivinaba que acababa de aparecer una diosa —dijo Rudy, mientras se alejaba valseando hacia la pista de baile.

—Prefiero el francés —murmuró la Gran Anna, mirando acremente el fugitivo lamé plateado de Rudy—. ¿Dónde está Agnes? —dijo retorciéndose las manos.

Otto estaba intentando pedir otra copa. Contemplaba el festival con ojos vidriosos, y por seguridad había decidido quedarse sentado hasta poder reunir energías para marcharse. Hizo gestos con la mano mala a un mulato que pasaba, cuyo pelo negro sobresalía cuatro pulgadas por detrás de su cabeza cónica con gomosa fluidez, y el mulato pasó de largo con su bandeja. En su lugar apareció revoloteando Cleopatra para preguntarle el número de teléfono de Maude Munk, «porque le van a enviar una ricura de bebé por correo aéreo desde Suecia, y tenemos *tantas* ganas de tener uno…». Con la concentración de una memoria aplicada, Otto se inventó un número de teléfono. «¿Bailas?», le preguntó Cleopatra. Adeline volvió sola a la mesa.

—Estaba bailando con un tipo y de repente me suelta y dice: «*Eres* una chica, ¿verdad?», y me deja tirada en medio de la pista. Míralo, es ese chico alto y guapo; tiene pinta de haber estudiado en Princeton.

—Probablemente lo haya hecho —murmuró Otto. Luego se volvió en redondo hacia Cleopatra—. ¿Quieres dejar de meter esa maldita cosa en mi cabestrillo? —dijo, y la reina, alarmada, retiró el áspid.

—Llevas un disfraz monísimo —dijo Cleopatra, y luego, bruscamente y como indignada—: ¿Es que no *eres* marica?

—Por supuesto que no —dijo Otto, indignadamente poco original.

—Qué *vergüenza,* —dijo Cleopatra—. Tengo que encontrar mi falúa.

Otto buscó a Esme, no la vio. Buscó a Feasley, no lo vio. Estaba a punto de decirle algo a Adeline cuando ella se levantó de la mesa y se dirigió hacia la pista de baile diciendo: «Veo a un caballero».

Una voz dijo: «Nunca he visto tanta seda mala sobre tantos cuerpos *divinos»*. Otra dijo: «Fuguémonos juntos». Y otra: «No puedes *tocarme*, porque estoy en estado de gracia. Mañana me bautizan, ¡date cuenta! *Mañana*…».

—Potrillo mío —canturreó una voz.

—Pero creía que Victoria y Albert Hall iban a estar aquí. ¿Has leído el libro de ella? ¿Has visto la comedia de él? ¿Dónde están? —dijo la Gran Anna, que parecía, como había parecido durante toda la noche, a punto de echarse a llorar—. ¡Oh, Herschel! ¡Herschel! ¿Quieres dejar de cantar y venir a consolarme?

—¿Qué te pasa, cariño?

—Es Agnes. Tiene mi *llave.*

—Sí, cariño —dijo Herschel. Estaba casi inmóvil, pero se mantenía erguido—. Tengo que irme a casa a trabajar —dijo con una voz que era más bien una presencia líquida y apenas brotaba de su garganta—. Trabajo. Trabajo. Trabajo.

—¿Qué trabajo?

—Tengo que escribir un discurso. ¿Has leído *Los árboles del hogar*? Apesta, cariño. Es un éxito de ventas. Estoy escribiendo discursos para el autor del éxito de ventas *Árboles del hogar*, cariño. Regeneración moral, influencias insidiosas que socavan nuestros más gzzjuu juuu «Me voy al Siam holandés, sí, me voy…» —cantó.

—¡No te he visto desde que atracó el barco!

Al oír esto, la Gran Anna se volvió en redondo.

—¡Victoria! ¿Dónde está Albert? Me alegro tanto de *verte,* cariño.

—Está bailando con un arzobispo. Pero dime, querido, ¿has visto aquí a una chica alta y morena? Se llama Seraphina di Brescia, esperaba que estuviera aquí, sé que está en Nueva York. La conocí en el Monocle de París…

—No, pero ¿has visto tú a Agnes? ¿A Agnes Deigh?

—Bromeas, querido. Dime, ¿conseguiste que te mandaran de Italia a tu pequeño como-se-llame?

—¡El pequeño Giono! —dijo el sueco, retorciéndose las manos de nuevo—. No, y he estado acosando a los de inmigración, pero no quieren ayudarme. No, si tendrá *quince* años cuando consiga al fin que me lo manden, y entonces no valdrá para *nada.* Voy a tener que adoptarlo, es la única solución. Pero antes de adoptarlo tengo que convertirme, querida mía, date cuenta. Tiene que tener un *padre* católico. Vuelvo allí la semana que viene.

—¿A Roma?

—Oh, sí, no soporto seguir aquí un momento más.

Al ver acercarse a Feasley, Otto se levantó trabajosamente.

—Vámonos de aquí —dijo—. ¿Dónde está Esme? ¿Y Adeline?

—Que se vayan al infierno. Espera un minuto. Hay por ahí una negrita que quiero llevarme. Mira a ver

si la encuentras mientras voy al baño. Lleva un vestido morado.

—Nos conocimos en París —dijo alguien—, en el Reine Blanche…

—En el Carrousel…

—En Copenhague…

—El Cáete Muerto…

—El Buey sobre el Tejado…

—¿Seraphina? ¿La que llaman Jimmy? Sé que tiene dinero, pero ¿en qué se lo gasta?

—No seas tonto. Se lo gasta en chicas.

—Sí, querida —dijo la pareja de baile de Adeline en su pelo rubio, que se derramaba sobre las solapas de gro—. Debemos seguir el consejo de Emerson de tratar a la gente como si fuera real, porque quizá lo sea…

—«A mí y a bebé nos cocieron en un pastel, la salsa estaba muy calentita» —brotó una voz temblorosa de algún lugar en medio de la pista de baile.

—Claro que da tiempo —dijo la voz de Agnes Deigh—, tú coge la llave y date *prisa.* Y recuérdame que te dé la dirección de mi madre en Roma…

—Y la dirección de Monseigneur Fé, tiene una capilla al lado mismo del Vaticano donde oficia unas ceremonias *matrimoniales* de lo más divino…

Así bailaban, como espoleados por la conciencia de un indio tarahumara, cuyo único pecado puede ser no haber bailado lo suficiente.

—Venga, vámonos de aquí —dijo Feasley, pasando junto a la mesa sin detenerse—. Crissto, la he encontrado, a la chica del vestido morado. Estaba junto a mí, en el urinario de al lado…

—Odio a las mujeres —dijo una voz. Se detuvo. Luego—. También odio a los hombres.

Y así, como profetizó el Señor por medio del griego Clemente: «He venido a destruir la obra de la mujer, esto es, la concupiscencia, cuyas obras son la procreación y la muerte».

La fiesta terminó y se dispersó en parejas y tríos y figuras solitarias dando tumbos por calles y portales, todos se internaron en la oscuridad repitiéndose y preparándose para encontrarse otra vez, para volver a reunirse y ensayar sus desastres intercambiables; y el lugar pareció un reino fulminado por un anatema papal, como cuando Philippe Auguste, astuto y despiadado monarca de Francia, fue excomulgado por casarse con Agnes estando aún en vida su esposa Ingeborg, y bajo el interdicto no hubo en su reino ni bautismo, ni boda, ni entierro, y los cuerpos se pudrían en el camino real.

—Qué *divertida* ha sido —dijo Agnes Deigh, apoyándose contra un cubo de basura. Herschel, que estaba a su lado rascándose convulsivamente la empapada pechera de su camisa de esmoquin, asintió con el ruido de alguien que se ahoga. Se excusó, y después de vomitar en un portal abierto, volvió cantando. No cabía duda: esta noche iba a conseguirlo.

—Tu *striptease* ha sido *escandaloso*, Rudy —dijo.

—¿Dónde está Tertuliano? No puedo perderlo —dijo Rudy, y deslizó un blanco brazo sin vello en torno a Herschel, se arrebujó en su capa de noche y con exasperación casi masculina se echó el largo pelo rubio sobre el cuello de piel—. Llama a un taxi, cariño, por el amor de Dios. Me siento fatal. Siento como si fuera a tener un aborto.

Poco después emergió Agnes Deigh de entre dos coches aparcados. Iba hablando. Pero no había nadie con quien hablar. Allí no había nadie en absoluto. Desde la esquina de la calle se acercaba un ruido atronador, un camión del Departamento de Sanidad que se paraba cada diez o doce yardas para abrir sus enormes fauces traseras y masticar rechinando sus dientes de acero las inmensas raciones que dejaban fuera para saciarlo, cristal triturado y madera astillada entre sus encías exangües. Allí, sola, apoyada a menos de diez bocados de distancia, Agnes se asustó de repente. Se sintió todo lo aterrorizada que le permitía la bruma de su conciencia, y echó a correr por la calle en sentido contrario, zigzagueando con pasos frenéticos como si esquivara árboles, una gama herida huyendo del paciente cazador en un paisaje de Piero di Cosimo. Llegó a un portal iluminado, se abrió paso como pudo hasta el vasto interior vacío y se desplomó en un banco.

Ed Feasley y Otto corrían a setenta y tres millas por hora. Pero ninguno de los dos quería ir a Connecticut, y cuando se dieron cuenta de que avanzaban en aquella dirección el coche giró en redondo con un fuerte chirrido, y evitó lo que habría podido ser un patinazo fatal golpeando su derrapante parte trasera contra una farola. Luego se dirigió hacia el sur. «Quiero ver a cuánto lo pongo en esa rampa que rodea la Grand Central», dijo Ed, muy animado. Mientras estaba consciente, le gustaba pasarlo bien. Llevaba años

pasándolo bien de forma ininterrumpida, sin permitirse ni un solo momento de duda cobarde. No tenía miedo: ni una pizca de ese miedo que se da por supuesto en cualquier definición de la cordura. En la universidad, en tranquilas veladas pasadas en su cuarto cuando se le acababa la asignación, se había divertido y había divertido a otros golpeándose el dorso del puño con un cepillo de pelo duro, y agitando luego la mano en círculos hasta que la presión de la sangre descendente rompía pequeños capilares y salpicaba la alfombra y el techo de puntitos que al día siguiente se volvían marrones; o apretándose la yugular ante un espejo con el pulgar y el índice hasta que su cara perdía todo el color y recobraba la conciencia mientras caía; o dejando caer cigarrillos encendidos en los dobladillos de los pantalones del traje de doscientos dólares de un amigo; o prendiéndose la mano tras sumergirla en combustible para mecheros; o prendiendo los periódicos abiertos de la gente en el metro un momento antes de que se cerrasen las puertas del vagón, dejándolo en el andén estremecido de risa ante la fugitiva conflagración. Le gustaba Pasarlo Bien.

El coche se detuvo con tanta brusquedad como si se hubiera estrellado contra un muro. Otto se desprendió del salpicadero sujetándose la cabeza. Estaban delante de un hospital.

—¿Qué pasa? —preguntó, frotándose una mancha en la manga hasta que se dio cuenta de que era un haz de luz de la farola de encima.

—Siempre he querido tocarle la cabeza a un fiambre. Los afeitan —dijo Ed Feasley.

Un minuto después estaban en un pasillo subterráneo del hospital, hablando con el vigilante. Se sentía solo. Sólo querían saber por dónde se iba a Connecticut. Se les dijo. El vigilante siguió su ronda.

En una gran sala refrigerada, Ed Feasley levantó una sábana y acarició una mollera lisa. Gruñía de placer. Otto abría y cerraba cajones. Luego se volvió con su trofeo. Era una pierna lo bastante pequeña para ser de una mujer, bastante vieja, ligeramente ennegrecida por los dedos del pie y con el extremo cortado pulcramente envuelto en esparadrapo. Pero la feliz imaginación de Ed también había estado ocupada: había juntado con cierto esfuerzo dos cadáveres solitarios de sexo opuesto, erectos ahora en el acto de la vida. Pero ni aun aquel placer mortal alteró sus expresiones, igualadas en inconsolable similitud por sus cabezas afeitadas.

Otto tenía problemas para envolver la pierna.

—Deberías quitarte ese pañuelo —dijo Ed Feasley—. Al fin y al cabo lo llevas de coña, ¿no? Trae, dame la pierna —y salió con ella bajo el brazo, parcialmente envuelta en el pañuelo azul.

El coche rugió hacia el sur con la primera luz del alba.

—Tenemos que *hacer* algo con eso —dijo Feasley, señalando con la cabeza el pasajero fragmentario del asiento trasero—. Debemos regalárselo a alguien. A alguien que lo necesite.

—Hay una chica a la que me gustaría regalárselo —dijo Otto—. Me gustaría regalárselo a Edna Mims, maldita sea, en una caja, en una bonita caja de flores blanca y larga enviada por Max Schling.

—¡Eso es! —dijo el conductor—. Es la chica con la que salías en la universidad, ¿no? Tiene un buen polvo. Ahora tenemos que conseguir la caja.

La luz repentina de Madison Square reveló al día acercándose rápidamente, aunque el cielo no estaba aún coloreado por el alba; pero con aquel cielo que se aclaraba por momentos, y con el golpe que se había dado en la cabeza, la sobriedad y el temor descendieron sobre Otto.

—Será mejor que no lo hagamos —dijo.

—Venga, hombre, es una idea genial.

Desembocaron con estruendo en Washington Square. Otto trataba desesperadamente de imaginar una alternativa, algo más seguro, alguien indefenso. Entonces dijo:

—Stanley.

—¿Stanley?

—Le diremos que es una reliquia. Es católico, y debe de querer tener una reliquia. Le regalaremos la pierna izquierda del papa.

—No se lo creerá.

—Se lo creerá.

—Yo no me lo creería, aunque fuera católico.

—Él es católico. Se lo creerá. ¿Cómo puede saber qué aspecto tiene la pierna del papa?

—¿Cómo puede saberlo nadie, salvo el papa?

—Salvo el papa. Ha habido más de un papa.

—Los demás están muertos.

—De acuerdo, están muertos. Eso es de un muerto.

—Bueno, entonces no puede llevar muerto mucho tiempo.

—Mira, no tenemos por qué decirle que es la pierna de un papa. Stanley vive en un sótano. Lo único que tenemos que hacer es romper el cerrojo de la verja, podemos hacerlo de algún modo, y metérsela en la cama mientras duerme. Al despertar creerá que es el papa.

—¿El papa en la cama con él?

—Pero luego verá que no hay nadie pegado a ella. Entonces lo sabrá.

—¿Qué sabrá?

—Bueno, entonces sabrá que el papa ha muerto.

El coche giró hacia la Sexta Avenida.

A las cuatro de la mañana la enfermera dijo a Stanley que su madre estaba durmiendo bien, que sería mejor que se fuera a casa y descansara un poco, que si ocurría algo se pondrían en contacto con él inmediatamente. Su madre ocupaba una de esas camas de hospital que pueden girarse o torcerse en cualquier dirección, para acomodar cualquier extravagante accidente o enfermedad humana. Pero ni siquiera ahora, aunque las cuentas negras yacían inmóviles entre sus dedos, estaba dormida. Nada de eso. Tras una mirada tranquilizadora a sus dientes en el vaso, había cerrado los ojos y fingido dormir para que se fueran, mortalmente cansada como estaba de todas sus voces sosegadas por la esperanza de que viviera, de sus caras ensombrecidas por la aflicción mientras confiaban en que no muriera, cuando eso, de forma inequívocamente razonable, era lo único que quería ella.

Por un lado, estaba segura de que en algún momento de la operación se habían dejado olvidadas unas tijeras en su interior. Por otro, le habían puesto música mientras hacían la amputación (esto se llamaba terapia), y no podía quitarse la melodía de la cabeza. Cuando pensaba en su miembro ausente recordaba la melodía; luego, mientras su agotada mente amusical la arrastraba desvalida por aquella melodía, recordaba la pierna, que entonces empezaba a picarle. Cuando se inclinaba para rascársela no estaba allí. Y cuando doblaba el cuerpo las tijeras se movían. Luego empezaba otra vez la melodía. ¿Podía esperar, mientras se llevaban sus partes una tras otra en una botella, en un vaso, en una bandeja? ¿En qué lamentable estado se presentaría cuando llegase a su Destino final? Curvó el pulgar sobre el crucifijo, y un movimiento solitario de la sábana hacia el final de la cama delató su vigilia, cuando rozó con el pie una barra metálica. Nadie lo notó. Stanley se fue a casa.

Entró en su habitación, cerró la puerta con cerrojo y echó la cadena, se tumbó de espaldas sin desvestirse y se quedó mirando la grieta del techo. Al principio solo había medido aquella grieta una vez a la semana, pero en los últimos meses la medía cada noche, y desde principios de diciembre de dos formas: a lo largo de su extensión resquebrajada, y la distancia en línea recta desde la esquina de la habitación hasta el extremo de la grieta. En veinte meses se había alargado una pulgada y cinco octavos. ¿Cuánto crecería aún, antes de que aquel techo, con la súbita impaciencia de las cosas inanimadas, se abriera bostezando sobre él y le cayera encima con la atónita presentación de las vidas de arriba en la suya? Quién podía vivir en una ciudad como aquélla sin el terror de una sepultura repentina: los edificios de cien pisos, construidos en un día, se derrumbarían obviamente mucho antes que la catedral de Fenestrula, por ejemplo, que había tardado siglos en construirse, y llevaba siglos en pie. Una foto de esta catedral colgaba en la pared al otro lado de la habitación, y cuando se tumbaba en la cama era para quedarse mirando al techo o, de costado, a aquella foto, la figura que parecía elevarse hacia el cielo en la mole aguzada de la catedral. ¡Fenestrula! Si alguna vez iba a Italia, era en aquella catedral donde quería tocar el órgano; una ambición solitaria, una epifanía en soledad. Mientras tanto llevaba ocultos un pequeño martillo y un cincel, herramientas de escape, e intentaba evitar viajar bajo tierra.

En el techo crecía el gráfico de la existencia de Stanley, su principal preocupación: el Desgaste.

Todo se desgastaba. Más aún, vivía en una tierra donde todo estaba calculado para desgastarse, todo hecho del diseño a la sustancia teniendo sólo presente su desgaste y sustitución, y la sustitución de ese substitutivo. A modo de pisapapeles, sobre el montón de papel pautado sembrado de borrones, había un fragmento de cerámica de la colonia romana de Leptis Magna, en África del Norte. Era ligeramente cónico, de forma triangular, descolorido, deslustrado, y en el borde festoneado se distinguían casi marcas de pulgares: sin valor como *objet,*
d'art
tenía lo que podía acreditarse como valor táctil, y poco más, salvo que había sido hecho para *durar*. Y Stanley, que comía en la vecindad con cubiertos de metal prensado, y bebía en vasos de papel y tazas de plástico, a menudo se quedaba sentado en la mesa durante minutos enteros, calibrando el peso deshonesto de un salero de plástico, meditando en Leptis Magna, que perduraba todavía en la costa libia del mar

interior. ¿Agujas de tocadiscos?, ¿cuchillas de afeitar?, se tiraban enteras, cuando sus puntas o bordes se desgastaban. ¿Baterías de automóvil? Alguien le había dicho que las baterías de los coches europeos duraban años, pero aquí las compañías poseían las patentes de esas baterías de larga duración, y las tenían bien guardadas mientras vendían otras para sustituir las que habían vendido el año anterior. Pero había en ello algo más que la burda tiranía del espíritu empresarial; y la publicidad, cuyos chancros abiertos asomaban por todas partes, era sólo un síntoma de la gran enfermedad, aquella plaga de novedad, aquel ataque febril y finalmente parético [2] ordenado por una conserjería del tiempo controlada por relojes, observatorios, señales horarias por la radio, la voz grabada de una mujer (muerta o viva) que diseccionaba el último minuto al teléfono cuando marcabas NERVIOSO.

Stanley miró su reloj de pulsera. Casi siempre se lo veía con ropa sucia y raída, pero tenía más. En el armario junto a su cabeza, que estaba cerrado con llave, había tres trajes, dos casi nuevos y el tercero sin estrenar. Había también dos pares de zapatos, marrones y negros, que sacaba y limpiaba cada semana. Tenía doscientas cuchillas de afeitar nuevas, y una piedra porosa sobre la que podía afilar malamente las usadas, lo que explicaba su aspecto a medio afeitar. (Esperaba tener algún día una navaja Rolls, pero tenía entendido que los fabricantes norteamericanos de cuchillas ponían trabas a su venta).

Estos eran los signos externos. Pero como todo terror legítimo, esta obsesión por el desgaste marcaba cada instante de su vida corporal. Stanley se cortaba el pelo en raras ocasiones, y aun éstas muy poco. No se lavaba a menudo. La gente debía de sospecharlo. ¿Qué pensaban? Pero quizá fuera mejor: que pensaran lo que quisieran. Cada contacto abrasivo con la manopla de baño y el jabón cáustico *debía* desgastar un poco el cuerpo. Pero aquí surgía otro enigma: si el lavado desgastaba las cosas, ¿qué ocurría con la ropa? Siempre demoraba un día la muda de su camisa, no sólo para que le durase más sino para conservar las limpias (y algunas sin estrenar) *listas.* Pero cuando, finalmente, la que llevaba puesta iba a la lavandería, ¿no era necesario utilizar los jabones y programas más contundentes para lavarla? Y, en consecuencia, ¿no se desgastaba más deprisa?

Sin embargo, los cálculos que más lo desazonaban eran los relativos al Último Momento. ¿Tendría tiempo para lavarse a la perfección y vestirse con prendas sin usar y sin arrugas? Quizá no. ¡Quizá la muerte lo arrebatase tal como estaba!, una idea tan desconcertante que cuando lo asaltaba de lleno sorprendía a todo el mundo apareciendo inmaculado durante uno o dos días, dejando sin respuesta (salvo en su propia aprensión) la pregunta cordial «¿Adónde vas, Stanley?». Quizá lo que le había ocurrido cuando fue a hacerse el reconocimiento médico para el ejército pretendiera ser una lección: cuando le dijeron que se desvistiera, la mugre que tenía encima lo hizo sentirse tan humillado que se metió en un cuarto de baño donde el único sitio que encontró para lavarse en privado, en secreto si queréis, fue la mismísima taza del retrete. ¿Tendría tiempo?

La perfecta muerte desnuda de un bebé (justo después del bautizo).

¿Y santa Catalina? ¿Acaso no quedó despedazada por aquella rueda giratoria? Pero ella *tenía* aquella rueda, y san Lorenzo su parrilla, como testimonio de su aspecto indecoroso. No como en este mundo: las cosas se desgastaban, y uno las perdía de mil maneras ridículas, sin la menor relación con cualquier idea de devoción, martirio, sacrificio… ¿Y su madre?, un pensamiento que había estado latente bajo la superficie de todos estos otros. ¿Y *ella*?

En aquel momento le traspasó una muela un pinchazo de dolor, que cedió embotándose lentamente mientras volvía la cara hacia la pared, y los ojos hacia el crucifijo que tenía allí. La sorda pulsación persistía, se agarró la mandíbula con una mano de finos dedos fríos y volvió otra vez la cara. En una mesa baja junto a su cabeza, acumulando polvo y motitas negras del río y de una vía férrea de maniobras, había recortes de periódicos, conservados sin otro motivo que el de evitar tirarlos, fotos desparejadas e información inconexa, un fragmento de la cual podría tal vez servir de algo en caso de necesidad. Encima estaba el más reciente, el reportaje especial sobre la niña española que iba a ser canonizada en la Semana Santa del año entrante. El dolor de su mandíbula se atenuó mientras contemplaba su foto, que colgaba boca abajo del borde de la mesa, y su mente mezcló pensamientos e imágenes volviéndolos más vívidos e irrelevantes, como hacía siempre que yacía de aquel modo, tan incapaz de dormir de noche como de sacudirse el letargo durante el día.

Se estremeció al pensar en Esme, seducida por la aprensión en un mundo bastante real para ella: aterrada un día cuando un avión que volaba a la velocidad del sonido destripó el cielo sobre ellos y evisceró sus fragmentos en náusea desde sus propios cuerpos, que caminaban debajo. Si hubiera ido solo no le habría dado importancia, lo habría excluido de sí como hacía con todo el tráfico frenético del mundo. Pero su terror lo sobresaltó, y tenía razón. Y, por otra parte, si un día soleado se hubieran encontrado por la calle con aquel primitivo jesuita, el padre Anchieta, cobijado bajo el parasol de pájaros que convocaba para que

se cernieran sobre él y mantuvieran la paz, aunque hubiera apreciado sin curiosidad profana aquel recurso, probablemente no habría contado a nadie lo que había visto. ¡Pero el avión! Si Esme se hubiera encontrado con san Pedro de Alcántara, san Pedro Nolasco o san Pedro González caminando sobre las olas del mar, según solían, aquellas excursiones le habrían parecido más sensatas que aquella línea de extravagancia cacodemoníaca que hendía la mismísima bóveda del cielo.

Stanley se incorporó de repente, moviéndose con brusquedad como para romper un hechizo. Se quedó rígidamente sentado en el borde de la cama, apretando los dientes como para disciplinar la actividad de su mente, que casi nunca podía estimular durante el día cuando intentaba ponerse a trabajar. ¿Cómo podía haber hecho Bach todo lo que hizo?, ¿y Palestrina?, ¿y los Gabrieli?, ¿y los conciertos para órgano de Corelli? Aquéllos eran los hombres cuya obra admiraba por encima de todo lo demás en esta vida, pues habían tocado con reconocimiento los orígenes del designio. ¿Y cómo? Con música compuesta para la Iglesia. No compuesta con la obsesión de un adelanto de derechos de autor; no compuesta para que la tocasen hombres vestidos con esmóquines raídos, para que la cantasen chicas cubiertas de lentejuelas, para que se viera envuelta en disputas salariales y derechos radiofónicos, derechos de grabación, derechos sindicales; no compuesta para que la emitiese una caja de plástico del tamaño de un cráneo empotrada en la pared, como fondo para seducciones y revistas de humor, para discusiones sobre automóviles, personalidades, tallas de camisas, cócteles, el flu-flu-flu de una chica solitaria lavándose la faja; no compuesta para que la interrumpiesen con recomendaciones de remedios para el dolor de cabeza, calmantes estomacales, detergentes, brillantina… ¡Oh, Dios!, *dove sei Fenestrula*?

Pero no se levantó, sino que siguió sentado mirando hacia la forma borrosa de la foto de la catedral. Debajo de ella estaba la mesa en la que trabajaba, con un teclado de prácticas de cartón en el centro, cercado a ambos lados por montones desiguales de papeles, uno sujeto con el fragmento de cerámica, el otro con el *Liber usualis* abierto por la *Missa pro defunctis*, con las notas apretadas de su escritura en los márgenes de las palabras majestuosas impresas entre los compases, «Quántus trémor est futúrus, Quando júdex est ventúrus…». Y había una página señalada con una maltrecha hoja de papel de carta. Era un *Misereris omnium*, y en la hoja estaban escritos estos versos de Miguel Angel, y a su lado el vacilante intento de traducción de Stanley:

O	Oh
Dio,	Dios,
o	oh
Dio,	Dios,
o	oh
Dio,	Dios,
Chi	Que
m'a	me
tolto	has
a	sacado
me	de
stesso	mí
	mismo
	de
	mi
	ser
Ch'a	Que
me	estaba
fusse	(lo)
piu	más
presso	cerca
	de
	mí

O Y
piu podía
di hacer
me más
potesse, que
yo
más
por
mí
che ¿Qué
possio puedo
hacer?
O
Dio,
o
Dio,
o
Dio.

Advirtió con el rabillo del ojo unas manchitas de porquería en el suelo, y según su costumbre alargó la mano y chasqueó los dedos, para ver si alguna se movía por su propia voluntad. El diente le dolía sordamente, y mientras volvía a tumbarse se acordó otra vez de su madre, a quien iba a dedicar su obra cuando la terminase. Miró la hora, apagó la luz y, con los ojos cerrados, se sumió en una visión del cobre antifónico de Giovanni Gabrieli brotando a raudales de las dos galerías del coro de San Marcos, para reunirse sobre las cabezas de los congregados debajo.

Su obra, siempre inconclusa, era como el encargo de un príncipe de la Edad Media, el príncipe que ordenaba la construcción de su tumba, y luego tenía continuamente ocupado al artista con una sucesión de puertas y chimeneas, los desperdicios de esta vida, mientras la tumba seguía inconclusa. Tampoco para Stanley aquella imponente composición musical en la que trabajaba cuando podía era la tumba que sabía debía ser, como toda obra creada es la tumba de su creador: por eso no podía terminarla de cualquier modo, como las obras que veía por todas partes a su alrededor. Debía terminarla con minuciosa perfección, en la medida en que humildemente podía percibir eso, cada nota y cada compás, cada transición y movimiento según el modelo que tenía encima y delante y dentro como prueba contra el tiempo: el movimiento de la Divina Comedia; el modelo de una Misa de Réquiem; preparada contra el tiempo como los viejos maestros preparaban sus lienzos y sus pigmentos, para que cuando los hicieran comparecer la obra conservara aún la perfección que habían plasmado en ella. No como lo que ocurría ahora a su alrededor, un lienzo listo en cuanto lo habían estirado y babeado con albayalde, o no preparado en absoluto, palabras dejadas caer sobre el papel, parpadeantes imágenes sobre celuloide, sin preocuparse más que de las palabras y la imagen y el pintarrajo que vendrían a continuación. (Stanley escribía su obra en recortes de papel que él mismo pautaba, y en el dorso de sobres, cartas viejas o viejas partituras que había borrado. Tenía guardada una pila de papel nuevo para la composición final).

Cuando fuera empezó a insinuarse el alba seguía aún completamente despierto, tumbado bajo la grieta del techo, bajo el crucifijo de marfil amarillento (siglo XIII) colgado sobre la cama. Oyó el camión que recogía la basura al fondo de la manzana. ¿Tan cerca ya la Navidad, otra vez? De pronto miró el reloj que llevaba en la muñeca, un furor de cifras batallando en su mente. Vio a Anselm, y se estremeció; a Esme, y gimió: ¿qué impiedad era aquélla?, ¿qué conocimiento del mal compartían?, pues eso hacían, antípodas, pero abrazándose en su mente, imágenes que profanaban su amor con su acoplamiento. Estiró los brazos por encima de la cabeza. ¿Se llevaba reloj en la tumba? Un largo paseo, decidió, y luego iría a misa. Por qué se habría negado Agnes Deigh a ir a misa con él, un día que se habían encontrado; era a aquella hora, y estaban bastante cerca. «Tengo que ir a tomar unas copas con alguien, los negocios son los negocios, querido», creía volver a oír su voz. Luego sus imágenes profanas desviaron sus intenciones apostólicas, y cada vez pensaba más en ella.

Había vuelto la cara hacia la ventana que tenía justo encima, por la que entraba una luz incierta para mostrar las cosas como habían quedado la noche anterior, unas a la sombra de otras, ahora ya sin sombra, más viejas, desgastándose por separado y todas a la vez. En verano tenía que tener abierta aquella ventana, por lo que los transeúntes podían mirar dentro, trastornándolo, como si el roce de sus miradas pudiera desgastar las cosas un poco más; la ventana abierta en verano por la que podían tirar cosas dentro, como un día unos críos, jugando, habían tirado tras el radiador algo que un perro había hecho en la acera.

Se oyó un leve toque en la puerta, como si estuviera llamando alguien que no quería que le contestasen, llamando para no encontrar allí a nadie en vez de a alguien. Stanley se sentó en el borde de su cama turca, el pomo de la puerta giró lentamente un cuarto de círculo, y volvió a su sitio.

—¿Quién es? —gritó—. ¿Quién hay ahí?

—¿Stanley? —Una voz de chica: era Hannah, la dejó entrar—. Hace tanto frío —dijo—, lo siento, pero ¿puedo quedarme a dormir en tu sillón?

—Quédate aquí —dijo él—. Túmbate, Hannah. Me voy.

—Pero no, no te vayas por mí. Vuelve a la cama. Pero ¿estás completamente vestido?

—Sí, quédate aquí. Me voy.

—¿Todo va bien, Stanley? ¿Ha pasado…?

—No ha pasado nada. Acuéstate aquí, Hannah. Me voy a misa.

En el vestíbulo, donde se detuvo en el retrete comunal, lo asaltó de nuevo la preocupación de aquel problema aritmético escrito a lápiz en la pared. Alguien había multiplicado 763 por 37, y le había dado
38 231
. Dos años antes había revisado ociosamente la operación; luego atentamente, cada vez que se sentaba allí. ¿Quién había cometido el error? ¿Era demasiado tarde para encontrarlo y decírselo?
10 000
… ¿qué? ¿Lo había ganado aquella persona?, ¿o lo había perdido? ¿Era demasiado tarde? Stanley miró su reloj. Salió a la fría mañana haciéndose esta herética pregunta: ¿podía uno empezar a medir un minuto en el instante que quisiera?

—Primero voy a ver si está abierta la puerta —dijo Otto.

Feasley salió para seguirlo, volvió para coger la pierna del asiento trasero y se reunió de nuevo con él. La puerta estaba cerrada. «Hay alguien despierto dentro», dijo Otto. De vuelta en la acera, giró el cerrojo de la reja de la ventana. Feasley dijo: «Voy a por una llave inglesa», alargó la pierna a Otto y volvió al coche. De pronto se levantó de golpe la persiana en la cara de Otto, y tras ella la ventana.

—¿Qué haces aquí?

—Oh, yo… Hannah, yo… quiero decir, nosotros…

—¿Qué demonios estás haciendo en esta ventana?

—Pues nada, yo… —Por lo que podía ver, Hannah sólo llevaba puesta una camisa—. Solo estábamos… bueno, hasta luego, Hannah. Ya nos veremos —gritó, mientras oía rugir a su espalda el motor del coche, y salió corriendo hacia él, mientras el pie desnudo se agitaba bajo su brazo despidiéndose de Hannah.

—Tiene a una chica ahí dentro, Hannah está durmiendo con él —dijo Otto mientras arrancaban con estruendo—. Oye —dijo luego, mirando a su alrededor—, ¿has visto una cartera marrón, una cartera de piel de cerdo?

Frenético de repente, se volvió a mirar en el asiento trasero. El coche tomó chirriando una curva, patinó hacia un lado, se recuperó, patinó hacia el otro lado y se estrelló de frente contra un poste entre las maldiciones de Feasley. Salieron. Otto miró, pero sólo encontró la pierna.

—Vamos. Que se vaya al infierno.

—Pero ¿qué hacemos con esto? —dijo Otto, envolviéndola mejor con el pañuelo mientras subían rápidamente por la calle Doce Oeste.

—Oh, Crissto, métela en un cubo de basura.

Empezó a hacerlo, pero entonces doblaron la esquina tres hombres, y volvió a esconderla en su cabestrillo. Cogieron el metro, entre gente inexpresivamente curiosa que surgía por todas partes a su alrededor.

Stanley había hecho un largo trayecto en autobús, de vuelta a la vecindad del hospital, y llevaba andando algún tiempo, según le pareció, cuando oyó que daban las seis. Siguiendo el tañido de las campanas encontró la iglesia y entró, con la mente bullendo mientras se paraba a hacer una genuflexión. Se acercó a un banco del fondo, y estaba a punto de arrodillarse a su lado cuando reconoció a Agnes Deigh. La agarró de la muñeca. Al despertar hizo ademán de apartarse con terror de él.

—*¿Stanley?*

—Estás *aquí* —susurró él.

—Oh, Dios —su cabeza cayó hacia adelante, alejándose de él—. Llévame a casa.

—Pero estás aquí, en *misa.*

—Ya lo sé. Llévame a casa. Venga, Stanley.

—Oye, no podemos andar paseando esto por toda la ciudad a plena luz del día. Además, está empezando a oler.

—Déjame echarle un vistazo. Crissto, se está poniendo gris.

Desde enfrente los miraba una mujer, pero no los veía; su boca se movía, sus dedos se movían pasando las cuentas. Era el primer vagón del tren, y en las paradas se oía la voz de una mujer, que hablaba con la cara pegada a la ventanilla que daba al túnel, tan cerca que su aliento empañaba su reflejo en el cristal. «Nos lo han contado todo, está en cartas que todos pueden leer, todo el mundo lo sabe, se están matando entre sí, niños matándose entre sí millones de niños americanos se están matando podéis leerlo todo…».

El rugido del tren ahogó su voz.

—¿Qué hago con ella?

—Déjala en el asiento, ahí, en el rincón. Vamos a bajarnos en esta estación.

—«… los cortó en trozos a los dos y los metió en maletas y ésa es la gente que viaja en aviones…».

Las puertas se cerraron a su espalda, y se quedaron en el andén a esperar otro tren.

—Esta vez el viejo me la va a armar buena por volver a estampar ese maldito coche.

Frente a ellos había una chica esperando el próximo tren, camino de la fábrica de chicles donde trabajaba: Hestia, Vesta, virgen cabal, el fuego y el hogar (llevaba un vestido barato de lanilla, pendientes de coral de imitación, zapatos estropeados y un pequeño periódico bajo el delgado codo, catálogo de la desinformación del día).

—Crissto, después del negrito de la fiesta de anoche ya no sé si es chico o chica. Eh, preciosa, ¿quieres ganarte treinta y cinco centavos?

—No, la verdad es que ya *no* soy católica, sólo puse ahí esa foto del cardenal Spellman porque ese rincón de la habitación necesitaba un poco de *rojo* —dijo Agnes Deigh, casi recuperada—. ¿Quieres una copa?

—¿Ahora?

—Stanley, tú también pareces agotado. Toma, bébete esto, te calentará —le tendió un vaso de oporto y bebió un poco de whisky, atragantándose casi—. Qué desorden más espantoso. Debe de haber estado aquí.

Agnes miró a su alrededor, a su ropa interior esparcida por todo el cuarto de estar. Uno de sus mejores vestidos pendía de su lámpara bronceadora, que estaba encendida.

—Esto calienta —dijo Stanley, bebiendo—. Lo siento por todo el cuerpo.

—Dios, estoy tan cansada —dijo ella, empezando a desnudarse—. ¿Me ayudas? —La siguió al dormitorio —. Gracias a Dios que me has encontrado.

—¿Qué es esto? —preguntó Stanley, mirando espantado una tarjeta que había cogido de la mesa, leyendo con un susurro—: «¡Cristo ha venido!».

—Oh, Stanley, se supone que no deberías leer eso. Es una felicitación navideña.

—¡Una felicitación *navideña!* Pero ¿quién…?

—No te enfades, Stanley. Es de ese chico sueco al que llaman la Gran Anna.

—Pero es… repugnante, este dibujo…

—Ya lo sé, Stanley. Pero esas cosas ocurren en el mundo. Tíralo a la papelera. No, no lo rompas, simplemente tíralo a la papelera.

—Pero… ¿por qué te *tratas* con esa gente?

—Oh, Stanley —dijo ella, y se detuvo, doblada sobre una media bajada—. No lo entiendes, Stanley, a veces la gente así es… más fácil para una mujer. De algún modo son más seguros… —Mientras tanto se había quitado las medias, y se levantó vestida sólo con la combinación. Cogió una planta y la llevó al otro cuarto—. No soporto tener algo viviendo y respirando en el mismo cuarto donde estoy intentando dormir. —Volvió a sentarse en la cama con un vaso de agua, y puso al lado dos pastillas para dormir—. Dios, qué olor a perfume ha dejado en la casa. Se le ha debido caer el frasco. Oh, vamos, Stanley, siéntate aquí. Entiendes lo de esa gente, ¿no? No pienses más en ellos. Tienes que tomarte las cosas con filosofía, querido. Gracias a Dios que me has encontrado en esa iglesia.

—Sí, gracias a Dios, que te condujo allí.

—Pero Stanley, querido…

—Estabas en misa —dijo él.

—Te digo que ya *no* soy católica.

—Siempre serás católica. No te toca a ti decidirlo. Pero ¿por qué te has desviado tanto? —preguntó, sentándose a su lado.

—Creo que fue el miedo lo que me apartó, siendo aún una niña. Recuerdo una vez, en el colegio de monjas, que nos iban a llevar a ver una reliquia. Era… no sé, una astilla de la Cruz, o una migaja de algo. Hasta tenían una que según decían contenía un trocito de la tiniebla original que Moisés hizo descender sobre el mundo, imagínate. Sí, creo que era una migaja de la hostia que sangró cuando los soldados de Zuinglio la pisotearon. Pero yo no fui, me fui al cine. Al día siguiente, en clase, me mandaron que me levantara y describiera el relicario, y yo hice una descripción maravillosa, diciendo que era grande y lujoso y de oro, con una mirilla y un cristal de aumento para ver la miguita que había dentro. Entonces me pegaron, y me dijeron que ni siquiera lo habían tenido expuesto, que lo habían mandado a limpiar…

—Pero ésas son las pruebas a que nos someten de niños para prepararnos…

—Y siempre masticaba la hostia —siguió con un susurro contenido, casi somnílocuo—. No podía tenerla en la boca sin masticarla. Cuanto más sabía que era pecado, más masticaba Su Cuerpo, *tenía* que masticarlo…

—Esos pecados que cometemos de niños…

Pero Agnes había respirado profundamente y se había arrellanado en la cama. Se miró la cara en un espejo de tocador y dijo:

—Qué pinta más horrible tengo, mi ojo…

—¿Qué te ha pasado?

—En esa fiesta, esa terrible fiesta, en el cuarto de baño de señoras, una mujer me golpeó con su bolso. «Esto ha llegado demasiado lejos», dijo. No se creía que yo era de verdad una… creía que era uno de los que iban disfrazados —Agnes se había quedado mirando al suelo. Luego sorbió por la nariz y se volvió hacia Stanley con una sonrisa forzada en los labios—. Pero el psicoanálisis es más seguro, y tú tienes el mismo confesionario.

—Pero ¿es que no entiendes lo que ha ocurrido esta mañana? —exclamó fervorosamente—. No sabías que ibas a venir a misa, pero te dirigieron allí, como a mí, como Él me condujo allí para…

Ella le pasó un brazo por los hombros, y el tirante de la combinación se le soltó. Mickey Mouse señalaba las
6:45
.

—Stanley —dijo—. Eres tan niño.

El alba, en algún lugar más allá de la planta de incineración que había ganado un primer premio de arquitectura funcional una década antes: Fuller estaba en el cuarto de baño del señor Brown, recogiendo todos los pelos del señor Brown que encontraba y metiéndolos en un sobre. Esme se despertó un momento en una cama desconocida, miró el brazo que la rodeaba, no pudo identificar a su dueño ni su sexo, y volvió a quedarse dormida. Esther se despertó, oyendo ruidos que parecían llevar sonando largo tiempo, como si horas antes hubiera oído girar una llave en la cerradura, y pasos, y el sonido de una voz, o de voces. Pero se quedó inmóvil y cerró los ojos, como siempre que oía los ruidos apagados de los sueños de Rose. Abajo, en la calle, jóvenes policías aceleraban con arrogancia los motores de sus motos, y partían rugiendo hacia el deber. En la comisaría de la calle Cincuenta y Uno Este, la Gran Anna lloraba sentado en un banco. «Pero nadie ha visto mi *vestido»,* chilló. «Nosotros lo hemos visto, amigo», dijo el hombre tras la mesa, volviéndose hacia otro policía en mangas de camisa: «¿Está fichado?». Anselm descendía a cuatro patas las escaleras del metro
I. R. T.
del West Side. Adeline acababa de cerrar una puerta a su espalda, tras despertarse junto a alguien de pelo corto y manos pesadas a quien recordaba haber tomado por un hombre la noche anterior. A Herschel no lo despertarían hasta varias horas después dos marineros en una habitación de hotel de Chelsea, donde yacía con el pecho y la espalda vendados, la gasa protectora de Siam holandés, artista del tatuaje.

El alba, tal como llegaba a los cielos australianos, una mujer de mal genio con una capa de pieles de zarigüeya roja.

Lo que más maravillaba a Stanley era la abundancia que había ido revelando a medida que se quitaba la

ropa. Tenía *tanto* debajo. Ahora se estaba limpiando el maquillaje con la cara vuelta hacia el otro lado, y él observaba sus muslos por detrás como un coleccionista observa la fina pátina que cubre las sendas de los gusanos, pues aquellas vastas superficies vermiculares estaban surcadas de igual manera. Lo fulminó el terror. Empezó a levantarse de la cama y alargó la mano hacia su camisa. Demasiado tarde. Ella estaba allí, agitando los maravillosos pesos apepinados que colgaban de un pecho que parecía a punto de derrumbarse con semejante maná. «Mira», dijo, recobrado el gozo de este mundo, irguiéndose para que su delantera oscilase pendularmente sobre él, inigualada, y con longitudes desiguales no tocadas por mano alguna de bebé, «puedes jugar al teléfono con ellas».

Trenes de largo recorrido procedentes de tierras bárbaras, barcos que venían de costas civilizadas y aviones surgidos de ninguna parte se dirigían a la isla, picaban sobre ella, penetraban en ella, descargaban vidas en ella. Lejos, en la parte alta, yacía el señor Pivner como arabesco inconsciente en nerviosa imitación del sueño (en realidad, estaba sufriendo un accidente ferroviario en Rajputana), alerta ya aquella parte de él que detendría el timbre del despertador un momento antes de que empezara a sonar.

En Harlem, caminando solo, Otto miró su reloj, olvidó ver la hora y volvió a mirar, mientras buscaba la escena de las saturnales donde esperaba recuperar la cartera de piel de cerdo.

Las calles se iban llenando de gente cuyo trabajo no era suyo. Brotaban como botones de una multitud de cazos comunes, aunque algunos eran de papel prensado, otros de marfil, de cuerno, de nácar sintético, para colocarse en su lugar, romperse o caer y perderse, rodando hasta alcantarillas y rincones oscuros donde ninguna Mano Omnipotente podría alcanzarlos, ningún Ojo Omnisciente verlos; para ser sustituidos, cosiendo los hábitos de aquel monstruo que vestían con sus vidas.

El periódico temblaba en las manos de Basil Valentine, entrelazadas a su espalda. La música también tiraba de él por detrás, desde otro rincón. Era una pavana de un español muerto.

«HUNGRÍA QUIERE VENDER CUADROS FAMOSOS… Viena… Fuentes diplomáticas informaron ayer aquí de que Hungría estaba intentando vender en Occidente obras maestras de la Galería Nacional de Arte de Budapest. La galería posee cuadros de Rafael, Tintoretto, Murillo y otros pintores, coleccionados por los emperadores y los príncipes austrohúngaros. Los informantes dijeron que algunos de los cuadros estaban siendo embarcados por valija diplomática con destino a Estados Unidos, con la esperanza de despertar el interés de los coleccionistas de arte norteamericanos».

Alzó el periódico ante sí y volvió a leer aquella noticia a la pálida luz del alba, parado junto a las ventanas.

En el rincón opuesto de la habitación, la mesa seguía cubierta de los papeles con los que había estado ocupado durante la noche, hasta que al fin apagó la luz y se sentó en un hondo sillón con las yemas de los dedos apoyadas en los párpados y la cabeza erguida. El reloj Vulliamy que había sobre la repisa de la chimenea repicó tres veces suavemente, a intervalos regulares, antes de que se moviera, y entonces sólo movió los dedos para arquearlos ante su cara, tocándose las puntas en gótica contemplación, con los ojos claros como si no hubiera hecho más que guiñarlos.

Ahora suspiró con impaciencia, dejó caer el periódico en el antepecho de la ventana y se quedó mirando fijamente el cielo gris. «¿Otro día azul?», murmuró, mientras los majestuosos acordes del arpa se extinguían, y se apartó de la ventana.

Los membretes dispersos entre los papeles de su mesa testimoniaban importantes competencias en el mundo, lenguas tan variadas como los emblemas y blasones que los adornaban. Se sentó y confrontó rápidamente un mensaje cifrado con su original, «Ponga al corriente a Inononu inmediatamente, ha recibido la información necesaria…», con el que hizo una bola. Metió los demás papeles en una cartera y desapareció un momento en el dormitorio para guardarla en una caja fuerte empotrada en la pared tras la cómoda. Luego entró en el cuarto de baño, dejó caer la bola de papel en el lavabo y la prendió con una cerilla; una vez reducida a cenizas, abrió el grifo para hacerlas desaparecer por el desagüe, se lavó las manos lenta y cuidadosamente y salió a hacer té.

Había una correspondencia exquisita entre la taza de Sèvres y el dorso de su mano, donde las venas azules se veían, haciendo parecer traslúcida la carne: no era un reflejo de fragilidad mutua, sino que, más bien, la delicadeza de la porcelana completaba una composición, realzando al hacerlo la fuerza de tensión de la mano que la sostenía en alto. Con la otra abrió un libro y se puso a leer. De vez en cuando se movían sus labios, mientras volvía las páginas de los *Ejercicios espirituales* de Loyola, que en contra de su costumbre había prestado (pues no era el único ni, desde luego, el más bonito ejemplar que tenía). Una mosca aterrizó sobre la página, y la espantó de un manotazo. La mosca se elevó y atravesó la habitación hasta instalarse

afanosamente en una estatuilla dorada, un toro que bajaba la cabeza, con el cuello tachonado de piedras preciosas, para empujar con los cuernos el huevo suspendido en la cavidad rocosa que tenía ante sí. Era una estatuilla pequeña, colocada sobre una columna al lado del sofá.

Volvió otra página. En el margen interno había un pelo castaño rizado. Basil Valentine se inclinó para quitarlo de un soplido. El pelo no se movió. Hizo un ruido con los labios y lo apartó con un dedo. Luego siguió leyendo durante menos de un minuto, cerró bruscamente el libro y se agachó para buscar el pelo por el suelo. Lo encontró en la alfombra, lo puso en un cenicero, volvió a abrir el libro y se quedó mirando la página. Se oía un leve zumbido procedente del rincón donde se había parado el tocadiscos. Su mirada giró hacia el cenicero. Luego se levantó rápidamente, cogió el pelo del cenicero, entró en el cuarto de baño y lo dejó caer en la taza del retrete. Tiró de la cadena y se lavó las manos, contemplando mientras tanto su cara en el espejo.

La expresión de ansiedad que había mostrado durante todo el tiempo no había abandonado su cara cuando volvió al cuarto de estar, apretándose el cinturón de la bata y sacándose del bolsillo del pecho la pitillera de oro. La abrió, volvió a cerrarla sin sacar ningún cigarrillo y se quedó mirando la inscripción casi borrada de su superficie. «Maldito sea», susurró. «Maldito sea». Se volvió a mirar el reloj Vulliamy. Estaba adornado con un cupido. Se aflojó el cinturón de la bata.

Minutos después, Basil Valentine se había cambiado las zapatillas negras por unos zapatos negros igualmente estrechos, la bata por un traje azul, y volvió estirándose los bajos de los pantalones. Entre los libros que tenía tras la mesa apartó *La nuit des rois* y encontró rápidamente el ejemplar de Thoreau. Se puso el abrigo, y camino de la puerta abrió un armario con entrepaños y sacó un gran sobre plano. Se detuvo en el umbral para examinar rápidamente la habitación, y luego cerró la puerta con dos llaves, dejando abiertos sobre la mesa los *Ejercicios espirituales* de san Ignacio de Loyola, donde se posó la mosca antes de que la segunda llave girara en la cerradura.

En el portal se detuvo a mirar en todas direcciones. Había empezado a caer una ligera llovizna. Salió a la calle maldiciendo el viento, sujetándose el sombrero con la mano del anillo de sello de oro mientras llamaba a un taxi con la otra.

El viento que soplaba del río era bastante fuerte. Lo bastante fuerte, de hecho, para sostener a un hombre; y eso era exactamente lo que estaba haciendo en una esquina de la calle Gansevoort. Por otra parte, el hombre no parecía agradecido. Estaba hablando al viento, y cuando alguna que otra palabra cobraba forma destacándose del revoltijo de sonidos que emitía, resultaba evidente que lo estaba llamando cosas muy feas. Al oírlas, el viento extremaba aún más sus atenciones con él. El hombre se golpeaba los faldones del abrigo, que revoloteaban a su alrededor, dirigiéndose al viento con algo así como «Guay guayg… icckscкr…», hasta que, una vez satisfecho su capricho, el viento lo hizo doblar una esquina de un empujón y siguió hacia el este.

Abandonado, se tambaleó, y afortunadamente nada más extender la mano encontró una pared, en vez de la cara del hombre que se acercaba, pues había lanzado el brazo a aquella altura.

—Oiga, buen hombre. ¿Podría decirme dónde está Horatio Street? Cielo santo…

Así interpelado, se envalentonó; el sursuncorda de un eructo pródigo lo hizo enderezarse, y contestó:

—¿Qué coj…?

Nunca se sabría si esto era un inicio de discusión que él mismo había ideado, o una adaptación sutil del método socrático de interrogación perfeccionado en los ateneos locales que frecuentaba hasta la hora de cierre, pues la respuesta fue:

—Apártese.

—Eh, no se vaya. Eh, cómo sejdrr… —Se lamió un labio y empezó de nuevo, tendiendo la mano—. Yo me llamo Boyma… —logró decir, armándose de valor ante el reto del reconocimiento—. Y usted debe de ser Gro… go… ¡raggly!

Parecía haber saltado por detrás sobre aquella palabra, y terminó con el triunfo de haberla derribado por tierra con un golpe en la cabeza. De hecho miró hacia abajo, como si fuera a encontrarla allí tendida a sus pies. Había sido un combate tan victorioso que decidió repetirlo. «Go… gro… gorag…». Su mano encontró una muñeca, y se cerró sobre ella. Repicaron las campanas de una iglesia cercana. «Go… ro… grag…». Pero el canto afilado de una mano dirigida al flanco de su cabeza lo detuvo, y se dejó caer contra la pared sin una sola exclamación de sorpresa.

La puerta se abrió el grueso de un dedo.

—¡Usted…!

—Yo…

—¿Cómo… cómo me ha encontrado?

—No ha sido fácil. Al menos podría poner Rouge Cloître aquí fuera, junto al timbre.

—Rouge… ¿poner qué?

—El nombre del convento que acogió a Van der Goes, ya sabe. ¿Puedo entrar?

—Oh, bueno… sí, sí, entre.

—¿No le molesto? —preguntó Basil Valentine, entrando en la habitación—. Viniendo a una hora tan inusual…

—Sí que lo es, pero no, no si… ¿no necesita dormir?

—Desgraciadamente, sí, lo necesito de mala manera —contestó Valentine con una sonrisa—. Tome, le he traído estas ampliaciones de Van Eyck. Y su Thoreau. Me lo llevé por error.

—Ah, gracias. Y su… su…

—¿Mi abrigo? Sí, está mojado. Me lo quitaré dentro de un momento. Antes me gustaría lavarme las manos —siguió Valentine, volviéndose hacia una puerta—. He tenido un encuentro bastante desagradable cuando venía hacia aquí. —El cuarto era la cocina, y tras un vistazo al fregadero, se volvió a decir—: ¿Sabe que hay algo creciendo ahí dentro? Una planta delicada, que sale directamente del desagüe.

—Oh, no, pero eso, eso debe de ser un melón. Unas pepitas de melón que cayeron… aquí, el cuarto de baño está aquí.

Un minuto después se oyó desde allí la voz de Valentine.

—¿Una toalla?

—Sí, tome, use esto.

Valentine salió secándose las manos con una bola de borra.

—Bonito material, ¿eh? —dijo, sonriendo de nuevo, y la tiró a la chimenea—. Y dígame, ¿tiene por costumbre tapar los espejos, como hacen en las casas donde ha muerto alguien?

—¿El del cuarto de baño? No es más que… algo que se está secando. Pero —preguntó bruscamente a Valentine— ¿usted no se cansa de la imagen que esquiva en el espejo?

—Yo no la esquivo. —Valentine no había perdido su sonrisa. Se quitó el abrigo y lo dejó con el sombrero en la cama, donde se sentó en el borde sin hacer y se reclinó contra las sábanas revueltas, con las manos entrelazadas alrededor de una rodilla—. De modo que está trabajando, ¿no? —dijo afablemente—. ¿Lleva toda la noche?

—Toda la noche. Llevo trabajando toda la noche. Acabo de terminarlo.

—¿Qué? ¿Puedo verlo?

—Es ése, ese grande de ahí.

Valentine se levantó para ayudarlo a apartarlo de la pared y apoyarlo del revés contra el interior de la puerta. Ofreció su pitillera, encendió los cigarrillos y examinó el cuadro durante algún tiempo antes de decir:

—Esto no le va a gustar a Brown, ¿sabe? Esta cara, de qué mala manera la ha dañado.

—Pero ¿el daño? Es como si no lo hubiera hecho yo. —Ante él se disparó una mano—. El propio cuadro, la composición cobró su propia forma cuando fue pintado. Y luego el daño, el daño es indiferente a la composición, ¿no? El daño, ¿sabe?, es… ocurre.

Valentine se encogió de hombros.

—Lo sé, por supuesto —dijo—. Pero dudo que Brown lo sepa. Bajará el precio de mala manera.

—¡El precio! ¿Qué tiene que ver eso con…?

—Cielo santo, a mí no me importa. Pero a su patrón le preocupan bastante esas cosas, ya sabe. —Tras otra pausa, Valentine retrocedió un paso, y la figura que estaba a su espalda se movió tan deprisa como su propia sombra bajo la luz violenta de la bombilla desnuda que tenían encima—. Es magnífico, ¿verdad? —dijo Valentine en voz baja. Quedó enteramente absorto en él, y cuando habló lo hizo con un murmullo, como si hablara para sí—. La sencillez… es la forma en que pintaría yo…

Ningún sonido siguió a su voz, y nada se movió para moverle, hasta que bajó los ojos hacia la sombra que listaba el suelo a su lado: entonces Basil Valentine se volvió bruscamente y se aclaró la garganta.

—Sí, da una espléndida sensación de muerte, ¿no es así? —siguió con su tono habitual, más enérgico y despreocupado a la vez—. La muerte antes de que se volviera vulgar —siguió, apartándose del cuadro para pasearse por la habitación—, cuando unos pocos morían con dignidad. Y los demás, la gente que volvía calladamente a la tierra como estiércol. ¿Eh? —añadió, volviéndose. Tiró su cigarrillo a la chimenea,

encendió otro sin ofrecer uno, y expelió compulsivamente el humo delgado en un chorro uniforme—. Sí, eso es lo que quería reflejar en ese cuadro, ¿no es así?

—Casi…

—¿Casi? —repitió Valentine. Alzó el brillo frío de sus ojos para obligar a bajar al suelo entre ambos la mirada febril clavada en él—. ¿Casi qué?

—La… fuerza, la delicadeza, la ternura sin…

—Debilidad, sí. —Valentine dio con el pie a un libro que había en el suelo—. ¿Plinio?, ¿qué, por su disertación sobre los colores? Sí, gracias, no me vendría mal un poco de eso, es coñac, ¿no? —Sostuvo en alto el vaso sin lavar que le había dado mientras el cuello de la botella tintineaba contra él, pero mirando aún hacia la pintura dañada—. Trabaja deprisa, ¿verdad? Sí, Van der Goes también era un pintor rápido, pero uno de sus cuadros, creo que fue el tríptico Portinari, tardó en hacerlo sus buenos tres años. Pero al fin y al cabo, esto es bastante diferente, ¿no? Usted sabe durante todo el tiempo adonde va. No tiene esa sensación de, cómo es el verso de Valéry, ¿de que uno nunca puede terminar una obra de arte, uno sólo la abandona? Pero aquí no hay nunca ese problema, ¿no? ¿Eh? ¿Qué pasa?

—Si al principio dice usted, o dice la gente, «¡Es hermoso!», y luego, cuando descubren que no es lo que les habían contado, o si es un cuadro cuando descubren quién lo hizo, o más bien cuando descubren que no lo hizo quien creían…

—No, no, esta noche no, ¿o ya es de día? No, de verdad, no vamos a decidir eso ahora. No se… no se trata de eso. —Atraído por sus ojos, Valentine titubeó por primera vez—. ¿O se trata de eso?, ¿se trata justamente de eso? —Y desvió la mirada hacia el cuadro dañado.

—¿Qué dijo usted sobre firmar un cuadro? De que eso, eso es lo único que le importa a la ley…

—Falsificaciones modernas, falsificaciones de pintores modernos —lo cortó rápidamente Valentine, pero mirando a su alrededor en busca de algo que atrajera sus ojos no encontró más que el hombre y el cuadro dañado—. Y tenga cuidado —dijo, forzando el tono despreocupado de su voz—. Si Brown decidiera que hay tanto dinero en los pintores modernos como en los viejos maestros, no, no es broma, ya le ha amenazado con Van Gogh… —Había empezado a pasearse por la habitación, y se detuvo para atraer hacia sí, con la punta de su zapato negro, un dibujo detallado que recogió y examinó. Lo sostuvo en alto entre ambos y dijo —: Un notable parecido.

—Un estudio, para el… último trabajo.

—Sí, ya veo. ¿Con espejos invertidos? Al revés, como en un grabado por contacto. Un parecido exacto, y sin embargo una mentira perfecta. —Dejó caer el dibujo entre sus dedos y se echó a reír—. ¿Usted?, los… ¿cómo dijo, los escombros de su obra? ¡Qué carrera más penosamente egoísta!, ser vivido, ¿cómo dijo?, por alguien que le utiliza y luego se desprende de usted como de una cáscara cuando ha conseguido su propósito, ¿no?

—Sí, pero si los mismos dioses…

—Es digno de…

—Si no pueden recurrir a sus… dones, para… redimirlos, apurándolos, ¿entiende?, sacándoles todo el jugo…

Valentine se apartó rápidamente de aquellos ojos, y volviendo hacia el cuadro dañado apoyado contra la puerta murmuró:

—Pensándolo bien, creo que yo habría puesto una o dos figuras más aquí abajo, a la izquierda, la sensación de elevación en la parte superior de la composición habría ganado mucho…

—¿Usted?

—… y el azul es demasiado claro, ¿no? Creo que si lo hubiera hecho yo habría usado un poco más de…

—Pero no lo ha hecho.

Basil Valentine se volvió hacia él lentamente, y lo contempló durante unos instantes antes de hablar.

—Mi querido amigo —dijo al fin—. Si es tan sensible a cualquier tipo de crítica, no he venido aquí a…

—¿A qué ha venido?

—He venido a pedirle un favor. Pero si es tan penosamente sensible a la crítica, un artista tan cohibido que…

—No, yo, es sólo que, escuche, ¿la crítica? Es el arte más importante hoy, es el que más necesitamos ahora. La crítica es el arte que más necesitamos hoy. Pero no, ¿no entiende?, no el «Si lo hubiera hecho yo…». Sí, una, una nostalgia disciplinada, reconocimientos disciplinados pero no, no, escuche, ¿qué favor? ¿A qué ha venido?

Basil Valentine había dejado caer un cigarrillo en el suelo sucio, y cuando se inclinó para recogerlo se le soltó el botón de un tirante en la parte de atrás de la cintura, y se enderezó sintiendo que la mitad de los

fondillos de los pantalones le colgaba y la otra mitad tiraba hacia arriba.

—¿Recuerda ese Patinir? —dijo—. ¿El cuadro que tiene Brown nada más entrar, colgado enfrente de ese ridículo retrato? Quería preguntarle si le importaría hacer una copia para mí. —Se metió las manos en los bolsillos para emparejarse los pantalones y siguió hablando rápidamente—. Ni siquiera tendría que ser una copia perfecta, ¿sabe?, ya que el original no existe. ¿No lo sabía? Brown tenía asegurado el cuadro en una fuerte suma, y se quemó en un incendio. Al menos, tenía una prueba de que se quemó cuando llegaron los expertos de la compañía de seguros. Había cortado un extremo del cuadro y se lo enseñó, chamuscado de mala manera, pero no tanto que no pudieran identificarlo como lo único que quedaba del original, que ahora espera colocar de nuevo, por supuesto «en secreto». Sí, ¿qué pasa?, ¿qué le parece tan gracioso?

—Esos. He hecho lo mismo con ésos.

—¿Qué quiere decir con lo mismo? ¿Cortar los extremos y…?

—Guardarlos.

—¿Qué? ¿Para qué?

—Como prueba.

—¿Cómo prueba?

Basil Valentine se apartó rápidamente para dejarlo pasar, y observó cómo retiraba unos lienzos de la pared.

—¡Este! —dijo, levantando uno—. ¿Ve? Iba a ser un estudio, era un estudio para este… este nuevo trabajo, este Van Eyck.

—Pero ¿qué? *¿La Anunciación?* —Valentine se enderezó el lado caído de los pantalones—. ¿Y no ha salido como quería? Pero eso es viejo. ¿Sobre lino? ¿Qué es?, ¿y esto, estos pendientes? ¿Quién es ella? Estos aros antiguos de aspecto bizantino, ¿qué son? ¿Quién es ella? ¿Esto?, ¿un estudio para un Van Eyck?

—No, para lo que yo quiero.

—¿De qué está hablando? ¿Y esto qué es? Es exquisita esta cara, el reproche, como las caras de la Virgen en otras cosas que ha hecho, el reproche en esta cara. Su trabajo es antiguo, sí, pero siempre se trasluce algo, sí, algo, *semper aliquid haeret?,* siempre queda algo, algo suyo. Pero ¿de qué está hablando? —Valentine encontró los ojos febriles clavados en él—. Tome esto… le he traído estas fotos, estas ampliaciones fotográficas, tome, si es que quiere hacer creer de nuevo a los críticos en Hubert van Eyck, ¿no? Y el, vaya, podríamos meter su brazo en un ataúd y ponerlo ahí arriba, encima de la puerta, ¿eh?, en Horatio Street, ¿eh? Como el brazo derecho de Hubert van Eyck sobre el pórtico de la iglesia de San Bavón en Gante, ¿eh? Pero ¿qué es? ¿Qué pasa? ¿De qué está hablando, qué es esa prueba?, ¿para probar qué? —preguntó perentoriamente Valentine.

—Escuche, si quisiera seguir con este trabajo yo mismo, ¿no? Y demostrar las demás cosas que he hecho, los Bouts, los Van der Goes, ¿no? Si quisiera contarlo, tengo la prueba de cada uno de ellos, lienzo o tabla, cuando los acababa cortaba una tira del extremo, y las tengo.

—¿Dónde? —preguntó rápidamente Valentine.

—Sí, están en lugar seguro.

—¿Dónde? —repitió Valentine.

—Y eso será una prueba, ¿no?

—¿Una prueba? —Valentine se levantó—. ¿Cree que iba a ser tan fácil? Sí, ¿cree que quieren que se lo cuenten? ¿Como Miguel Angel al Cardinale di San Giorgio? Sí, se había guardado un brazo de su «antiguo» cupido, y cuando fue a pedir ayuda al cardenal para empezar su carrera, le enseñó el brazo de la estatua para demostrar que la había hecho él, ¿y cree que el cardenal le dio las gracias? —Valentine cogió su vaso y lo apuró—. ¿Cree que es tan sencillo? Vaya… —Puso una mano en el hombro que tenía delante—. ¿Que lo puede hacer solo, así de simple? —Retiró lentamente la mano—. Pero está usted mojado, su chaqueta está húmeda. ¿Ha salido?

—Antes, poco antes de que viniera, a dar un paseo…

—Pero me ha dicho, cuando llegué dijo que llevaba trabajando toda la noche.

—Sí, pero he salido, se lo cuento, he salido, he ido a llevar a lugar seguro esos fragmentos, esas tiras de los extremos de los cuadros.

—¿Adónde? —preguntó Valentine.

—Los he llevado… adonde vivía antes.

—Donde vivía hasta hace dos años, ¿no? A casa de su mujer, su mujer, ¿así que confía en ella? ¿Confía en que los vigile?

—Ni siquiera lo sabe. No estaba allí. Sólo su hermana, sí, su hermana, los escondimos.

Pero Basil Valentine le había vuelto la espalda y se alejaba hacia el fondo de la habitación, donde se

quedó mirándolo, observando sus ojos impacientes, la chaqueta negra, mojada y arrugada, que le colgaba de los hombros.

—Su mujer, ¿eh? —Hizo una pausa, pero cuando siguió habló más deprisa—: ¿El Rouge Cloître? Sí, ¿y dónde está la madre superiora? ¿Quién le arregla la casa, eh? Este suelo, ¿cómo lo tiene tan sucio? Vaya… así que confía en ella para eso, ¿no?, esos fragmentos que son tan importantes. Y esto, este Van der Goes, ¿qué le pasa a la cara, eh? Y todos los demás, sí, los hombres, es usted sacado de sus espejos, está ahí media docena de veces, al revés, ¿no? Dibujando la muerte y plasmándola con su propia mano, pero ¿qué le ha pasado a la cara? Oh, ¿el daño no respeta la composición? No, en absoluto, en absoluto. —Se detuvo; la vena le sobresalía como un bulbo en la sien. Se la tocó con la punta de un dedo, apoyó los hombros contra la vacía repisa de la chimenea de ladrillos desiguales, y encendió un cigarrillo. Inmediatamente, la corriente de aire atrapó el humo y lo arrastró a su espalda por el cañón de la chimenea—. ¿Y esto? ¿Quién es la del boceto del caballete? Es viejo, ¿verdad? ¿Su mujer?

Parado bajo la bombilla desnuda, de cara a Valentine, empezó a hablar, pero lo único que dijo fue:

—Ella…

—Sí, ¿o su madre?

—Sí. Mi madre —admitió con un susurro, volviéndose para mirar la imagen sobre el gesso sucio, con la cara surcada por arrugas de confusión, como si acabara de recordarla.

—Sí, ¿es ella? —musitó Valentine—. ¿*La Visitación,* pues? —Se echó a reír—. ¿Una *Stabat Mater*? No, no más, gracias. Suponga… que yo he venido aquí como Nicodemo, ¿eh? Sí, el fariseo Nicodemo, en san Juan, el… menos fiable de los evangelios. ¿«A menos que un hombre vuelva a nacer»? Sí, en verdad, «… díjole Nicodemo: "¿Cómo puede un hombre nacer siendo viejo? ¿Acaso puede entrar de nuevo en el seno de su madre y volver a nacer?"». —Valentine tosió y se aclaró la garganta. Había cogido de pronto su abrigo antes de reparar en la nube de ansiedad que nublaba los ojos clavados en sus bruscos movimientos, la cara torcida por una expresión que era casi una mueca de dolor, y la figura sentada en equilibrio inestable en un taburete alto, retirada allí tras eludirlo con la cautela vigilante de una sombra, los arrugados hombros hundidos, desiguales e inmóviles. A pesar de todo, Valentine se puso el abrigo, pero suavizó sus movimientos, y su voz recuperó su cortante tono despreocupado—. Quiere seguir con ese trabajo, ¿verdad? Pero podríamos ir juntos alguna vez a echar un vistazo a ese *Edén,* ¿no? Allí está la serpiente —rio, tirándose de las solapas para alisar la delantera del abrigo—. ¿La serpiente de la conciencia? Y allí está ella, Eva, la mujer. La misma mujer, personalizándolo todo. Buenas cristianas, buenos objetivos para la publicidad, porque lo personalizan todo. Un desodorante o un crucifijo, lo cogen y lo hacen parte de ellas. —Recogió su sombrero, bajando la voz hasta un irritante tono monocorde—. ¿Cómo era, en el Eclesiastés? Dios ha hecho veraz al hombre, pero las mujeres han discurrido muchas falsedades…

—Espere…

—¿Eh?

—¿Cree que…? Tome, ¿quiere un poco más de coñac?

—Me voy ya, no quiero molestarle —dijo Valentine con un tono de deferencia cordial; y al retroceder un paso, algo rodó junto a su pie, y se inclinó para recogerlo—. ¿Granza rosa? —leyó en la etiqueta.

—Oh, eso, no es nada. Granza rosa, es demasiado tarde.

—¿Demasiado tarde? —Valentine alzó la vista fingiendo sorpresa ante la apremiante angustia de la voz, y la mano temblorosa donde dejó el paquete.

—La compré para un Bouts, el primer Dierick Bouts, pero esos colores… la laca de granza no se usó hasta el siglo XVI. Y Bouts estaba muerto. Dierick Bouts, estaba… estaba muerto. Espere… escuche, ¿cree que algo puede salir mal?

—¿Salir mal?

—¿Si intento contarles lo de esos cuadros?

—Haga lo que quiera —dijo Valentine encogiéndose de hombros—. Si cree que puede hacerlo solo.

—Pero ¿y las pruebas?, ¿ni siquiera con eso?

—¿Está seguro de que están a buen recaudo? —Los labios de Valentine se estiraron en una sonrisa delgada.

—Bueno, espere entonces. Espere. Si usted…

—¿Yo? ¿Si yo le ayudara?

—Sí, esos fragmentos…

—Pues tráigamelos, si quiere. Arreglaremos este asunto. —Basil Valentine se puso el sombrero, y sus ojos, endurecidos bajo el ala negra, resbalaron por el hombro arrugado y la cara ajada que tenía ante sí hasta la cara serena del caballete, mientras añadía—: Tráigamelos a mi casa, pues. ¿Me oye? No podemos

cometer errores. —Se quedó allí parado, contemplando el retrato del caballete, cuyos ojos impávidos miraban más allá de él; y finalmente, murmurando «Su madre, ¿eh?», apartó los ojos de él con un brusco esfuerzo—. ¿Una *Stabat Mater*? Ni una niña, ni en absoluto una mujer.

Giró sobre los talones y abrió la puerta.

—Va a oler raro ahí fuera, tras este… ¿olor de santidad? —El anillo de sello de oro brilló contra el borde de la puerta abierta, refulgiendo suavemente a la luz de la desnuda bombilla, mientras la lenta luz del día entraba a su espalda con un repique de campanas—. ¿Oye a san Bavón? Otro día azul. Espero su visita. Y muchas gracias por el coñac.

No había ningún taxi a la vista.

—Lo único que conocen es la sangre, cada hora que pasa matan a más niños; acaba de estrellarse un avión y quién se ha sorprendido, cuarenta y una personas muertas, aunque hay cierta esperanza de que la azafata, que ha sobrevivido, pueda contárselo a la policía, porque viene todo en los periódicos donde todo el mundo puede leerlo…

¿Qué era?

Stanley se sentó. Frente a él había una mujer que lo miraba fijamente a la cara, moviendo los labios, moviendo los dedos entre las cuentas. Apretó con fuerza el cincel en su bolsillo, la primera vez en varios años que viajaba en metro, como vencido por la necesidad de sumergirse en la oscuridad y no salir hasta llegar a casa. No temblaba de frío, aunque hacía frío en el metro. Iba todavía abrochándose la camisa. Qué era lo que le había gritado ella cuando le pidió que se arrodillase junto a él, junto a la cama; lo que había seguido gritando mientras él se batía en retirada por una puerta, huía hacia otra, escapaba desnudo con toda su ropa en la mano, y salía al vestíbulo, donde su voz se extinguió pero el olor de su perfume lo persiguió. Se apretó el nudo de la corbata. El tren penetró con un rugido en su firmamento de roca, donde las luces parpadeaban admonitorias al frente de aquel vagón delantero, y la voz de la mujer se apagó mientras sus labios seguían moviéndose, empañando el cristal ante sí, y Stanley se dio cuenta de que se había equivocado de tren, de que iba en la dirección equivocada.

Alzó la vista ansiosamente, como si algún otro pasajero pudiera haber cometido su mismo error y, confirmándoselo, demostrar que todos los demás también iban desencaminados, descarriados. (Era una expresión que Stanley mostraba la mayor parte del tiempo). De pie, frente a él, mirando fijamente como si pudiera ver a través del sucio cristal, había un hombre alto con un pañuelo apretado contra su boca y nariz. En su puño brillaba el oro. Entonces una mujer de edad incierta y macizas dimensiones inestables pisó el pie de Stanley, se tambaleó con grandiosa inercia y fue a darse con una barra blanca.

—Nunca se ven judíos tan borrachos —dijo la persona que iba junto a Stanley.

—¿Síií? —gritó la mujer, volviéndose hacia ellos. El tren se acercaba a una estación. Stanley se levantó y se dirigió a la puerta donde estaba el hombre alto con el pañuelo pegado a la cara, vuelta ahora hacia el interior del vagón—. ¿Síií? —gritó la mujer, tambaleándose entorno a Stanley. Tenía ambas manos libres—. ¿Es esto lo que queréis? ¿Esto es lo que queréis, eh? —chilló mientras se agarraba el dobladillo del vestido, e inmediatamente quedó patente que era la única prenda que llevaba.

Stanley se tambaleó y se dio con el hombre alto del pañuelo, cuyos ojos se habían helado con un frío horror azul, y que susurraba: «¡Dios santo…!».

—¡Tomad! ¡Venid a cogerlo! ¡Venid a cogerlo!

Entonces se oyó una conmoción al otro extremo del vagón, donde un viejo desharrapado había encontrado algo: pero la conmoción fue suya, pues sólo otros dos se levantaron a echar un vistazo; los demás se quedaron mirando con espantoso desdén, como miraban los que iban sentados cerca de Stanley, no a la mujer, sino a él y al hombre que tenía al lado.

—Vamos, vosotros dos, ¿os da miedo…? —El tren se aproximaba dando tumbos a una estación, y su falda ondeó y cayó mientras se agarraba a una barra. Se abrieron las puertas, y siguió gritando tras ellos—. Vamos, vamos, vosotros… poneos una tapa de retrete al cuello y todos la usaremos…

LO HIRIERON
por nuestras transgresiones,
lo azotaron
por nuestras iniquidades:
… y con sus llagas
nos ha curado,

decía el cartel contra el que se apoyó el hombre alto. Encima de él, alguien había garabateado «Jesús era comunista». Se quedó allí tapándose la cara con el pañuelo, y Stanley se detuvo junto a otro cartel que llamaba la atención del público sobre una casa de empeños del bajo East Side, donde alguien había escrito con lápiz «Hitler tenía razón». El pañuelo bajó lentamente, y el hombre captó un vislumbre de una sucia sombra de sí mismo en el espejo de una máquina expendedora de chicles.

—Perdone… ¿está usted bien? —aventuró Stanley.

El hombre retiró el pañuelo, y dijo a Stanley con voz serena:

—Esas, mi querido joven, son las desgraciadas a las que en tiempos quemaban en las cazas de brujas.

Cuando Basil Valentine llegó a casa, llenó el baño inmediatamente; y mientras el agua caliente se cerraba sobre sus hombros, y sostenía un cigarrillo con una mano seca, suspiró mirando al techo limpio, y sus labios se movieron como si durante todo aquel tiempo, desde que había apartado las yemas de los dedos de sus párpados, sentado en aquel gran sillón a la espera del alba, hubiera estado hablando consigo mismo.

Los camiones avanzaban cargados hacia los muelles, y se alejaban cargados del mercado mientras Stanley apretaba el paso hacia su casa cerrada, ya allanada. ¿Por qué habría dejado quedarse a Hannah?, la última persona a la que querría dar explicaciones ahora: incluso corriendo sentía el olor del perfume de la desnudez de Agnes Deigh. Los pájaros se apiñaban ruidosamente en un abrevadero de caballos. Ya era pleno día.

Al llegar encontró la habitación vacía. Inmediatamente notó que la ventana de encima de la cama estaba abierta, pero no tuvo fuerzas para bajarla. Se dejó caer en la cama y se quedó inmóvil bajo el frío. Qué era lo que le había gritado ella mientras corría, su grito y su voz como algo casi tangible arrojado por el aire entre ambos, algo que le penetró y heló en plena huida, como si una abstracción eterna se hubiera materializado en metal y hueso fundidos, y el Amor hubiera enseñado sus mandíbulas de acero surcadas de cicatrices y erizadas de dientes rotos.

¿Qué era? Con la oreja pegada al colchón, miraba fijamente la catedral de Fenestrula; y los muelles del colchón amplificaban los latidos de su corazón y se los devolvían con la martilleante resonancia regular de tambores con bordón. Crang, crang, crang, sonaban con familiar ritmo regular, saltándose un latido, o redoblando uno, en preciso acompañamiento de algo.

Fuera, por la acera, se acercaba un hombre con aire inseguro, frotándose una áspera mejilla con una mano áspera. La limpidez del día azul que se abría sobre él parecía incitarlo a aclarar el problema inmediato de aquel estanque túrbido que, si le hubieran preguntado más tarde, habría llamado su memoria, pero que ahora hallaba instalado en su mejilla, donde la sangre se había secado ya. «Era Boyma», musitó el hombre, «luego yo debo de ser Go… ro… gro… go…».

Crang… crang… crang… ¿Qué era? Con el último soplo de conciencia se dio cuenta de que se había dejado las gafas en su mesita de noche, junto a su cama de la parte alta. Crang crang crang llegaban los tambores por la colina, visibles ya. Iban tocando «Adelante, soldados cristianos».

A dos pies de distancia de Stanley, el hombre se detuvo a cometer una guarrería al escaso abrigo que proporcionaba la ventana, sin mirar una sola vez a la cara que yacía exhausta a sus pies, bajo la ventana abierta.

II

> «Es como si un hombre ebrio se creyera sobrio, y obrando a todos los efectos como un hombre ebrio, siguiera empero creyéndose sobrio, y deseara que los demás lo tuvieran por tal. Así son, pues, los que no saben lo que es verdad, aunque aparenten tener cierto conocimiento, y hagan muchas cosas malas como si fueran buenas, y se precipiten a la destrucción como si fuera la salvación».
>
> Los *Reconocimientos* clementinos, Libro V

—Pienso contarle lo de la tostada, cuando esta mañana estaba poniendo mantequilla en su tostada y la tostada me habló —dijo Fuller, con una voz que sugería la casi inaudible confianza de la intimidad—. Pero aunque me paré a escuchar muy cerca, la tostada hablaba en una lengua que nunca había oído hasta ahora. ¿Me estaría aconsejando algo? —añadió, e interrumpiendo el movimiento de su mano, apoyó el trapo sucio en el soporte de la lanza y miró por la rendija de la visera del yelmo. Nada se movió. La armadura seguía prestando atención a sus confidencias, como llevaba haciendo desde hacía años. A base de abrillantar cada charnela y juntura, cada lámina y abertura, hacía tiempo que había establecido una estrecha familiaridad informal con aquella figura cuya actitud, en su primer encuentro, no había augurado semejante posibilidad. Fuller había tardado tiempo en penetrar la fría reserva y ganar ascendencia sobre la formidable altivez con que había acogido sus reluctantes avances. Si hubiera dependido de él, ciertamente la habría evitado, y como mucho habría pasado ante ella con ese respeto inspirado por la desconfianza, considerándola como una aliada de su opresor. Pero como tan a menudo ocurre bajo el dominio de los tiranos, había sido el propio señor Brown quien los había hermanado. Con su insistencia en que aquélla, su favorita, estuviera siempre inmaculada e irreprochable, el señor Brown había alentado una conspiración bajo sus propias narices.

—Ya le he contado a Adeline que el método del cajón no parece destinado a tener un gran éxito —siguió, mientras frotaba con el trapo una hombrera. Estaba contando una visita reciente a una mujer de su misma edad, color y antepasados (aunque considerablemente más pesada) a quien consultaba, con las manos extendidas pero sin tocarse sobre una mesa de madera bruñida, acerca de su aflicción. Adeline, a su vez, consultaba a su hija Elsie, que había muerto cuando sólo tenía tres años y ahora iba al colegio en el otro lado, pero hacía novillos con gusto por esta buena causa—. Le he asegurado que cada vez que entro en mi habitación escribo su nombre en un trozo de papel y lo escondo en el cajón. Pero al enterarse de que escribo su nombre de muy diversas formas, dijo que ahí estaba el impedimento. Puede que ya hayas causado desgracia a otros cuyos nombres hayas escrito sin querer, me reprendió.

El trapo había llegado ya al peto, que Fuller reservaba para el final debido a su lisa accesibilidad, la franqueza de trato que permitía y la forma gratificante en que relucía.

—Ahora tenemos pensado intentar el método del pelo —siguió, con voz levemente preocupada—. Me ha mandado que llene un sobre de pelos suyos, que Elsie procederá a tratar de forma secreta, y me devolverá para que los queme pronunciando sobre ellos ciertas palabras de los misterios de los que participa. —Fuller frotaba con fuerza, mostrando una severa contrariedad con su repentina energía, un poco más inclinado, dirigiéndose ahora no al paciente yelmo, sino a su propio reflejo movedizo en el peto—. Sugerí que este método huele quizá a cierta clase de magia, pues dudo en hacer algo anticristiano ni siquiera a él. Pero ella se apresuró a asegurarme que este método es cristiano porque lo empleo contra las fuerzas del mal. Luego procedió a contarme lo que aconsejaba hacer san Luis, por supuesto en los viejos tiempos, cuando un judío te aventajaba en una controversia, esto es, hundirle una espada en la tripa hasta la cruz. —Se detuvo y retrocedió para contemplar su trabajo, pero añadió—: Parece que cuando Elsie murió, murieron diez mil personas en el mismo momento, de las que nueve mil novecientas noventa y cinco partieron al instante para el infierno, cuatro hacia el purgatorio, y solo Elsie fue llevada directamente al cielo. Así que parece estar altamente recomendada —tranquilizó a la figura impasible que tenía delante. Luego, levantando velozmente el trapo para dar otro frote rápido a la babera, dijo—: Tengo que darme prisa para volver a tiempo —y enderezándose se dirigió a su habitación.

Cuando volvía, con el grueso sobre bien guardado en un bolsillo interior, se asomó por la puerta a la galería, primero hasta el comienzo de las escaleras, para ver si la perra estaba vigilando. Se aventuró hasta la barandilla, y allí debajo estaba, un borrón inmóvil sobre las rosas de Aubusson. Tras una mirada de

intrépida calma a su bruñido confidente, se volvió hacia las escaleras con aspecto ligeramente atribulado, pero satisfecho. Fuller le sacaba más de una cabeza a aquella armadura; y seguramente, si hubiera llevado poco tiempo tratándola, su corazón se habría llenado de sospechas agoreras hacia alguien tan preocupado por su seguridad, tan receloso de los demás, que toda su belleza estribaba en sus defensas. Pero a base de abrillantar año tras año cada lámina y abertura, cada charnela y juntura, Fuller había descubierto todos los eslabones flojos de la cota de malla, todos los intersticios de la armadura, y ahora la veía como una muestra más débil de su propia resistencia más elástica, una esperanza hueca, pero que mantenía en ristre el guantelete de su mano, y una cara que ya no relucía con desdén, sino en la cual, en sus momentos de intimidad, la familiaridad había engendrado el contento.

Al rato entró Fuller con lo que consideraba gran sigilo. Sin embargo, no había avanzado mucho por el oscuro vestíbulo de entrada cuando tropezó con algo. El gran paquete plano cayó de plano en el suelo. Fuller quedó en vilo ante él. Entonces vio dos ojos negros clavados en él. En el preciso instante en que alzó la vista, la perra se volvió y salió trotando. «Vas a anotarlo en tu informe», musitó Fuller, y enderezó de nuevo el paquete. «Algún día descubriré dónde lo guardas y destruiré hasta la última página», siguió. «Así rescataré a mucha buena gente del pesar y la aflicción. Sobre todo a mí mismo», concluyó, entrando en el inmenso cuarto de estar.

Allí, elevándose de uno de los sillones situados ante la chimenea, vio una delgada columna de humo azul. Retrocedió, dejó el sombrero de paja en un pequeño armarito con entrepaños que había en el vestíbulo, y volvió a acercarse. Entonces, con gran alivio, dijo:

—Oh, es usted, señor. Buenas tardes.

—Sí, soy yo, Fuller. Al menos por el momento. Quién creías…

—Supuse que quizá fuera el señor Valentine, señor. He adquirido el hábito de esperar lo peor durante mi estancia aquí.

—Nos pasa a todos, nos pasa a todos. Tráeme coñac, ¿quieres, Fuller? Trae la botella de Cordon Bleu. La botella que tiene una cinta azul.

—Sí, señor, pero el señor Brown, señor…

—Cuando me ve bebiendo lo mejor que tiene, ya lo sé. Tráela de todas formas.

—Sí, señor. —Minutos después volvió Fuller con hielo, un vaso, un sifón y la botella de Cordon Bleu—. ¿Puedo prepararle algo, señor? —preguntó desde el púlpito, donde esperaba con sus guantes blancos. Concedido el permiso, cruzó la alfombra con un vaso de coñac y hielo en una mano, y la botella de sifón en la otra. Pisaba con cuidado—. Resulta curioso —dijo al llegar—, parece que siempre me siento inclinado a evitar pisar en las flores. —Aunque no obtuvo respuesta, siguió allí parado, balanceando las manos blancas un poco por encima de la mesa de los Siete Pecados Capitales. Finalmente, dijo—: ¿Es suyo ese paquete que he encontrado en el vestíbulo, señor? —Y giró los ojos con lo que consideraba una ojeada subrepticia, aunque sólo fuera por el ángulo oblicuo de la mirada fija que bajó hacia la cara que tenía ante sí—. Confío en no ser responsable del posible daño causado a su contenido cuando cayó a mis pies. Tuvimos una pequeña colisión en la oscuridad. —Tras otra prolongada pausa, Fuller dijo—: Al entrar en la habitación me pareció que no había más alma presente que yo. El señor Brown debe de seguir ocupado en la oficina, supongo.

El sifón irrumpió en el vaso, y al fin dijo la voz:

—¿De qué se trata, Fuller? ¿Qué es lo que te preocupa?

El pecho de Fuller se abombó, y al mismo tiempo su voz descendió a un tono acorde con los lugares comunes a través de los cuales planeaba acercarse a su pregunta.

—Dígame, señor, ¿existe eso que llaman pulpos?

—Sí. Por supuesto.

—¿Usted ha visto realmente alguno, señor?

—Bueno, yo… no, la verdad es que no. Pero los he visto muchas veces en fotos.

Fuller se lo quedó mirando con respetuosa incredulidad.

—Sí, señor, yo también he visto esas fotos en alguna ocasión. ¿Señor? ¿Existe eso que llaman sirenas, señor?

—Eso es una leyenda, Fuller. En realidad no existen, no.

Fuller se lo quedó mirando con respetuosa incredulidad. Sin embargo, siguió:

—¿Le resulta conocido san Luis, señor?

—Nunca he estado allí.

—No, señor, éste al que me refiero es un hombre, señor, una especie de fantasma que tienen en la iglesia.

Fuller se detuvo, y fue recompensado con lo que pareció ser una expresión de reminiscencia.

—El cruzado que trajo la auténtica corona de espinas.

—Es muy probable que se trate del mismo caballero —dijo Fuller, alzando sus manos blancas—. Suena muy digno de crédito.

—¿A propósito de qué, Fuller?

—De un sabio consejo para el problema que lleva ya algún tiempo atormentando mi entendimiento, señor. Si un hombre intenta vivir como un buen cristiano, y encuentra el sendero obstruido por lo que considera malo, señor… ¿puede recurrir en justicia y rigor a las malas artes para combatir al adversario?

Fuller esperó ansiosamente. Incluso añadió «¿Señor?» para animarlo. Pero su respuesta fue simple.

—Fuller, ésa es una de las preguntas más viejas del mundo.

—Sí, señor. Muy vieja me parece cuando me la planteo. Así que la respuesta debe ser también muy vieja, no hay pregunta sin respuesta, pues si no tienes ninguna respuesta no tienes ninguna pregunta.

—Fuller, te estás metiendo en cuestiones de dialéctica.

—Sí, señor —contestó Fuller, y retrocedió un paso—. Estos problemas siguen afligiéndome, señor —siguió—. Como las sirenas, señor.

—Fuller, Fuller… quédate con las sirenas, si te gustan.

—Sí, señor. Pero sigue siendo complicado, señor, pues si hay mujeres sirena, también debe haber hombres sirena.

Por primera vez, la cara a la que Fuller miraba ahora directamente se volvió hacia él con una sonrisa.

—Supongo que tienes razón, sabe Dios, Fuller.

—Sí, señor. Dios se mantiene muy bien informado sobre estos asuntos.

—¿Fuller…?

—¿Señor?

—Tú… tú nunca has visto un retrato de Dios, ¿verdad, Fuller?

—No, señor. Si algún artista pintara Su retrato sería un serio impedimento para la fe, señor.

—Sí, sí. Miguel Angel lo intentó.

—¿Qué aspecto le dio, señor?

—El de un viejo.

—Parece que los extranjeros encuentran consuelo pintando esos cuadros… —Fuller retrocedió rápidamente un paso, y estuvo a punto de caer sobre la mesa, cuando la figura se levantó de repente del pesado sillón—. No pretendía molestarle, señor, presentándome con mis aflicciones cuando está usted aquí sentado, señor, disfrutando tranquila y apaciblemente de su… refresco.

Fuller dio un paso hacia él, en el centro de la habitación.

—No, Fuller, no es… maldita sea, si fueran sólo tus problemas podríamos encerrarte y olvidarte.

—Sí, señor —dijo Fuller, retrocediendo el paso—. Me preparo a diario para esa eventualidad.

—No, no, no quería decir… simplemente quería decir que… todos tenemos los problemas por los que preguntas.

—Sí, señor —dijo Fuller, con aspecto aliviado—. Parece una medida poco práctica encerrar al mundo entero.

—Sí, pero… se le cierra la puerta. Se le puede cerrar la puerta.

—¿Se puede, señor? —Fuller alzó la vista hacia la cara bruscamente vuelta hacia él—. Parece que semejante medida no daría buenos resultados. Entonces el hombre perdería todo lo que cree guardar, y guardaría todo lo que cree perder. —Fuller permanecía inmóvil, con una impasibilidad intencional, como para compensar el movimiento que veía ante sí, los zapatos que pisaban descuidadamente las rosas—. Parece una tendencia muy general la de considerar a Dios como un viejo hasta que el propio hombre se hace viejo —dijo a la figura en movimiento.

—Supongo que sí —fue toda la respuesta que obtuvo Fuller, a pesar de lo cual siguió:

—Parece que los extranjeros encuentran consuelo pintando esos cuadros.

—Y a ti te parecen innecesarios, ¿verdad?

—Si les da consuelo y los fortalece…

—No, para ti. Para ti.

—No, señor, para mí supone un obstáculo.

—Y crees sencillamente que Dios está ahí.

—No lo vemos, señor —contestó Fuller—, pero tenemos que creer que está ahí. —Y Fuller se puso a

hacer frenéticos gestos ansiosos con sus manos blancas en el espacio que había entre ambos, como alguien despidiéndose de un amigo en un barco que zarpa, un amigo al que tapan sin cesar los brazos y las figuras agitadas del resto de la gente—. Eso dice el predicador…

—¿El predicador?

—¿Señor?

Ambos quedaron callados. Las manos de Fuller, enfundadas en los guantes blancos, revoloteaban torpemente a sus costados, como parodiando las manos que veía abrirse y cerrarse sobre nada ante sí.

—El predicador, señor, el reverendo Gilbert Sullivan, es el predicador a cuyos sermones he asistido en alguna ocasión. Finalmente se ha convertido también en un impedimento.

—¿El reverendo Gilbert Sullivan?

—Sí, señor. El reverendo Gilbert Sullivan es un predicador altamente cualificado, pero parece que cuando estaba adquiriendo su alta cualificación perdió en algún lugar del camino el primer requisito necesario para predicarnos. —Fuller había juntado las manos blancas a su espalda, y permanecía con los ojos bajos, como si hubiera terminado. Pero entonces alzó ansiosamente los ojos para añadir—: No es que pretenda juzgarlo…

—Pero ¿qué requisito, Fuller? ¿Qué requisito?

—Bueno, señor, el reverendo Gilbert Sullivan necesita creer que es el hombre por quien murió Jesucristo.

—Y tú… ¿te puedes creer eso, Fuller? ¿Puedes creerlo sin ningún problema, así de simple?

—Oh, no, señor. Creer eso es siempre un reto. No es tan simple de aceptar como las sirenas.

—Las sirenas… las sirenas…

—Sí, señor.

—¿Y puedes… aceptar las sirenas sin demasiada dificultad?

—Sí, señor, aunque queda la complicación de los hombres sirena.

—Sí, queda eso. Queda eso.

—Pero las mujeres sirena…

—Sí, las mujeres… puedes creer en las mujeres…

—Oh sí, señor —dijo Fuller, y luego, tras una pausa—: La mujer te trae al mundo, tienes que tenerle apego.

—Entonces, ¿no fue la mujer quien trajo el mal al mundo?

—¿Señor?

—Sí, cuando cogió el fruto del árbol prohibido, y se lo dio a comer al hombre, ¿no?

—De modo que el mal existía ya, y naturalmente ella lo descubrió.

—Sí, sí, y se lo dio al hombre…

—Lo compartió con él, señor —dijo Fuller—. Esa es la razón por la que la amamos.

La caniche negra, que había estado mordiéndose las uñas, alzó la cabeza, luego se levantó y se dirigió hacia la puerta del vestíbulo. Fuller se quedó mirando la espalda vuelta hacia él, silenciosa. Luego se estiró las solapas y siguió a la perra.

—*¿Efluvio?* —musitó Brown entre dientes.

> La dulce Norah Winebisquit bañada en sueño
> Descendió por sucios humeros de hollín y beleño.
> ¿Y dónde —gritó— estará ese cetro de mando
> Que los hombres llaman Recktall Brown, y yo dios llamo?
> Por una puerta de opaco cristal la condujeron
> A su presencia, y allí todas sus dudas se extinguieron.
> (Ella, la casta, la inexpresiva beldad)
> Ya no tenía que preguntar por su potestad:
> Terrible aparecía en su bastión de roble dorado
> Aquella encarnación de un sucio chiste gastado
> Que los dioses se cuentan mientras el nombre
> Esperan de la última obscenidad, llamada hombre.

Su ancha manga tapó el resto de este escrito sobre la despejada superficie de caoba donde, con las manos derechas extendidas pero sin tocarse, la delgada mano cetrina temblando nerviosamente, la suya acogiendo el peso de los diamantes, Recktall Brown se encaró con un joven de ojos feroces con un brazo en cabestrillo,

que decía: «Espero que la encuentre, quiero decir que encuentre una copia, la necesito, si usted no la necesita, quiero decir si no cree que pueda utilizarla…». Había esperanza en la última frase.

Musitando aún, los charcos perturbados tras las gafas mientras apartaba la atención, Brown levantó los ojos del poema.

—¿Por qué me pregunta por una copia? ¿Qué le hace pensar que nos la envió? Pregunte a la secretaria.

—Pero si envié copias a… sé que envié una aquí, su secretaria… y su secretaria no está aquí hoy, ha…

—Recibimos las cosas de los agentes, y se las devolvemos a los agentes. Pregunte a su agente.

Entonces Brown pareció advertir que los ojos enrojecidos de aquel joven, que recordaba bastante ese estereotipo de insania desmelenada en súbita eclosión tan a menudo asociado con el genio, unos ojos dilatados de forma anormal, estaban clavados en la hoja garabateada que sobresalía bajo su manga. Puso encima unos papeles, tapándola parcialmente, para volver a la correspondencia profesional del día. Pero la voz siguió hablando, las palabras brotando en tono angustiado:

—Sí, señor, pero ya que estoy aquí… —Una nueva intensidad hizo que Brown volviera a alzar los ojos —. Hay una cosa, algo que quiero saber, si puedo preguntarle lo que piensa, porque algunas personas han dicho, o más bien han dado a entender, que creen que yo he… bueno, que en realidad no es mía, que he utilizado alguna otra… que la he… plagiado.

—¿Plagiado? —Recktall Brown se recostó en su asiento. Registrando su mesa con un rápida mirada, encontró un original, lo empujó hacia adelante con una mano y se quitó las gafas con la otra. Clavó sus penetrantes ojos en la figura que tenía ante sí y se echó a reír—. Eche un vistazo a eso —dijo, mientras los temblorosos dedos cetrinos lo cogían—. Eso está robado. Toda la maldita novela está robada. Uno de nuestros lectores lo descubrió desde el principio. Un abogado la revisó y no hay ningún riesgo. Después de cambiar un par de cosas no hay ningún riesgo y es buena, y se venderá.

La caza del gamusino silvestre, leyó Otto en la cubierta.

—Así que ha cogido prestadas unas cuantas cosas de aquí y de allá, ¿y qué demonios importa? ¿Qué hay que no haya sido escrito antes? Coja algo bueno, cámbielo un poco y seguirá siendo bueno.

Otto estaba mirando el nombre de Max en la cubierta de *La caza del gamusino silvestre.*

—No tiene más que coger las palabras y ensartarlas de un modo ligeramente diferente —siguió Brown, alzando de nuevo las gafas.

—Pero… pero las palabras —murmuró Otto desvalidamente. Levantó la vista—. Las palabras tienen que tener un significado.

—Déjeme darle un consejo, muchacho —dijo Brown, levantándose—. No se preocupe por eso. Es precisamente al perderse la idea cuando aparece la palabra. Se puede hacer cualquier cosa con las mismas palabras. Limítese a seguir el manual y no intente sacarse del caletre un montón de ideas geniales. —Brown apretó un botón con el dedo. Había beligerancia y triunfo en su voz, pero fue con beligerante solicitud como terminó—: Así que ya lo sabe, limítese a sacarlo de donde sea y copíelo como si el propio Jesucristo se lo estuviera dictando.

—Pero esa obra —insistió la figura en retroceso— no puede haberse perdido, estoy seguro de que una copia llegó aquí, no… no está plagiada, no la he robado, la he escrito yo…

Pero Recktall Brown había vuelto a sentarse, y cuando apareció una secretaria estaba ya musitando de nuevo sobre la hoja garabateada que su manga, recogida, había descubierto.

Una leve corona celeste sobre su frente sin mella
Pesaba onerosa sobre el perspicaz Ahora de ella.
(Aún seguía hollando los dientes terribles del tiempo
Y admirándose de la virilidad del ser supremo).
La dulce Norah Winebisquit, en sueño bañada,
Despertó aquella forma pintada y decorada
De la mujer presente: ¿podía dudar de su pecado?
Buscó furiosamente el íntimo fuego sagrado,
ofreció con un desnudo grito hiriente
El ardiente botín del Yo presente.
El orgullo le alzó la ropa, y cubrió la gracia
De su cara con rasgos incapaces de desgracia.
Y luego, la cara bañada en gozo, la tintura
Del cristal cruzó, y como todo lo sabía supo al fin
Que también los inmortales tienen cubos de basura.

—¿Sí, señor?

—¿Qué es esto? ¿De dónde demonios ha salido? —preguntó perentoriamente Brown, agitando el papel en el aire. Se lo tendió a la secretaria.

—No lo sé, señor. Llegó por correo esta mañana, pensé que podía ser algo… literario.

—¿Y ése, cómo demonios ha entrado aquí?

—Lo siento, señor. La señorita Mims está fuera esta semana, y… —Se aclaró la garganta—. El señor Valentine espera para verle, señor —dijo, retirándose.

—¿Amigos? —oyó decir Otto cuando salía. El hombre alto del traje de rayas grises apenas le dirigió una mirada, desde una cara completamente inexpresiva cuyos ojos afirmaban, de forma clara e inmediata, que no se conocían—. Por supuesto, elige a tus amigos con tanto cuidado como eliges tu ropa —siguió el hombre, hablando con alguien que no tendría más edad que Otto—. Con cuidado infinito al principio…

En el vestíbulo de entrada, el lápiz que garabateaba «Elge amgos cm rpa» se detuvo de pronto: acababa de ver a Gordon, y no tenía ningún sitio donde meterlo.

Abajo, Otto salió a la calle murmurando imprecaciones de carácter general, sin sentido, hasta que el viento lo embistió, y proporcionó un objeto para sus maldiciones mientras lo impulsaba hacia adelante, despeinándolo por detrás.

—¿Te he oído aconsejando a algún futuro Menandro? —preguntó Basil Valentine al entrar—. ¿Y he oído la palabra plagio?

Brown terminó de cortar la punta de un puro antes de contestar:

—La has oído. Y puedes volverla a oír.

—¿Volverla a oír? —Valentine no se había sentado. Empezó a pasearse de un lado a otro por la habitación—. ¿Qué quieres decir?

—Quiero decir que acabo de leer una reseña anticipada de tu libro de arte, un crítico mierdero lo hace trizas.

Valentine se detuvo a encender un cigarrillo. Se quedó con la cerilla en la mano, mirando la llama. Luego la apagó.

—¿Qué quieres decir con que lo hace trizas?

—Saca tus palabras del texto y las cita para…

—Sí, para condenarme. Entiendo lo que quieres decir —dijo Valentine fríamente—. Suena realmente bastante… mierdero, como tú lo describes de modo tan gráfico.

—No solo eso…

—Mi querido Brown, nada me divierte más que eso, exactamente eso —lo interrumpió Valentine—. ¿Por qué crees que las escribí? Para dar a tu crítico… mierdero la oportunidad de revelar su absoluta falta de recursos, en lo que considera una demostración ejemplar de su inteligencia. ¿Te imaginas la satisfacción que da eso a alguien que nunca ha hecho nada propio? Nuestro gran sacerdocio mierdero, por así decirlo —concluyó con aspereza, volviéndose hacia Brown, o más bien hacia la nube de humo de puro que se elevaba entre ambos.

—No solo eso —siguió Brown con beligerante satisfacción, mientras Valentine se alejaba de su mesa—. Dice que has plagiado prácticamente todo el libro, que has robado…

—¡Plagiado! —Valentine se volvió, y dominó su voz con una delgada sonrisa—. Me haces sentir como Virgilio, cuando alguien lo vio llevando una obra de Ennio y supuso…

—Dice que has robado…

—«Sólo estoy sacando las perlas del estercolero de Ennio», fue la respuesta de Virgilio.

—Si crees que puedes robar partes enteras de otros…

—¿Y ahora qué? —exclamó rápidamente Valentine—. ¿Descubriendo en mí a otro… Crisipo? Setecientos cinco volúmenes —siguió, recobrando mientras hablaba la forzada calma morosa de su voz—. Pero los trabajos de otros le gustaban tanto que uno de sus libros incluía una obra de Eurípides casi entera. El… tráfago de semejante carrera tuvo que ser espantoso —añadió con un murmullo, y se volvió. Brown observó su paso nervioso, y advirtió un gesto familiar en otra persona: las manos de Valentine, abriéndose y cerrándose sobre nada a sus costados. Al fondo del despacho, Valentine se detuvo a echar un vistazo a los libros y revistas que había sobre aquella mesa. Las nubes del puro de Recktall Brown, elevándose lentamente, parecían acentuar el silencio entre ambos, y finalmente Valentine se volvió con una pequeña revista de tapas duras en la mano—. ¡Un simposio sobre religión! —leyó en la cubierta—. Un número bastante viejo. Supongo que la habrás comprado, ¿no?

—¿Dónde has oído eso?

—Es la única razón posible de que tengas aquí un ejemplar. Debes de haber comprado todo el negocio.

—No es ningún secreto —dijo Brown—. No me ha costado casi nada.

—Supongo que ya es hora de que le insufles algo de vida —dijo Valentine, dejando la revista en un sillón junto a su abrigo—. Se ha convertido en algo bastante siniestro, un grupito asustado que pasa todo el tiempo criticando sus mutuas tentativas en términos de proporciones cósmicas, y luego se defienden mutuamente contra el mundo exterior. Hasta la ficción, las historias que escriben son sobre sí mismos, no conocen a nadie más. Una especie de diario de almas muertas.

—Un hatajo de judíos de segunda mano… —empezó Brown, aunque solo fuera para interrumpirle.

—Dudo de que las ventanas de sus oficinas se hayan abierto desde hace décadas —siguió Valentine, con un tono monótono cuyo único propósito era establecer su autoridad para continuar—. Si es que hay alguna. ¿Qué futuro planeas para esos… críticos?

—¡Críticos! —musitó Brown—. Se llaman a sí mismos críticos simplemente porque nunca han aprendido a ganarse la vida. Tiene una miserable tirada de unos cinco mil, pero tiene una reputación. Intelectual. Voy a transformarla de modo que hasta un cretino pueda sentirse intelectual leyéndola. La tirada será veinte veces mayor que la de ahora.

Valentine rio entre dientes, alejándose de nuevo; y sólo cuando volvió la espalda mostró Brown impaciencia, agitándose en su silla. Parecía dispuesto a dejar seguir hablando a Valentine, perdiendo el tiempo hasta que lo que lo había llevado allí, y que ahora constreñía su nerviosa presencia, saliera a la luz.

—Como ese libro increíble que publicaste, ¿cómo se llamaba? —siguió Valentine, echando un vistazo hacia los amontonados sobre la mesa—. «Examen de conciencia», dijeron los críticos. Escrito por un pobre tipo que se unió a un célebre grupo político y se comportó traicioneramente, ¿no? Y tras satisfacer esa peculiar acumulación de culpa que llamaba su conciencia delatando a todo bicho viviente, se unió a un respetable residuo de la Iglesia protestante y se dedicó a vomitar su…

—Ya ha vendido medio millón —dijo Brown pacientemente—. Eso es lo que la gente quiere ahora, examen de conciencia.

—¡Examen de conciencia! —repitió Valentine—. Esa gente no tiene ninguna conciencia que examinar. Podría decirse que examinan en busca de una. Las únicas que parecen encontrar están en algún confesionario sensiblero con la gran masa de gente que en realidad consideran mucho menos inteligente que ellos, y a eso lo llaman humildad. Gente estúpida en la que pretenden encontrar alguna hermosa cualidad de la que esa gente no sabe nada. Eso se llama caridad. No —dijo, y se encogió impacientemente de hombros, volviéndose con las manos enlazadas a la espalda—. Esos que van saltando de una fe a otra no tienen nada que confesar salvo que no tienen ninguna fe en sí mismos.

Brown observó atentamente a través de las gruesas gafas cómo se paseaba despacio con la cabeza baja, tocándose con una mano delgada el marcado perfil de su barbilla, para detenerse de nuevo ante la mesa y abrir de golpe un libro que había allí.

—*En sueños beso su mano, señora* —leyó—. Realmente… «Seleccionado y editado, con una introducción de…», ¿tuya? Todo el mundo ama…

—No hay ningún plagio en eso —dijo Brown—. Todo el que ha escrito algo lleva su nombre debajo.

—Si no fuera así, no habría podido vender un solo ejemplar. Pero aquí, ¿Esme? ¿Quién diablos…?

—¿Quién?

—«PARA ESME, cuyo juicio infalible es responsable del valor que pueda tener este libro…». Tu humildad resulta de lo más conmovedora.

—Una chica de la oficina me reunió esas cosas —dijo Brown, tamborileando más deprisa con los dedos, mientras sus ojos bajos se clavaban en el extremo del poema garabateado bajo su manga—. Ahora dime qué…

—Tu modestia resulta abrumadora, como siempre.

—¿Has venido a hablar de mi modestia? —exclamó al fin Brown.

—Más bien no. —Valentine se volvió hacia él—. Me he pasado por aquí para hablarte de tu… más exitoso *protégé.* —Sonrió.

—¿Qué pasa? ¿Qué has estado haciendo con él?

—¿Yo? Nada, nada en absoluto.

Si la calma de Valentine había parecido alterarse, la había recobrado ya por completo; pero Brown siguió mirándolo, con las manos extendidas sobre la mesa, como si nada le resultase tan familiar como aquella expresión que solo era serena cuando tenía algo que disimular.

—¿Lo has visto? ¿Para qué?

—Déjame ver —contestó distraídamente Valentine—. Según recuerdo, estuvimos hablando de la Lex Cornelia, una ordenanza contra las matronas romanas que envenenaban…

—Te dije que no iba a tolerar que te entrometieras con ninguna de tus mierdas.

—¿Mis qué? —dijo Valentine, alzando las cejas.

—Sí, maldita sea. Te he tolerado muchas cosas, pero esta vez… Mira, sé muchas cosas sobre ti, cosas que quizá no sepas que sé —dijo Recktall Brown inclinándose hacia adelante sobre la mesa, mirándolo con los ojos descentrados tras aquellas gruesas gafas.

—Mi vida privada apenas tiene interés…

—No es sólo tu vida privada. Un maldito montón de otras cosas.

—¿Otras cosas? —repitió suavemente Valentine.

—¿Qué me dices de aquel viaje que hiciste a París hace unos seis meses? Una semana en París. ¿Adónde fuiste desde París?

—Al Midi, como te dije. Un agradable pueblecito cerca de…

—Y un cuerno, al Midi. ¿Quieres que te diga adónde fuiste?

—No especialmente —dijo Basil Valentine, dándose golpecitos con un dedo en la barbilla.

—Podría decirte…

—Pero no lo vas a hacer, ¿verdad? —dijo Valentine, apoyando el dedo en la barbilla y alzando la vista, mientras Recktall Brown bajaba la suya.

—Te lo dije el día que le conociste —repitió Brown—. No quiero que te entrometas de ningún modo.

—Sabes, creo que en realidad te gusta. Debe de ser una extraña sensación para ti.

—Tenemos negocios en común.

—Dime, ¿cuánto interés tienes en él?

—Ahora mismo, un cuarto de millón de dólares. Y no estoy dispuesto a perder ese interés.

—Imagino que no —dijo Valentine, sacando otro cigarrillo y deteniéndose hasta que lo hubo encendido —. Dime, ¿y si ocurriera algo que rompiera esa asociación vuestra?

—Algo así tendría que ocurrir sobre mi cadáver —dijo Brown sin alterarse.

—¿Y si se descubrieran esas falsificaciones?

—¿Qué quieres decir con que se descubrieran?

—Podría haber dicho demostraran.

—¡Así que es eso! —Brown se levantó, dejando las manos apoyadas en la mesa—. Sabes puñeteramente bien que nadie puede demostrar nada.

—Pero si él…

—¿Él?

—Según me has dicho, uno no se puede asegurar contra el vicio inherente.

—¿Qué quieres decir?

—No importa —dijo Valentine—. Me alegro de entenderte. Sí, para ti no existe más que como una inversión, ¿no?

—Y para ti no existe más que como…

—Basta ya de eso —le cortó Valentine—. Ahora bien, esa cuenta corriente conjunta en la que ingresas su dinero…

—Es bastante segura —murmuró Brown, sentándose—. Nadie sabe nada de ella, nadie puede tocarla más que nosotros, tú, él y yo. —Entonces Brown alzó la vista—. ¿Es en eso en lo que estás pensando?, ¿en coger y sacar…

—Cielo santo —rio Valentine—. Me conoces mejor que eso. En todo caso sabes que lo único que podría hacer sería interrumpir los pagos. Pero él… —Valentine se quedó mirando el reflejo de los diamantes en la caoba—. Con su genio…

—Con su genio y tu ambición yo habría…

—Vaya —volvió a interrumpirle Valentine, alzando la vista hacia él—. Quizá deberías sentar la cabeza y fundar una familia. No puedo imaginar un padre más orgulloso que el que tú harías.

—Escucha —dijo Recktall Brown, volviendo a levantarse—, no vamos a seguir con esto. Vas a olvidar toda esa mierda sobre denunciar sus cuadros y arruinarle.

—¿A él? Pero imagina… imagina que fuera él mismo quien tuviera esa intención.

—¿Crees que está loco? Puede que en otro sentido, pero…

—Pero no puedes imaginar que alguien esté loco cuando se trata de ganar un millón de dólares. —Basil Valentine recogió su abrigo. Mientras se lo ponía se quedó mirando el amplio despacho—. Sabes, deberías instalar aquí una fábrica de novelas —dijo—. Ya se ha hecho otras veces. Sobre todo después del éxito de ese libro de «examen de conciencia». Y de esa notable abominación, ¿cómo se llamaba, *Los árboles del hogar?* Una auténtica cadena de montaje. A propósito —siguió con tono afable, subiéndose las solapas—,

¿qué ha sido de aquel chico que encontré aquí tratando de venderte un libro de poemas? El que tenía un acné lamentable, que encontré en el cuarto de baño frotándose las mejillas con papel de lija. Arthur no sé qué…

—Sigue dando la vara con sus malditos poemas. Poemas religiosos.

—No eran tan malos. Podrías darle algo de dinero por ellos, sabes, una oportunidad de vivir como un ser humano.

—¿Es que los seres humanos escriben poesía? —preguntó Recktall Brown, alzando la vista. Luego su mirada descentrada cayó sobre el papel que tenía bajo el puño—. Eso lo hacen los poetas.

Basil Valentine se quedó mirando un momento la pesada cabeza inclinada. Luego recogió su sombrero, y con él la pequeña revista de tapas duras que había dejado en el sillón.

—Te deseo suerte con esto —dijo, tirándola ante las manos de Brown sobre la mesa, donde resbaló hacia la masa de la mano de los diamantes, que se apartó con instantánea volición. El puro se había apagado casi en el cenicero, pero seguía despidiendo una nociva emanación. Brown no levantó la vista. Se quedó mirando *Efluvio* y musitó algo sobre lo popular que era ahora la religión, y algo sobre «esos pobres cabrones intelectuales».

—Quizá deberían crucificarlos a todos, ¿no? —sugirió Basil Valentine, abriendo la puerta a su espalda—. Eso podría darles una idea de la experiencia religiosa.

—Pero este libro es sobre religión —dijo un subeditor, apartándose para dejar paso al hombre alto con sombrero Homburg negro—. Es sobre budismo.

—Pero está escrito por un judío —dijo el otro, apartándose.

—Bueno, le he dicho que si cambiaba su protagonista de judío a homosexual podríamos aceptarlo.

—Pero si así era como estaba al principio.

Recktall Brown entró preguntando: «¿Quién demonios es el reverendo Gilbert Sullivan, y qué demonios hace aquí?». Al no recibir respuesta (aunque solo se detuvo a escuchar lo que tardó en pasar de la puerta de la casa a otra), Recktall Brown entró en un amplio y espacioso ropero, y colgó su abrigo entre muchos otros del mismo tamaño, forma y estilo. La perra salió a su encuentro meneando lentamente el muñón de su rabo, y él se agachó para darle una sola palmadita en la cabeza que pareció agradarle sumamente.

—Señor…

—¿Por qué demonios no contestas a la puerta, Fuller? —dijo Recktall Brown, avanzando—. En lugar de… ¿quién es ese reverendo Gilbert Sullivan, qué…?

—Oh, no, señor —dijo Fuller, retrocediendo ante él hasta la habitación—. El reverendo no está presente aquí, estoy solo aquí…

—Entonces por qué demonios no contestas a la puerta en lugar de hablar a solas.

—Oh, no, señor, no exactamente solo, señor, yo…

—Bueno, quién demonios… Bueno, hijo mío, me alegro de verte. Me alegro condenadamente de verte. Fuller, tráeme aquí la jarra.

Recktall Brown se quedó junto a los sillones colocados ante la chimenea, observando cómo cruzaba Fuller la habitación hasta el púlpito.

—¿Fuller? —dijo de pronto.

—¿Señor…?

—¿Qué has estado haciendo, Fuller?

—¿Señor? Nada, señor. Últimamente he estado de lo más pacífico y tranquilo.

—Procura seguir así.

Recktall Brown bajó la mirada hacia la mesa, y Fuller bajó la mirada hacia la perra.

—¿Fuller?

—¿Señor?

—¿Es que no hay un coñac más corriente?

—Sí, señor, pero…

—Le dije que quería éste. Puede descontármelo de mi próximo cheque.

—Está bien, hijo mío, cálmate. Simplemente creí que ese estúpido negro se había equivocado. Dice que el alcohol lo aturulla, no distingue una botella de otra. —Recktall Brown se acomodó en un sillón, y miró hacia el otro lado de la mesa—. Pareces cansado, hijo mío. Infernalmente cansado.

—Los perritos callejeros me ladran.

—Qué demonios, hijo mío. Qué demonios. No los puedes culpar.

—¿Quiere decir que si fuera un perrito callejero me ladraría?

—Escucha, hijo mío, qué demonios…

—Ese maldito congénitamente maldito demonio candente de perro suyo es el único que no me ladra. Éste es un buen coñac.

—Escucha, hijo mío, quiero hablar contigo. ¿Qué pasa con ese cuadro en el que estás trabajando?

—Por eso estoy aquí. Está ahí fuera, en el vestíbulo.

Recktall Brown estaba inclinado hacia adelante en el gran sillón, con las manos dobladas hacia adentro sobre las rodillas. Ahora se rebulló de forma que la carne le formó un pliegue en la parte de atrás del cuello, y gritó:

—¡Fuller!

—¿Señor?

—Trae ese paquete grande que hay en el vestíbulo, tráelo aquí. ¿Es ése, hijo mío? —preguntó volviéndose. No recibió respuesta, y volvió a rebullirse para ver acercarse a Fuller con el paquete, sorteando las rosas.

—Date prisa, Fuller. ¿Qué demonios estás haciendo, jugando a la pata coja? Venga, déjalo aquí y ábrelo con cuidado, con muchísimo cuidado, maldita sea. —Mientras caía el papel de envolver marrón, Recktall Brown siguió diciendo—: Te dije que no trajeras estas malditas cosas hasta aquí en el metro. Te dije que me llamaras y que yo mandaría un coche a buscarlo. Mira ahí, ya le has golpeado una esquina. —Entonces dejó de hablar, y recobró el aliento para decir—: ¡Qué demonios!

Fuller había retrocedido cuidadosamente tres pasos, y ahora estaba mirando con una expresión que en otra cara hubiera podido acrisolarse en inquietud, pero que en la suya era simple terror expectante. La explosión no fue por él, sin embargo; pero sin embargo, siguió clavado en el sitio.

—¿Dónde demonios está su cara?

—¿Señor?

—No te estoy preguntando a ti, Fuller, maldita sea. ¿Dónde demonios está su cara?

—Parece que se ha quedado sin ella por los muchos siglos pasados respetuosamente sobre…

—¡Fuller! ¡Por Dios, Fuller! ¿Os habéis vuelto locos los dos? Vete de aquí. —Los charcos tras las gruesas gafas se estremecieron como agua perturbada por el viento—. Esto es… por Dios. Bueno, veamos. Dime dónde demonios está su cara.

—Como dice Fuller, parece que se ha quedado sin ella por la fricción de muchos años respetuosos pasando sus manos amorosas…

—¡Basta! —Recktall Brown bajó la voz, y luego dejó caer su masa en un sillón. Estaba sudando—. Yo también estoy cansado, maldita sea. Ahora dime simplemente por qué demonios lo has estropeado de ese modo. Fuller, te he dicho que te fueras de aquí.

—Sí, señor.

—Ah, dictar al pasado lo que ha creado es posible, pero para imponer la propia voluntad sobre lo que ha destruido hace falta una mano firme y una presunción pura. Mi mujer me dijo una vez que parecía un criminal.

—Lo que le has hecho a ese cuadro es un crimen.

—Un criminal supralapsario.

Recktall Brown se inclinó hacia adelante agarrándose las rodillas.

—No deberías reírte de ese modo, hijo mío.

—¿Por qué no? Dígame, dígame. Hace tiempo que no me reía.

—Simplemente no suena bien —musitó Recktall Brown, y bajó la vista hacia el cuadro dañado. Luego volvió a levantarla—. ¿Estás bien, hijo mío?

—Sí, bien. Últimamente tengo a menudo una sensación de ingravidez, o de pesar muy poco. Eso es. Ingrávido pero bien. Cuando se vive donde yo vivo, los trastornos del hígado son raros.

—No era en tu hígado en lo que estaba pensando —dijo Recktall Brown, volviendo a bajar la vista—. Mira, tienes que volver a pintar esa cara, la cara de esa mujer. Has bajado de golpe el precio de eso en diez mil dólares.

—Y deshonrado a la muerte por añadidura, según me han dicho. ¿Puedo coger un puro?

—¿Tú?

—Un puro.

—Hijo mío…

Recktall Brown observó cómo rasgaba la envoltura de celofán y empezaba a cortar la punta con la uña del pulgar.

—Toma, usa esto —dijo tendiéndole el cortaplumas—. No te quedes mirándolo sin más, hijo mío. Corta la punta del maldito puro con eso.

—Vaya.

—Hijo mío…

—En esta habitación no se mueve nada. Si tuviera música…

Sin embargo, el humo asciende.

—¡Allí! Algo se ha movido allí, un movimiento íntimo en la pared del fondo… —Se recuperó con un estremecimiento, y tras pasarse una mano por los ojos susurró—. Da igual. Me pareció ver a Patinir allí colgado, siempre me olvido de que está en manos muertas, se ha ido a casa y ha cobrado su salario. ¿Ve cómo nos engatusa la esperanza? Haciendo unos dados perfectos. Tienen que ser perfectos para que luego puedas cargarlos. ¡Bondad divina, qué hermosos diamantes! ¡Con qué viveza bailan sus impurezas! No es un engaño meramente superficial, como este campo intrincado y artificioso, repleto de fraude, que nos separa, siete y capitales. Ni siquiera es una buena copia.

Se quedó mirando la mesa sin pestañear, y de repente se inclinó hacia adelante para pinchar el borde con el cortaplumas.

—¡Quieto! —Brown extendió bruscamente la mano abierta—. Esta tabla es auténtica, deja de arañarla. No te preocupes, inmediatamente después de que Valentine se fuera de la lengua con ella la hice examinar por unos auténticos expertos. No te preocupes —gruñó Brown con beligerante satisfacción, bajando la vista hacia la mesa—. Es el genuino original.

—Ya veo, no lo es —brotó claramente el susurro desde el otro lado de la mesa de los Siete Pecados Capitales—. ¡Cristo! ¿Haber copiado una copia? ¡Y así fue como empezó todo!

—Hijo mío —dice Recktall Brown y, levantándose, enciende su puro y se lo embute entre los dientes desiguales. El retrato de juventud cuelga inmóvil mientras se acerca a él, y quizá, como señaló Basil Valentine, sirve en cierta medida para humanizar los fragmentos de movimiento que componen su avance hacia él. Nada más llegar allí, Recktall Brown le vuelve la espalda, un gesto que no altera la expresión del retrato mientras la oscurece con la que la ha sustituido—. Puede que necesites una chica.

—¿Una chica?

—¿Cuánto hace que no has tenido una?

—¿Tenido una?

—No me refiero a una maldita esposa colgada todo el tiempo de tu cuello. Me refiero simplemente a una chica. No puedes seguir un mes tras otro con todo esto amontonándose dentro de ti. Por supuesto, qué demonios, cualquiera puede ver que te va a volver loco como una cabra. Hay que descargarse de ello de vez en cuando, o le vuelve loco a cualquiera. ¿Quieres que te mande una chica bonita allá abajo para un par de noches?

—Pero el coste.

—¿El coste? —Con cada pie plantado sobre una rosa, la risa de Recktall Brown parece surgir tras atravesarle el cuerpo entero, un viaje laborioso, complicado por venas y conductos, por cavidades y órganos diligentes cuyas funciones se ven interrumpidas por el paso de esta forma ondeante que brota entre bocanadas de humo—. Puedes pagarte cualquier cosa en esta ciudad.

—Descalzo en esa vasta extensión, por amor o por dinero.

—Maldita sea, hijo mío. Maldita sea…

—¿Sin amor?

—¿Me enamoro yo del peluquero cuando me corto el pelo? Maldita sea, hijo mío.

—El reverendo Gilbert Sullivan…

—¡Maldito sea el reverendo Gilbert Sullivan!

—Exactamente.

Recktall Brown empieza a darse la vuelta; su vuelta es notable por su rapidez, una proeza de cooperación muscular que ocurre antes de que sus ojos puedan advertir la razón. Pero lo hacen, y su voz también.

—Deja ya esa maldita botella y siéntate.

—Un obstáculo para el trabajo de la realidad. Ah, Brown, Brown, todas tus hijas eran bellas. Pero la menor…

—¿Te sirve de algo Esme?

—Queda la complicación de los hombres sirena.

—Siéntate. Vamos a sentarnos los dos y a resolver esto. ¿Te ha metido él toda esta mierda en la cabeza?

—Oigo cantar.

Hundiéndose con tonos graves en las profundidades de la inmensa habitación, llegan estos pesos: «Chiquilla».

«Mi cuarto de soltero».

—¡Fuller!

—¿Señor? —cae desde arriba.

—Para ese maldito ruido.

—Tú y yo, Brown. Tú y yo. Eres tan condenadamente familiar.

—Tienes que dominarte, hijo mío.

—Si somos, como dice él, proyecciones de su subconsciente. Entonces la intimidad no es nada extraordinaria, ¿verdad?

—Para ya. Tienes que dejar de hablar de ese modo. Valentine me hace la misma maldita cosa, trata de agotarme. ¿Te ha… te ha estado molestando, hijo mío? Háblame ya, maldita sea, vamos a arreglar esto ahora mismo. ¿En qué estás pensando?

—La ecuación de *x* elevado a *n* más *y* elevado a *n* no tiene ninguna solución significativa en números enteros cuando *n* es mayor que dos.

—Siéntate.

—Es el último teorema de Fermat.

—Siéntate. ¿Qué demonios te pasa, hay… te duele algo? —El movimiento reflejado en las gruesas gafas (y que penetra por cámaras acuosas para ser invertido y viajar así, sin sorprenderse, por humores vítreos hasta la pared demarcadora de las retinas, donde se le rescata y transporta hacia abajo por los nervios ópticos hasta que se reúne consigo mismo tras estos viajes separados y se funde en la redondez) sale a la superficie de su conciencia con la fuerza del movimiento retardado—. ¿Por qué gruñes?

—Estoy fingiendo que peso trescientas libras.

—Siéntate. Para ya. Dame esa maldita botella.

—No es difícil.

—¿Señor?

No se mueve nada más que el paisaje íntimo de Patinir, un proceso silencioso e independiente que no exige ninguna atención, pues su color predominante es el azul.

—¿Señor? ¿Qué hago con estas reliquias?

Una docena entera de cruces aparece apretada entre los brazos de Fuller.

—Fuller —dice Recktall Brown con impasible paciencia mortal—, coge esos hombrecillos que has estado restregando y clava cada uno de ellos en una cruz, y ponlos bien boca arriba, y hazlo en silencio, y lárgate de aquí de una puñetera vez.

—¿Los hombrecillos-Jesús, señor?

—Vete. Vete. Vete.

—A san Pedro, boca abajo. Espera, Fuller. Confírmame una cosa. ¿No hay en cada uno de nosotros un hombre desnudo que avanza solo por la calle Mayor tocando el bombo?

Recktall Brown activa el pesado armazón que lo sostiene y se levanta.

—¿Me has oído, Fuller? ¿Estás loco tú también? ¿Me has oído?

—Pienso que en el estado del que goza ahora, señor, tal vez pueda entender el lenguaje de la tostada…

—¡Vete!

Fuller y Recktall Brown divergen. El viejo cruciferario pisa con cuidado y asciende la colina de escaleras. Recktall Brown llega a un rincón, donde se quita las gafas y se queda mirando la suave difusión de la habitación con ojos abiertos y penetrantes, como los que miran bajo la superficie del mar.

—No —dice hacia la chimenea, y luego persigue su palabra—. No puedes hacer esto, hijo mío. No te me puedes volver loco ahora.

—¿Ahora? ¿Ahora?

—Maldita sea, hijo mío. No antes de que termines ese cuadro de Herbert. —Enguirnaldado de humo, se cierne sobre su propiedad—. ¿Cómo te está quedando?

—Hermosamente. Excitantemente. Maravillosamente.

—Bien. Bien, hijo mío. Bien.

—Pero no Van Eyck.

—¿Qué quieres decir?

—No Hubert.

—¿Qué quieres decir, hijo mío? ¿Qué demonios quieres decir? —El propio humo flotaba en planos difractados, y Recktall Brown se sentó—. Quieres que te reconozcan el mérito de pintarlo, ¿no? ¿Es eso?

—Pero no por ti, ni por ellos, sino por el propio cuadro.

Recktall Brown hizo rodar el puro entre sus gruesos dedos. Luego se lo llevó a los labios y, sin soltarlo, lo hizo rodar allí.

—No puedes hacer eso, hijo mío. —Hizo una pausa—. Sabes condenadamente bien que si intentas vender uno de esos cuadros como tuyo te ofrecerán cuarenta dólares. Espera, hijo mío. No te rías de ese modo. No suena bien.

—Imagínate…

—Maldita sea, hijo mío. ¿Hicimos un trato o no? Tú y yo tenemos negocios en común. ¿Ves ese libro que está en la estantería, el amarillo? *Los árboles del hogar.* Ese tipo tiene un negocio, y lo tiene conmigo. Y tú…

—Yo…

—Cuando empezaste sabías —dijo Recktall Brown— que no podrías parar.

Se quedaron callados. Las líneas de sus miradas formaban dos lados de un triángulo, eso era todo.

—Maldita sea, hijo mío, si no fuera porque tienes negocios conmigo irías a la deriva. Ese maldito mundo de formas y olores en el que dices que vives, te convertirías en uno de ellos. Mírate, ya casi lo has hecho. Por Dios —dijo Recktall Brown levantándose, de forma que la mirada de sus ojos no necesitaba ya salvar la distancia entre ambos, sentados, sino que caía como un peso junto con sus palabras—, no te puedes volver loco ahora. No te dejaré. —Arrojó el puro a la chimenea, y sacó otro—. ¿Hace falta que haga bajar a Cristo para que pose para ti? —Su voz se iba elevando de nuevo—. ¿Hace falta que haga bajar a la Virgen para que extienda su…

—Ya es demasiado tarde.

—Demasiado tarde ¿para qué? Vamos. Háblame. Me siento como si estuviera hablando conmigo mismo.

—La *Madonna* Steenken. Pues eso. Cuando Hubert van Eyck pintó eso, no era sólo un hombre pintando un cuadro de una mujer.

—Bueno, entonces, ¿qué demonios era? Dímelo.

—¿Sentimiento? ¿Creencia? Digamos sensación, pues. Pregunta a Calígula.

—¿La creencia es necesaria? También lo es el dinero, y mira cuánta gente lo tiene, por el amor de Dios. Deja los sentimientos a los demás, utiliza la cabeza. Míralos. Prefieren sentir a pensar, y míralos. Deja que sientan y crean por ti, y piensa por ellos, o acabarás en el arroyo donde están todos.

Las dos venas de su garganta, ambas vitales, latían bajo pliegues de carne. Las dos que tenía ante sí sobresalían ofreciéndose a cualquier cuchillo pasajero.

—Ya es demasiado tarde. «El mejor cuadro, y quizá la obra culminante del genio del siglo XV, Dierick Bouts». ¿Ves? Tengo que decírselo.

Recktall Brown bajó la voz.

—Como tú dices, hijo mío, no es tan simple. ¿Crees que quieren saberlo? —Recktall Brown no sacó su cortaplumas, ni siquiera lo buscó en los bolsillos que oscilaban contra su estómago, donde era un inquilino familiar. Cortó con los dientes la punta del puro, y empezó a pasearse ante la chimenea—. Eminentes científicos coinciden, tras análisis exhaustivos, en que un producto químico que vale quince centavos el galón, metido en un frasquito lujoso con un montón de términos científicos, resulta superior. De modo que pagan un dólar por frasco porque quieren. Esos cuadros tuyos, ¿crees que podrías sacar doscientos dólares por alguno? No. Pero esos pobres cabrones se pelean por quitármelos de las manos pagando muchos miles. No saben, no quieren saber. Quieren que se lo digan. Ese tipo que aparece en las fotos con un estetoscopio en la mano es igual que tus autoridades de mierda. Quieren tener el mérito de descubrir uno de esos cuadros antiguos. Lo mismo que la gente que se siente orgullosa de pagar un dólar por un frasco de ese producto químico, la misma maldita gente se siente orgullosa de poder contratar a una autoridad eminente para que les diga lo que deben comprar en materia de arte. Y si no hay suficientes cuadros para todos…

—Aprobamos la ley de Gresham.

—No me hables ahora de leyes, limítate a escucharme. ¿De qué serviría que fueras por ahí contando a la gente que esos cuadros los has pintado tú? Se volverían locos de rabia contigo, sobre todo la gente que los ha comprado. ¿Crees que admitirían siquiera que han pagado cuarenta o cincuenta mil por una falsificación? ¿Crees que alguien te daría las gracias?

—Cambiaría mi puro por esa botella de coñac, esa botella de coñac por este puro habano a medio fumar que no estoy disfrutando.

—¿Crees que te harían caso siquiera? Te encerrarían, hijo mío. Aunque llegaras allí y volvieras a pintar otra vez todos esos cuadros, no te creerían. Pensarían que estás loco. Eso es lo que querrían creer. Tú has engañado a los expertos, hijo mío. Pero una vez has engañado a un experto sigue engañado. Espera un minuto. Siéntate. Aún no he terminado. ¿Quién te ha metido eso en la cabeza?

—El enano que se casó con la mujer alta. ¿Te sabes ése?

—Esto lo está haciendo Valentine, ¿verdad? Contéstame. Te dije que tuvieras cuidado con él, ¿no? Maldita sea, te dije que tuvieras cuidado con él. Está celoso de ti, hijo mío, ¿no te das cuenta?

—Tú y él sois muy íntimos, el señor Brown y Basil Valentine.

—Lo conozco —dijo Recktall Brown, bajando la vista hacia el puro que tenía en la mano. La hoja había empezado a abrirse, y lo tiró a la chimenea—. Hace tiempo que lo conozco, y lo único que sé —siguió, alzando la vista— es que no te puedes fiar de él. Nadie puede. Está mezclado en un montón de cosas. —Brown estaba hurgando en el bolsillo de su chaleco—. En casi todo, maldita sea. Es demasiado listo para lo que le conviene. ¿Tienes tú ese cortaplumas? No te levantes, no te levantes, simplemente pásamelo.

—¿Un hombre brillante?

—Te puedo decir que ha tenido la mejor educación que se puede pagar con dinero.

—Si somos sacerdotes y conspiramos contra ti, no te extrañes.

—Me… maldita sea, te he dicho que no te rías de ese modo.

—¿Qué es la risa?

—Me pone nervioso.

—Cuando no estoy aquí no piensas en mí. Bueno, ¿debería extrañarme eso?

—¿Adónde vas ahora?

—A ver a mi mujer. Pura cuestión de negocios, como comprenderás. Cuando salgo por la puerta, me pregunto cómo puede tolerarnos el pasado.

Recktall Brown rodeó los sillones, y sus trayectorias convergieron. Levantó el brazo y lo apoyó.

—Te noto los huesos en el hombro. ¿Es que no comes nada?

—Tus palabras me reconfortan, pues yo también he tenido la sensación de notarlos. Pero hacía tiempo que nadie me lo confirmaba. ¿No hubiera sido una tentación irresistible coger un cuchillo y escarbar en su busca para demostrar que están ahí?

—Cristo, hijo mío, tienes que dominarte.

—Pues qué plan, dominar lo que otros desechan.

—Te sientes mejor ahora, ¿verdad? Tómate un descanso. Después de ese cuadro de Hubert, tómate un descanso. Y olvida esas chifladuras que has dicho. Qué demonios, puedes pintar ese cuadro, y lo sabes. Y en cuanto a lo que has dicho sobre… bueno, qué demonios, olvidemos lo demás, pero no te olvides de mantenerte apartado de Valentine.

—Eres tan condenadamente familiar, Brown.

—Jesucristo, hijo mío, te conozco desde hace ya bastante tiempo. Quiero protegerte. Y mantente apartado de él, ¿me oyes?

—Tan condenadamente familiar.

—Lo cambiaría por ti sin dudarlo. Ahora cuídate. Te sentirás mejor cuando te pongas a trabajar otra vez.

En el vestíbulo de entrada, el peso del brazo permanece extendido durante otro instante, y los gruesos diamantes pegados a la áspera mejilla. Detrás, la perra está tumbada lamiéndose el vientre. Al lado está el retrato, las manos como ubres delante. El peso del brazo y los diamantes, la mama sin leche, malhechora hasta en reposo pendulante, eso y el ruido de la perra, lamiéndose y lamiéndose en medio del pestífero calor, tan inertemente opresivo como la mano, se funden con insensible intimidad en una sombra sofocante; y si en aquel preciso instante Recktall Brown no hubiera soltado el hombro con una palmadita, diciendo «Domínate y termina ese último, hijo mío, y luego tómate un descanso. Necesitas un descanso…», la sombra que los unía, tras un momento de confusión, habría menguado quizá en un tercio.

«¡Hola, pandilla! Vuestro amigo Lázaro, el Leproso Risueño, os presenta el novísimo programa radiofónico para chavalines *Vidas de santos,* patrocinado por Necrostyle. Antes de que oigamos a vuestro amigo Lázaro, dejadme haceros una pregunta. ¿Tiene mamá problemas para dormir? Si los tiene, y ja ja qué mamá no los tiene, preguntadle si ha oído hablar de Necrostyle, el somnífero en forma de oblea. ¿Recordáis la historia que os contó Lázaro el Risueño la semana pasada, chavales? ¿Sobre la santa que pasó sin dormir los últimos ocho años de su vida? Eso es. Ágata de la Cruz. Pero mamá no es una santa, ¿verdad? Mamá necesita dormir. Habladle de Necrostyle, si es que no lo conoce ya. No lo olvidéis, chavales, Necrostyle, el somnífero en forma de oblea. No se mastica, no deja sabor…».

—Ellery —interrumpió Esther.

—Espera un segundo —Ellery se inclinó hacia adelante en su asiento con un periódico enrollado en la mano, la cabeza baja, escuchando la radio—. Es un cliente nuevo.

«… vuestro amigo Lázaro el Risueño estará aquí dentro de un momento, pero escuchad, chavales. Antes quiero haceros una pregunta realmente confidencial, entre nosotros. ¿Tenéis suficientes hermanos y hermanas? Ya sé, queréis mucho a vuestro hermano mayor o a la pequeña Janey, ¿verdad? Pero demasiados pueden perjudicaros. Miradlo de este modo. Cuando tenéis tarta de postre, ¿en cuántas partes hay que dividirla? ¿Os llega algún trozo? Si tenéis suficientes hermanos y hermanas, o incluso si no tenéis ninguno y no queréis ninguno, hablad a mamá de Puño. Puño, el nuevo anticonceptivo milagroso. Puño, con la garantía de no dañar tejidos internos ni tener efectos duraderos. Pero no hace falta que recordéis todas estas palabras largas, simplemente decid a mamá que pregunte por Puño la próxima vez que visite a su amable farmacéutico habitual. Recordad: Puño. Está en un Puño».

—Me siento mal —dijo Esther.

—Escucha.

«… y Zap. Pero luego volveré para contaros más cosas sobre Zap. Aquí está ya vuestro amigo Lázaro el Risueño, ja ja, que va a contarnos lo que le ocurrió al santo Dodó de Hascha cuando se…».

—¿Puedes apagar eso? —preguntó Esther, apoyando la cabeza en el respaldo, con los ojos cerrados.

—Rose quiere oírlo. Lo bajaré un poco —dijo Ellery.

Se acercó a la radio con los laboriosos movimientos con que un jugador de fútbol americano demuestra que su mayor logro consiste en el simple hecho de ser físico. Ellery tenía una constitución ágil y pausada. Manejaba su cuerpo y todo lo que lo rodeaba con un aire de desgarbada familiaridad. Cuando andaba, lo hacía con un aire de paciente indiferencia hacia dónde iba, aunque nunca llegaba a ningún otro sitio. La ropa le sentaba bien: era lo que los sastres con inclinación deportiva tenían en mente cuando diseñaban chaquetas holgadas y pantalones de pernera estrecha sin plisar. Los cigarrillos se consumían entre sus dedos exánimemente, olvidados, quitándole la responsabilidad de las cenizas que caían sobre la alfombra cuando pesaban lo suficiente. Fumaba arrojando con desdén gruesos anillos de humo que parecían sacudir todo lo que tocaban. Miraba a las cosas y a las caras con paciente aburrimiento, y se encogía de hombros. A veces guiñaba un ojo, como hizo ahora a Rose, que estaba sentada en el suelo, encogida contra el altavoz de la radio. Ellery bajó el volumen. Rose se lo quedó mirando.

También Esther.

—A veces… oigo esas cosas y simplemente no puedo creerlas —dijo.

—Es un gran cliente, Productos Necrostyle. Es la forma de llegar a ellos, a través de los críos.

—Pero es… ¿cómo puede ser tan vulgar? —dijo Esther, pronunciando con énfasis la última palabra. Había abierto los ojos inyectados en sangre y miraba fijamente al techo.

—¿Vulgar? Es lo que le gusta a la gente. Eso es lo que significa vulgar: gente.

—Ellery, pero no veo por qué… no veo por qué…

—Tú misma me lo dijiste. En Yale no enseñaban latín.

Esther bajó los ojos hacia él. Tenía el gatito demasiado apretado contra su regazo, amenazando con su solicitud el hilo de vida que latía en él.

—No que yo sepa, al menos. —Ellery se encogió de hombros—. ¿Cuánta gente va a venir a tu fiesta?

—Unos veinte —dijo ella con aire cansado.

—Es un momento demencial para una fiesta. Para que des una fiesta.

—Ya lo sé. ¿Crees que tengo ganas?

—Entonces, ¿por qué no la suspendes sin más? Porque ya has invitado a ese gran poeta que siempre has querido conocer. Yo también sé por qué, cariño. Pero, créeme, eso no te ayudará a escribir mejor.

—Me gustaría… —Estaba mirando su máquina de escribir y su silencioso montón de papeles.

—¿No te basta con una?

—Me gustaría que no hablaras ahora de ese modo, por favor. Tenemos que encontrar un médico, Ellery, enseguida.

—Tengo que hacer una llamada —dijo él, y entró en el dormitorio, donde estaba el teléfono, con el periódico enrollado en la mano. Su voz se oyó por encima de la radio—. Un segundo, operadora. Es el Hospital de la Inmaculada no sé qué puñetas, espere un momento… —Abrió el periódico sobre la cama.

Rose apartó su atención del santo Dodó de Hascha.

—Hay alguien en la puerta —dijo a su hermana—. Santo Dodó, santa Didée, san Bartolo de San Gimignano…

—¡Rose!

—O incluso el doctor Biggs de Lima, Perú.

—¿Tú…? —Reflejando el cansancio de él en su propia voz, Esther abre.

—No te molestes, no te molestes. Sólo he venido a buscar unas cosas que dejé aquí, a buen recaudo,

como dicen. Es sólo un minuto.

—¿Y Rose? —dice Rose.

—Rose.

—Rosa de Lima, Perú. Santa Rosa de Lima. Entonces tú… Don Diego Jacinto Pacheco…

—Venga, Rose, basta ya —dice Esther—. Es una… pero ¿tú…?

(—Sí, ese tipo es, cariño, se tiró por una ventana, pero el periódico dice que sólo se rompió unas cuantas costillas…).

—Mi esposa Dios te ama, incluso ahora algo de Mozart especialmente. La Sinfonía número treinta y siete especialmente. Cuatro, cuatro, cuatro.

—Pero tú, tú… estás aquí.

—Palabras amables, pues, mientras quede aún luz diurna. Entonces, ¿has guardado mis secretos? He venido a recogerlos.

(—Horas de visita, de dos a cuatro y de siete a ocho. Gracias cariño).

—Pareces… estás… ¿todo va bien? —Esther revive; hasta sus ojos parecen aclararse—. Tengo tanto que… debe haber alguna forma de… ¿es la bebida lo que te pone así?

—Sus poderes de aumento nos afectan a todos, ¿nos afectan o no? Bueno, al estudio, pues allí he puesto mi confianza en ti.

—Bueno, tú…

—Yo…

—Oh, Ellery, éste… es mi marido.

—Qué tal…

—Este es Ellery, un… amigo.

Encendiendo un cigarrillo con la mano que había utilizado para estrechar la mano que le habían tendido, Ellery se sentó.

—Ya lo he arreglado —dijo a Esther—. Es cosa hecha.

Ella se lo quedó mirando con los ojos muy abiertos, encarando el alivio. Ellery dio una fuerte calada a su cigarrillo, y luego envió un anillo de humo hacia Rose, hecha un ovillo ante la radio. Rose se encogió al acercársele. «Es como una cría, ¿verdad? Probablemente conseguiría de ella una buena reacción del público en este programa». Ellery cogió una revista. Era un número de *Días de perros* dedicado a los dóberman pinscher que estaba allí cuando llegó.

§ AVISO §
Como muestra de su aprecio
A cada perra que le dé un heredero campeón
Dictador prestará un servicio adicional
sin cargo alguno

Ofrecían como semental al campeón Dictador von Ehebruch («para perras que sólo se conforman con lo mejor») por ciento cincuenta dólares.

—Mis ojos. ¿Puedo enseñarle mis ojos?

—Siéntate, Rose. Rose está trastornada —dijo Esther, de pie con el gatito—. Tenía un trabajo en Bloomingdale para las ventas de Navidad, y la castigaron injustamente. La despidieron. Nos… ¿sentamos?

—Alguien le dio el viejo timo del billete de veinte dólares —dijo Ellery apartando los ojos de la revista —. Entra uno y paga algo con un billete de veinte con la esquina rota; luego entra otro tipo y paga con un pavo, y cuando le devuelven sólo la vuelta de un pavo se pone hecho una furia, ¿entiendes? Dice que ha pagado con uno de veinte, y tiene la esquina rota para demostrarlo, se la ha dado fuera el otro tío…

—Es una vergüenza —lo interrumpió Esther—. Lo único que pudo decir a la policía del primero fue que tenía un bigotito fino.

—¡Y su pelo! —exclamó Rose—, que lo llevaba como un sombrero.

Se los quedó mirando, y luego se volvió hacia la radio y los dejó allí abandonados a sus mutuas vacuidades como tres niños reunidos en una colonia de vacaciones donde las cañerías de cada fea casita de campo son iguales, las camas se hunden con desaliento, usadas sólo para sostener el sueño, donde el calor del sol sólo sirve para disculpar el aspecto de pálidos padres en ofensivos estados de desnudez mientras pretenden que hay algo nuevo bajo aquel sol y que han venido a buscarlo; mientras los niños saben que no hay ningún secreto nuevo, y por eso se conforman con guardarse los viejos mutuamente.

—¿Qué día es hoy? —preguntó Esther, apretando el interruptor de la lámpara de mesa que tenía al lado.

—Miércoles.

—Jueves —corrigió Ellery, añadiendo un día más a la condena, y ella hizo una mueca de dolor.

—¿Qué te pasa, Rose?

—Qué viejos parecéis cuando se enciende la luz. Qué deprisa envejecéis a la vez —dijo Rose desde la sombra.

—Acabo de leer que el papa utiliza una maquinilla de afeitar eléctrica —dijo Ellery—. Me pregunto de qué marca será, ¿cuánto creéis que cobrará por un consejo publicitario?

Mirando hacia el fondo de la habitación, Esther dijo:

—Pero… ¿puedo traerte algo? ¿Estás bien?

—Solo un momento, me he mareado sólo un momento. Pero, bueno, he venido por otras cosas…

—Estás… ¿has estado trabajando últimamente?

—No últimamente, no. No últimamente.

Ellery se levantó de repente, dejando caer *Días de perros,* y mientras cruzaba la habitación cogió otra revista.

—Esther me ha contado que tú has pintado mucho, y tengo algo para ti si quieres hacer algo como esto. —Le tendió una página de publicidad—. Este de aquí, éste es uno de nuestros anuncios.

Señalaba el mayor. Sobre un dibujo empalagoso de una mujer con la cabeza cubierta y los ojos alzados SÍ, *la Madre de Dios* ALIVIARÁ *su Dolor, Enfermedad, Aflicción… El nombre de la Virgen María ocupa hoy los titulares de los periódicos… Escriba ahora pidiendo un ejemplar gratis…*

Debajo, otro anuncio decía

AGITE

LA BILIS DE SU HÍGADO.

Debajo, otro anuncio decía: ¿Tiene USTED problemas de PIES SUDOROSOS, INFLAMADOS, DOLORIDOS?

—Se me acaba de ocurrir —siguió Ellery—. Apuesto a que podrías hacerlo, y te pagarían con dinerito del bueno. Están gastando una pasta gansa en publicidad. Mira, aquí íbamos a poner al principio reproducciones de algunos viejos maestros, ya sabes, cuadros de la Virgen María como los que se ven en los museos. Pero esto es mejor. Es más moderno, salta a los ojos. Y si pudieras pintar un par de cosas así para nosotros, la Virgen haciendo… algo, lo que puñetas haga, pero un dibujo que sea artístico…

—Ellery, por favor… —dijo Esther débilmente.

—Tienen un montón de dinero detrás, la religión está volviendo a ser popular en todas partes. Sería un buen negocio para ti, y yo puedo…

—Espera, Ellery. Déjalo —dijo Esther—. No es… él no haría…

—Muy bien, al infierno con ello —dijo Ellery, volviendo a su sillón—. Pensé simplemente que quizá podría hacerlo, pero no hace falta que sea tan grosero, ¿no? —Ellery cogió otra vez *Días de perros,* mirando cómo se entornaba la puerta del estudio—. Pensé simplemente que quizá podría ayudarlo a salir adelante. —Volvió a concentrar su atención en Dictador von Ehebruch, y su pecho se hinchó mientras examinaba el dóberman.

Esther no lo había oído, se había quedado mirando la puerta entornada ante sí: Perséfone entonces, y ahora Proserpina, la misma reina en otro país, miraba fijamente la entrada de su reino, y se acercó con paso vacilante.

—¿Qué buscas? ¿Puedo ayudarte? —preguntó al entrar—. Rose duerme ahora aquí, por eso está cambiado.

—Bueno, entonces confío en Rose. ¿Qué son esas maravillas?

—Oh, eso son dibujos de ojos. Los hace Rose. Le gustan… los ojos.

—En algún sitio, tiras de lienzo, en algún sitio tiras de madera, pintadas. Escondidas, Rose ayudó.

—Entonces, ¿estuviste aquí? ¿Estuviste aquí anoche?

—¿O estuvo eso?

—Porque ella dijo, Rose dijo que te había visto en el espejo. Y yo… no lo entendía. Estaba preocupada por Rose.

—El espejo, ¿ahí?

—Yo también te he visto en él.

—Para corregir los malos trazos. Ahí.

—¿Ahí debajo? —Dejó el gatito en el suelo, inclinándose, extendió las largas líneas de sus muslos y cogió un paquete envuelto en papel de periódico—. ¿Esto?

Entonces se ve tan bruscamente cara a cara que retrocede con un respingo, sus labios se mueven antes

de que pueda hablar.

—No tienes buen aspecto —es lo único que se le ocurre decir.

—¿No parezco yo?

—¿No pareces tú? Cuando me querías, entonces…

—¿Cuando me querías?

—Yo tenía una dimensión entera más, y ahora…

—Aquí duermo yo —dijo Rose, asomando la cabeza por la puerta—. Porque huele tan bien aquí dentro. Aquí duermo yo.

—Adiós, porque tengo que irme.

—Es eso… ¿tienes lo que querías? —preguntó Esther, siguiéndolo—. ¿Por lo que has venido?

—Y que me puedo llevar.

—Eh, espera un momento antes de irte —dijo Ellery, levantándose—, aquí hay un libro que quería pedir prestado pero Esther dijo que era tuyo.

—Ellery, no…

—Vale, mira —dijo Ellery, cogiendo el *Libro de los mártires* de tía May. Leyó en la cubierta—: «Una historia de las vidas, sufrimientos y muertes triunfales de los primitivos mártires protestantes, desde los inicios del cristianismo hasta los últimos períodos de las persecuciones paganas, papistas e infieles…».

—Pero en nombre de Dios…

—Otro programa como ése, ¿entiendes? —Ellery señaló con la mano hacia la radio—. Pero para distintas confesiones, como católicos y protestantes. Cosas como ésta. Escucha. «En Arethusa abrieron a varios en canal y les metieron maíz en la…», espera, aquí… «azotado, atado al potro, su cuerpo desgarrado con…», aquí, «Martha Constantine, una bella joven, fue tratada con gran indecencia y crueldad por varios soldados de la tropa, que primero la violaron y luego la mataron cortándole los pechos. Después los frieron y los pusieron ante su…».

—Adiós, Esther, quiera Dios…

—Aquí hay otra sobre el tipo ese al que le ataron bolsitas de pólvora… es para críos, esto es lo que les gusta a los críos.

—Esther, Dios santo, ese hombre es un loco peligroso.

Ellery se acercó con el libro.

—¿Cómo, se ha ido? ¿Se ha ido ya?

—Sí. Sí, se ha ido.

—Bueno, qué pasa con el libro. Sí que es rarito, ¿eh? ¿Borracho?

—Oh, llévatelo, llévatelo, llévatelo.

—Sube la radio —dijo Ellery volviéndose hacia Rose, que estaba sentada junto a ella, inmersa en los sonidos que formaba en el silencio que ella mantenía.

—¿Qué era esa llamada, Ellery? Has dicho que estaba todo arreglado. ¿Has encontrado un médico?

La miró con aire distraído, con los hombros desigualmente encorvados, como un hombre deforme por haber empujado un arado durante mil surcos.

—¿Un médico? Oh, esa llamada, no, quería decir que estaba arreglado lo de ese tipo que se tiró por una ventana.

—¿Qué…?

—Da igual, es para un bolo promocional en la tele.

—Ellery, tienes que encontrar uno.

Ellery dejó el *Libro de los mártires* de John Foxe. Se rascó la coronilla y puso una expresión incómoda. Volvió a coger el libro mientras se sentaba y dijo:

—A Martín Lutero le cayó un rayo encima, ¿sabías eso? Lo derribó y mató a ese tipo que iba con él, y por eso se hizo ermitaño, ¿entiendes? Imagínate eso en la tele, en el programa de la Eléctrica Combinada…

—Ellery, por el amor de Dios…

Entonces levantó la vista hacia ella.

—No te preocupes —dijo, encorvado ahora, quizá, como santa Catalina de Racconigi, que padecía de curvatura en la espalda por el santo peso que se le permitía llevar—. Escucha.

«… Zap, aprobado por los médicos en todas partes. Habladle a mamá de Zap, el despertador milagroso, una pastilla de Zap a primera hora de la mañana y empezará el día zapateando. Así que no lo olvidéis, pandilla. Habladle a mamá de estas nuevas ayudas científicas para la vida familiar moderna. Necrostyle, el somnífero en forma de oblea, que se traga como una oblea, sin masticar. Zap, el despertador milagroso. Y Puño. Recordad, está en un Puño».

—Dicho al revés. Dicho al revés, por supuesto, el Santo Sacramento vuelto del revés, ya sabes. —Basil Valentine tenía los ojos cerrados y el teléfono apoyado en el hombro—. Sí, la redención de las mujeres, si quieres —siguió, forzando un tono de paciencia cansada en su voz—. Eva, la maldición que le había echado el cristianismo. ¿Qué…? Sí, la sacerdotisa y el altar también, la misa celebrada sobre su vientre abierto, he encontrado algo sobre el pan cocido sobre su vientre, la hostia para profanar la Eucaristía, pero en nombre del cielo, ¿para qué quieres saber ese tipo de cosas? ¿Una novela? Pero… sí, tal vez pueda, si cree que servirá de algo. Pero puedes decirle a tu amigo Willie que la salvación tiene ya poco que ver con el estudio práctico que era entonces. ¿Qué…? Bueno, sencillamente porque en la Edad Media estaban convencidos de que tenían almas que salvar. Sí. ¿Los qué? ¿Los *Reconocimientos?* No, es Clemente de *Roma.* Casi todo bla bla bla. La más profunda preocupación del joven es la inmortalidad de su alma, va a Egipto para encontrar a los magos y aprender sus secretos. La han llamado la primera novela cristiana. ¿Qué? Sí, es realmente el inicio de toda la leyenda fáustica. Pero no se puede decir… ¿eh? Vaya, tu amigo escribe para un público bastante reducido, ¿no? A propósito, la próxima vez que te lleves el Loyola… Eso supuse, pero no es un sitio muy adecuado para leer a Loyola. ¿Que si tienen qué en el Vaticano? ¿Un molde para hojas de parra…?

Después de colgar se quedó inmóvil un momento, con los ojos aún cerrados, y murmuró «¿Qué puede inducir a alguien a escribir novelas?», pero sin pensar ni en las novelas ni en la misa negra ni siquiera en el molde para hojas de parra que tienen en el Museo Vaticano; pensando en cambio y en vano en el sueño que aquella llamada telefónica había interrumpido, aunque no podía recuperarlo, volver a entrar en él; no podía alterar, ni siquiera en aquel reino ilusorio, los hechos de un cuarto de siglo antes.

Con los ojos cerrados, intentando revivir el sueño, sintió que le cerraba la puerta, que se le escapaba; con los ojos abiertos entró en el salón y se quedó mirando la esfera del reloj Vulliamy, sobre la repisa de la chimenea, con el cupido dorado sobre alabastro oriental, y el sueño lo persiguió. La sombra del chico al que no había visto desde que ambos eran chicos juntos (Martin era el «primo» del padre Joseph) latía en el aire como si se hubieran separado hacía solo unos minutos. «Entonces, ¿es verdad? ¿No debemos comprender?». No habría podido decir si habían pasado treinta segundos o treinta años; y sólo la memoria repetía las palabras que había dicho en las sombras de la niñez bajo la torre de San Ignacio, donde se reunían a diario, donde se reunieron por última vez cuando dijo: «Llorar no te ayudará. No hay lugar para la debilidad entre nosotros. Crecerás para ser un tonto, Martin, pero yo no. La obediencia es el primer sirviente del amor. Fue por amor por lo que lo hice».

Basil Valentine se calzó las zapatillas de cuero negro y se ciñó la bata. Entró en el cuarto de baño, donde se lavó la cara con agua fría, y se quedó un momento mirándose los ojos reflejados en el espejo cuando la suave toalla dejó de ocultarlos. En la otra habitación sonó el reloj, y dejando caer la toalla volvió a los papeles esparcidos por su mesa. «Idiotas», murmuró mientras los recogía. «Diez millones de idiotas balbucientes». Guardó los papeles en una cartera, y estaba de pie con un cigarrillo sin encender, mirando distraídamente la pitillera de oro, cuando un timbre agudo y continuo cortó la frase «Pienso mucho…». Basil Valentine murmuró algo, y cruzó la habitación hasta el telefonillo conectado con la entrada de la calle. «¿Quién es?», preguntó. «¿El reverendo Gilbert Sullivan? Sí, mi querido amigo, suba enseguida».

Luego, en la puerta, dijo:

—Cielo santo, entre enseguida. ¿Dónde ha estado?

—¿Yo? Con mi querida mujer, oyendo a Mozart. *Sie kocht schlecht,* mi mujer. Llevaba tiempo sin oír música.

Basil Valentine estaba de pie encendiendo su cigarrillo, observando atentamente el movimiento ante sí; atención que se difundía desde todas las partes de su cuerpo, para corresponder a los movimientos que repetía, confirmándolos, mientras entraba tras él en la habitación, sosteniendo el cigarrillo que le distinguía.

—He estado en el pudridero, para decir la verdad celestial. El *pudridero,* donde Carlos II pasó sentado los últimos días de su vida, rodeado de su familia española y muerta. Dios santo, ahora hace falta algún preservativo.

—Siéntese, mi querido amigo. ¿Coñac?

Valentine echa una ojeada al paquete de forma irregular envuelto en papel de periódico, dejado sobre el mármol de la mesa baja, y tiende el decantador.

—Precisión de forma y olor, y el sexto cielo todo cercado. —Basil Valentine observa el decantador inclinado sobre el globo de cristal unos segundos de más, y su mano derecha se tiende a detenerlo, mientras sigue escanciando—. No el séptimo, de luz radiante, sino un cigarro, quizá, para cargarme de peso.

—¿Y algo de música, quizá? Aquí, siéntese aquí, donde pueda verle.

—¿Música? ¿Dejar balancearse mis talones libremente en el aire? No. Tal como estoy me veo obligado a

buscar refugio en la ficción, donde pueda verle. Es la acumulación, ya ve. La acumulación. Todos estamos cargantes, pues pintan diamantes, los gatitos se han ido a San Pablo, ¿recuerda ésa? Los bebés van a misa, la luna se cae de risa y las casas se construyen sin paredes. Bueno, no creo que lo recuerde, sin una infancia no podrá. En cuanto a mí, acabo de dejar una docena entera de crucifixiones. *Allegro ma non troppo.*

—Venga aquí y siéntese.

—Nada me gustaría más, pero es inútil. Oiga, me creería si le dijera que Martha Constantine…

—Por favor, no toque nada de lo que hay en esa mesa.

—¿Y se enamora del peluquero cuando va a cortarse el pelo?

—Mi querido amigo… —Valentine cruzó rápidamente la habitación—. Deje esos papeles.

—Vaya, vaya, húngaro…

—Deme ese libro.

—Magiar, ¿no es ya bastante difícil sin cifrarlo?

—Es… un diccionario, obviamente —dijo Basil Valentine, cogiendo el libro en rústica y metiéndolo en la cartera con los papeles.

—Transdanubia…

—Vaya ahí y siéntese ya. —Valentine cerró bruscamente la cartera con llave.

—Según me han contado, Buda Pest fue la ciudad más civilizada del mundo. Y hasta donde alcanza la memoria.

—Tienen razón —dijo secamente Valentine. Encarándose con la figura que tenía delante, se acercó como para arrinconarla y llevarla ante sí hacia el sofá—. Ahora siéntese y dígame qué ha estado haciendo.

—Allí abajo, en compañía de sirenas en el fondo de una cisterna donde vive el rey de los troles. —Lo interrumpió un ataque de tos, y Basil Valentine contuvo el aliento—. Dios lo ama. Me había atado de buen grado la cola a la espalda, y bebí lo que me dio, sabe, pero entonces intentó sacarme los ojos con las uñas. «Te arañaré un poco hasta que veas mal, pero todo lo que veas parecerá bello y bravo».

—Así que ha ido a ver a Brown, ¿no? —Basil Valentine se inclinó y abrió el paquete suelto de papel de periódico—. ¿Y esto?

—Ahí están, de pe a pa, rescatados bajo los ojos vigilantes de Rose… protegidos, cautelosos, circunspectos, toda clase de ojos, pero sobre todo de niños.

Valentine levantó la vista de los fragmentos pintados, y las arrugas de su frente se entrecruzaron de inquietud.

—¿Qué le pasa, qué le pasa? —dijo de pronto—. ¿Que tiene, por qué gime de ese modo?

—Le explicaré… en cuanto me… sí… me asiente…

—Mi querido amigo…

—Es una libertad que me estoy tomando hoy, fingir que peso trescientas libras. Maldita sea, ¿va a permitirlo? «I min Tro, i mit Håb og i min Kjaerlighed…», ¿eh? No, le digo que no fue así. Está Solveig encerrado con un hombre peligroso, humana y diligentemente loco, pero todavía puede salvarme como Lutero salvó al papado. Dios santo, hoy he deshonrado a la muerte por diez mil dólares. Entonces moriré como Zenón, que se estranguló a los noventa y ocho años porque al salir de la escuela se cayó y se rompió un dedo.

—Ahora relájese un poco, mi querido amigo. Dígame, qué le ha dicho Brown.

—Me ha quitado la botella como está haciendo usted, y ha jurado que si fuera un perro me ladraría por la calle. Luego me ha preguntado por mi hígado, y me ha ofrecido trabajo vendiendo por la calle un producto químico embotellado a unos clientes de las tierras bajas muertos hace cuatro siglos. Pero, Dios santo, acababa de llegar de la calle, sabe. Las calles se estaban llenando de gente como botones, y no les puedes vender nada. Alguien les dijo una vez que las mejores cosas de la vida son gratis, así que han adquirido la costumbre de no pagar. Así que simplemente se lo he advertido y he seguido mi camino. Ha sido tan amable y paternal, se lo he advertido y me he ido.

—Dígame qué quiere decir con que se lo ha advertido.

—Oh, sí, sí. Le he advertido que los sacerdotes están conspirando contra él, y que no le queda ninguna salida. Usted, yo y el reverendo Gilbert Sullivan.

—Espere un momento…

—Qué salida puede tener, vieja tierra, cuando los hierofantes conspiran. Sobre todo tres como usted, yo y el reverendo Gilbert Sullivan. En cualquier caso cree que somos tres. Cómo danzará cuando descubra que somos proyecciones del subconsciente del reverendo Gilbert Sullivan. Usted y yo.

Basil Valentine había estado sentado. Ahora se levantó, con las manos enlazadas a la espalda, caminó hasta la ventana con la cabeza baja (observando las puntas de sus zapatillas negras en la alfombra lisa) y

volvió. Cuando se oía la voz levantaba la cabeza, y volvía a bajarla inmediatamente.

—¿O entonces como Cleantes? Se le hincharon las encías y los médicos le mandaron que pasara dos días sin comer. Cuando le permitieron volver a su dieta les dijo: «Ya me he alejado mucho en mi viaje», y se dejó morir de hambre. Hay una dieta para la extinción, de eso se trata. La gente la deja demasiado pronto. Duplicada en un siglo de mil a dos mil millones. Nos están devorando. Eh, déjeme pasearme con usted por la habitación. Así veremos mejor.

—Siéntese —le espetó Basil Valentine a su espalda.

—He traído mi informe. En el año dos mil cuarenta, cuatro mil millones. Dos mil ciento cuarenta y uno, ocho mil millones. Dos mil doscientos cuarenta y dos, dieciséis mil millones. Son estadísticas. ¿Qué vamos a hacer para civilizarlos? Siglos de arte y celibato, pestes y guerras y actos abusivos de Dios, ascetas religiosos clamando en el desierto y hombres sirena cultos susurrando dulcemente absolutas naderías en la playa, y Dios santo no quieren enterarse de que no son necesarios. Un par de seres humanos, un hombre y una mujer a razón de amor de uno por ciento al año, podrían igualar nuestra población en novecientos años. El trabajo que nos espera está claro. Yo digo que hay que erradicar la poligamia. Eso es lo primero. Nuestras ejemplares misiones africanas nos han mostrado el camino. Pues sí, buen Dios, como resultado de su buen trabajo podemos gastar veinte mil libras esterlinas en sífilis tan sólo en Uganda. Así que quizá deberíamos haber sido médicos, usted y yo, en vez de lo que somos. El cardenal Richelieu bebiendo estiércol de caballo disuelto en vino blanco en su lecho de muerte, no es difícil entender por qué es Francia la primera hija de la Iglesia. Y en Egipto…

—Mi querido amigo…

—Curábamos los ojos inflamados con la orina de una esposa fiel. Por supuesto hoy nos vemos obligados a comprar en la farmacia remedios improvisados.

Basil Valentine había ido hasta las ventanas y vuelto al sofá por detrás, dándose golpecitos con los dedos de una mano en la palma de la otra: era algo más que la agitación que delataba su cara, pues a cada momento que pasaba parecía volverse más consciente de su físico, y del peso de sus miembros extendidos en el espacio. Sin embargo, lo más opresivo era el sistema respiratorio; no una sensación de constricción (aunque podría llegar a serlo si seguía así), sino una aguda sensación de lo que estaba ocurriendo allí dentro, entre membranas fibroelásticas y anillos cartilaginosos. Tenía dificultades para tragar. Se llevó la mano izquierda a la garganta, revelando en oro el cartílago cricoides que había debajo, el sello vuelto hacia dentro. No había nadie en el sofá. Valentine giró en redondo.

—Qué… hace siguiéndome los pasos de ese modo. Cielo… cielo santo, mi querido amigo, venga aquí y vuelva a sentarse.

Basil Valentine encendió una luz y acorraló como una sombra la figura que tenía delante.

—Ponga los pies en alto y relájese, si quiere. Pero quiero hablarle seriamente.

—¿Seriamente? Entonces hable con Richelieu. A mí me han ordenado hace sólo unos meses. ¿O años? Ya no puedo distinguirlo, he llegado tan lejos, tentado por las hijas de Mara disfrazadas de bellas mujeres. Eso fue antes de que la idolatría corrompiera el budismo. ¿Dónde está ese buen cigarro que me ha dado?

—Coja uno de éstos y siéntese —dijo Valentine, tendiéndole la pitillera de oro.

—*Varé tava soskei… soskei…* No puedo sentarme con uno de éstos. Saldría flotando. Eh, qué es eso que hay allí, ese toro de oro rompiendo un huevo.

Basil Valentine respiró con mayor facilidad cuando la figura que tenía delante pareció cansarse y mustiarse un poco.

—Una figura de altar, mi querido amigo.

—Bueno, eso es evidente, eso es evidente.

—Una pequeña copia de una que había en la pagoda de Miaco, en Japón —siguió Valentine, observando la mano que acariciaba el oro del lomo del toro—. El tiempo del Caos, ya sabe, antes de la creación, y el mundo oculto en un huevo flotando en las aguas. Y ese toro es el símbolo de la fuerza creadora, rompiendo el huevo para dar a luz a la tierra.

—¿Eso es lo que enseñan ahora los jesuitas? ¡Dios santo! De todas formas, qué lejos retroceden en el tiempo, ¿no? ¿Antes de que la muerte llegara al mundo? ¿Antes de la edad de la Noche y el Caos? Antes del bien y del mal, antes de la magia, antes de la religión. Sí, la religión es la desesperación de la magia… No, eso no es de los jesuitas, ¿no? La religión es la madre del pecado. Me gusta esto. Es de Lucrecio. Sí que está usted ocupado, ¿eh? Libros, papeles, ¿un huevo de grifo? No puedes arreglártelas sin uno de esos. Todas las iglesias tenían huevos de grifo colgados por ahí. Los colgaban de las cuerdas de las lámparas para que las ratas no pudieran bajar a beberse el aceite. Pardos y peludos por fuera, blancos por dentro y la yema un líquido claro. Cuénteles lo del huevo que puso Leda y les hará reír.

—Mi querido amigo —dijo Valentine, acercándose con los brazos extendidos (tríceps, bíceps, fascia semilunar todos conscientes)—, basta ya, sabe. Debe…

—Suélteme. Simplemente deme un buen libro para leer, e ilustraré mi mente mientras usted predica. Veamos, *Die Geschichte der fränkischen Könige Childerich und Clodovech.* Es el día de Navidad del año 496, y Clodoveo recibe el bautismo en Reims. Una paloma blanca bajó del cielo con una ampolla de óleo santo con este expreso propósito. ¿Sabía eso? Su mujer lo convirtió. Clotilda. Eso es exactamente lo que hizo. Lo convenció en medio de una batalla. Por eso renegó del sol. Mitra, el dios sol, y Clodoveo lo abandonó. Cómo, si hasta los estoicos creían que el sol tenía vida e inteligencia, y ochocientos años más tarde Clodoveo lo abandona, así por las buenas. Vaya, recuerdo de pequeño, sentado en la iglesia —siguió la voz, mientras Valentine guiaba suavemente los hombros que tenía delante de vuelta hacia el sofá—, leyendo el *Himnario del peregrino*. «Líbrame de la culpa de sangre, oh Dios, el Dios de mi salvación», lee en alto mi padre. «Pues Tú no deseas ningún sacrificio, si no te lo ofrecería», le contestamos todos a gritos. «Pues Tú no te complaces en ofrendas quemadas», sigue, «el sacrificio de Dios es un espíritu afligido». «Un corazón afligido y contrito, oh Dios, Tú no lo despreciarás», convenimos todos.

Cuando el peso, que sorprendió a Valentine, descendía hacia el sofá advirtió que los ojos que tenía ante sí estaban cerrados.

—Pero lo que recuerdo es el campo entonces, el resplandor que asediaba puertas y ventanas, y el sol entrando a raudales por los rombos de las vidrieras, y estábamos aislados de él, encerrados allí dentro para adorar. Y fuera estaba el sol, donde todos los demás podían verlo. Dios santo, dime que Clodoveo no estaba solo al alba. Dime que no estaba enfermo al atardecer.

—Pero ¿qué es? ¿Qué es? Por el amor del cielo, dígamelo —dijo Valentine, y sus hombros temblaron también—, en vez de… farfullar de ese modo, ¿qué es? ¿Qué pasa?

—Gracias a Dios quiere a la gente. Gracias a Dios quiere a la gente. Gracias a Dios quiere a la gente.

—¿Yo?

—Pero la noche que provocó aquel choque del taxi… por qué no se acercó a mirar. Me lo he estado preguntando. Me lo he estado preguntando.

—¿Provoqué? ¿Que yo lo provoqué?

—Tan seguro como Madre Shipton. Cielo santo, ¿es que los profetas están libres de culpa?

Basil Valentine se arrellanó con su cigarrillo. Habló con cierto esfuerzo, como para convencer y reprimir alguna parte de sí mismo.

—Si uno se detiene a gozar de satisfacciones vulgares, sabe, pierde de vista sus objetivos.

Los ojos se alzaron hacia él.

—Sé por qué no le gustan. Tienen demasiadas manos, ¿es por eso? Hay diez mil manos por cada corazón, ¿es eso?

—Precisamente —dijo Valentine, y aplastó su cigarrillo y se levantó. Volvió a dirigirse hacia la ventana, cada paso más sosegado, y cada palabra más tranquila a medida que hablaba—. Manos, manos, manos —dijo—. Manos sucias cogiendo cosas, y dejándolas caer, cosas hermosas, mancillándolas. Manos empujando, manos agarrando, manos extendidas, manos entrelazadas con violencia, manos caídas con desamparo, manos… encima de uno. —Se quedó parado ante la ventana, mirando hacia la ciudad—. Manos… —repitió.

—*Yetzer hara,* el pérfido corazón, ¿estaban enamorados Adán y Eva? Lo que quiero decir es: ¿solo conocemos las cosas en términos de otras cosas? Bueno, entonces moriré como Sócrates, eso es dignidad…

—¿Lo hará ahora? —Valentine volvió la espalda a la ventana, aunque se quedó allí, y casi sonrió—. Un criminal condenado. ¿Cree que le dejarán? —Se volvió de nuevo hacia la ventana—. Manos dejando centavos en el puesto de periódicos, a cambio de una foto de un hombre atado a la silla eléctrica, caras boquiabiertas sobre los periódicos en el metro, hasta que cada vagón parece un asilo ambulante. Cabezas espesas inclinadas sobre la radio, esperando la noticia de que han apretado el interruptor en la casa de la muerte.

Se hizo el silencio, y duró varios minutos. Basil Valentine estaba mirando por la ventana, como tenía por costumbre cuando estaba solo.

—Dígame, ¿se ha enamorado alguna vez de alguien ya comprometido, y luego le ha arrancado el ser amado a su rival? Y luego, con el paso del tiempo, empiezas a sospechar que te pareces a él. A él, a quien odiabas y encontrabas feo.

—No, mi querido amigo, no puedo decir que lo haya hecho —dijo Valentine, volviendo lentamente hacia el sofá.

—Bueno, déjeme contarle lo que me pasó a mí. Siendo aún un niño leí a Novalis, y sentí una gran atracción, ya sabe. Pero tras unos cuantos años más de estudio comprendí el error que había cometido, el

romántico error que casi había cometido, vi finalmente cómo Novalis había atraído a todas las partes mías más peligrosas, a todas las partes románticas y peligrosas, de modo que me dediqué a extinguirlas. Dos o tres años después salí triunfante, a decir verdad muy satisfecho conmigo mismo de verme libre de todas esas amenazas románticas que me habrían matado si me hubieran cogido desprevenido. Así purificado, seguí avanzando en el espíritu racional, descubriendo y sorteando fácilmente las trampas románticas. Un día encontré la obra de un hombre llamado Friedrich von Hardenberg, y mi mente racional se inflamó bastante al hallar las respuestas lógicas a las mismas preguntas que me había estado haciendo… desde que volví la espalda a Novalis, y a todo lo que él representaba.

Valentine se sentó. Sacó un cigarrillo, empezó a sonreír, alzó la vista y dijo «Mi querido amigo…» en el preciso instante en que la figura que tenía delante saltó del sofá.

—¡Maldita sea! ¡Maldita sea! Dios santo, ¿es que no entiende lo que quiero decir? Cuando te ves… cuando te ves… —Las manos que tenía delante temblaban en el aire, con las puntas de los dedos casi tocándose. Luego una mano agarró a la otra—. Y sabes que volverás a hacerlo otra vez… y otra vez.

Antes de que pudiera levantarse, Basil Valentine se encontró solo. Se quedó con el cigarrillo sin encender en la mano, dándole golpecitos con el índice, y oyó una colisión en la cocina, y pasos, y la puerta del cuarto de baño. Sólo se detuvo a encender el cigarrillo, y luego cogió rápidamente el paquete envuelto en papel de periódico, y su cartera al pasar junto a la mesa camino del dormitorio. Guardó ambas cosas en la caja fuerte y antes de oír otro ruido estaba ya de vuelta parado ante las ventanas.

—Según me han dicho no hay ninguna escena en toda la literatura griega que deba avergonzarnos más de nuestra cultura cristiana —dijo a su espalda una voz serena.

—Y tienen razón —dijo Valentine, y al volverse lo vio absurdamente sentado en el mármol vacío de la mesa baja—. Ahora, mi querido amigo, seamos sensatos —dijo acercándose—. Tiene mejor aspecto, mucho mejor que cuando llegó. Ahora siéntese y dígame simplemente qué se propone hacer.

—Toque «Barras y estrellas» y desfilaré por la habitación. Toque la «Polca del trueno y el relámpago». Bailaré.

—¿Qué le ha dicho a Brown?

—Le he preguntado: ¿qué es la risa?

—Y supongo que le habrá dicho que nos distingue de los animales.

—Ha dicho: crea el presente. Ha dicho que debe compartirse y que, por tanto, crea el presente. La risa.

—Ya imagino —musitó Valentine—. Pero… qué han…

—Nos hemos reído. Brown y yo y ese maldito, congénitamente maldito… —Se sentó murmurando algo, luego miró lentamente a su alrededor, y había empezado a calmarse cuando algo atrajo su mirada—. ¿Qué es eso? —Se levantó a medias, señalando un cuadro colgado en un rincón de la pared.

—¿Eso? —repitió Valentine, y sonrió—. Valdés. Juan de Valdés Leal. ¿Lo conoce?

—¿De dónde lo ha sacado?

—Estaba entre los cuadros sin valor que Brown encontró en esa casa de campo. Se lo pedí, dado que somos tan… amigos.

—¿Y se lo dio?

—Por supuesto. Como le habían asegurado que no valía más de veinte dólares, me lo dio por cincuenta… —Observando los ojos clavados en el cuadro de Valdés, como si le recordase algo, Valentine siguió hablando con calma—: Y ahora se va a poner de nuevo a trabajar, ¿no? ¿Ha vuelto a pensar en ese favor que le pedí? ¿El Patinir?

—Se acabó —dijo estremeciéndose—. Juro por todo lo que es feo que se ha terminado. Pero usted… —De pronto empezó a pellizcarse la carne del dorso de la mano—. ¿Por qué me hace esto? —preguntó sin alzar la vista—. ¿Me pide que lo copie, sabiendo que no existe? Como él… restaurar un lienzo en blanco, sí. Me arañó un poco, le contaré. ¡Hasta hoy, Dios!, esa maldita mesa. ¿Dios vigila? *Invidia,* me crié tomando las comidas sobre la envidia, hasta hoy. ¡Y era falsa durante todo el tiempo! —Hablaba esforzándose por controlar la voz más de lo que lo había hecho hasta entonces—. ¿Así es como empecé, copiando una copia? Toda la vida he jurado que era auténtica, año tras año, esa maldita tabla flotando en el fondo de la cisterna, he jurado que era auténtica, ¿y hoy? Un niño se daría cuenta de que es una copia —terminó, pellizcándose violentamente los pliegues de carne y las venas de la mano, y se atrevió a levantar la vista.

Valentine lo observaba atentamente, endurecido el acuoso azul de sus ojos, los párpados entrecerrados aguzando el interés en escrutinio: vio lo que pareció un débil intento de sonrisa, pero no más, un capricho en aquella cara que desapareció mientras la voz se elevaba de nuevo:

—Ahora bien, ¿y si no había oro…? —prolongando un esfuerzo por evitar la ruptura de un modelo que no habían evitado sus rasgos—. ¿Y si lo que he estado falsificando no existe? Y si yo… si yo, yo…

—Quizá, si me escuchara un momento…

—¡Escuchar! —Se había erguido, atravesado por un estremecimiento que lo había dejado rígido, como el relámpago congela el movimiento—. ¿Lo oye? —susurró. No se movía nada. Valentine se lo quedó mirando, hasta que vio que los labios le empezaban a temblar con bruscos tirones—, dos, tres-cuatro-cinco, seis-siete… ¿lo oye?, usted, ¿usted lleva reloj?, ¿lo oye?, compitiendo con ese otro reloj, ¿los oye correr?, tic, tic-tic-tic, tic, tic… ¡escuche!, su reloj adelanta. ¿No?, ¡escuche!

—Realmente, si no puede…

—¡Escuche!, le digo… —Y entonces se recostó lentamente—. No, se acabó. Lo ha estropeado, interrumpiendo. ¿Pero no los oía correr? Tic.

Tic-tic

. Zenón no habría admitido, Zenón… lo que quiero decir es que aunque sumes uno, restes algo o sumes algo al infinito, no cambia en absoluto. ¿Los oía?, cómo desmenuzaban el tiempo en fragmentos en su carrera por alcanzarlo. Si no no importaría. Pero ¡Cristo!, corriendo, en realidad la cuestión es homo- u homoi-, quién es quién, lo que quiero decir es: ¿quién gana, Cristo o la tortuga? Si Dios vigila… ¡Cristo!, escuche, ¡oh, mi dulce oro!, ¿por qué nacimos tan hermosos? Por eso estamos aquí, un alquimista y un sacerdote, sin tachas, usted y yo. ¿Es cierto? ¿Ha visto alguna vez un sacerdote bizco?, ¿un ordenado amputado? ¡No, nunca! ¡Por todo lo que es feo, se acabó! —Se incorporó, pellizcándose el dorso de la mano—. Bueno, ¿se acuerda? Quién era, *gettato a mare,* ¿se acuerda?, ¿con un ancla al cuello?, y arrojado, atrapado por las algas y martirizado, ¿se acuerda?, en el mar celestial. Vaya, quizá intentan pescarnos.

—Qué está intentando… —murmuró Valentine.

—Haciendo una momia, pero lo que quiero decir es ¿qué se saca primero, el corazón o el cerebro? Bueno, el cerebro con los lóbulos ópticos, se saca por la nariz tirando de los frontales… Pero el corazón no se saca hasta mucho después. —Se quedó temblando, moviendo aún los labios sobre aquel último «mucho después». Se detuvo; y luego, cuando siguió, apenas pareció mover los labios—. Por condenados entiendo a los excluidos y… mantienen limpio el sendero del paraíso para engañar a la buena gente. ¿Pescados?, vaya, pescados… ¿Ha leído a Averroes? Lo que quiero decir es ¿creemos para entender? O entendemos para que… nos pesquen.

Basil Valentine siguió inclinado sobre él un momento más; luego se encogió de hombros, se volvió para alejarse y habló con tono humorístico e impaciente al mismo tiempo:

—Si recuerda a san Anselmo, *Credo ut intelligam*…

—Sí, sí, eso es. ¡Eso es! Carne, ¿se acuerda?, carne, qué pisciforme eres. —Se puso en pie de un salto—. Escuche, ¿lo entiende? ¡Intentan pescarnos! Sobre esta piedra, ¿se acuerda?, y te haré pescador de hombres.

—¿Adónde va?

—A los filipenses. Sí, la primera… con Pablo, a los filipenses.

—No va a ningún sitio. Siéntese y dígame lo que se propone hacer. Si lo que necesita es un descanso, hay dinero.

—Ish Kerioth compró un cementerio con sus… treinta monedas, ¿no?, ¿no? —continuó, elevando la voz —. Mientras quede tiempo aún, nosotros… proseguimos nuestra formación, no hay salida. Iré a África del Norte y tentaré a los niños árabes dándoles dulces para que crean en el Cristo blanco. Es un procedimiento aceptado. Tienen prejuicios. Lo aceptan como profeta de su propio Profeta. Eso es más difícil de combatir que si nunca hubieran oído hablar de él. La caridad es el reto.

—Si no es más que una obsesión pueril por el sacerdocio…

—¿Y a usted?, ¿le parece justo el sacerdocio, propagar la condenación?

—No hay nada que pueda darse que no pueda también retirarse.

—Por todo lo que es feo… sí, ¿y si no tienen más que un cuello? Se acuerda del mesías del siglo XVII Shabbetai Zebi, pero… —titubeó, retrocediendo hacia una puerta—. Qué tiene que ver eso con… *Dominus ac Redemptor.*

—¿Qué es eso? —preguntó rápidamente Valentine, sorprendido, pero se sentó.

—Sí, Clemente XIV, ¿el breve con el que prohibió la orden? ¿Se acuerda? Sé qué… la Iglesia debe castigar, para demostrar que tiene poder para castigar, ¿no? Pero usted… ¿usted…?

—Me recuerda a un chico con el que estuve en la escuela —dijo en voz baja Valentine—. Usted y Martin. Los que se despiertan tarde. De repente se dan cuenta de lo que ocurre a su alrededor, de los intentos desesperados que se hacen en todas partes por reconciliar el ideal con la realidad, lo llaman corrupción y creen que es algo nuevo. Algunos lo hemos sabido siempre, los demás no lo saben nunca. Usted y Martin son los que causan los problemas, despertando de repente, para sorprenderse. La estupidez nunca se sorprende, tampoco la inteligencia. Son complementarias, y la entera marcha de los asuntos

humanos depende de su cooperación. Pero aparecen los Martins y provocan desconfianza…

—¡Eso es la Cuaresma! ¿
Martin's
? ¿Martins?, ¿lo mató con muchos mimos?

—Yo era síndico entonces. Martin estaba a mis órdenes. Lo primero que se aprende en una escuela así es la obediencia. No te animan a pensar por tu cuenta, porque todavía no estás preparado para hacerlo. Y, entiende, te animan a denunciar las… infracciones que cometen los otros.

—¡Una red de espías!, *ac redemptor*, ya sé. ¿Y usted? —gritó desde el umbral donde estaba—. Para usted, si odia sus manos, y odia sus caras, y odia sus sufrimientos… ¡y un sacerdote! Usted… usted… sí, un papa… de un papa…

A su espalda sonó el teléfono.

—*Ici* Castel Gandolfo… Un tal señor Inononu pregunta por SS Basil Valentine… dese prisa… los cuarenta días están a punto de acabarse…

Basil Valentine le arrancó el teléfono de la mano y cruzó el umbral, tirando al pasar la lámpara de pie. La línea se había cortado, pero Valentine se quedó con el auricular en la mano, la mirada clavada en la oscuridad.

—*El carro triunfal del antimonio.* Ahora recuerdo su nombre, Basilio Valentino, el alquimista que observó que los cerdos engordaban con alimentos ricos en estibio, ¿no…? Lo probó con unos monjes demacrados por el ayuno y murieron todos…

Valentine dejó el teléfono en su soporte, y la figura retrocedió ante él de espaldas a la ventana.

—Y por eso lo llamaron antimonio, anatema para los monjes…

Valentine se quedó inmóvil en la casi completa oscuridad, sintiendo cada detalle físico de su cuerpo, todos menos los ojos; pues la figura recortada contra la ventana era indistinta, su forma y tamaño ambiguos, a excepción de los ojos.

—Sermonéalos, pues, mi *yetzer hara,* háblales, pues, mi pérfido corazón. Mientras floto en el viento como un trozo de tela, o como el color mismo, la calle se está llenando de gente como botones en Galilea. Habla a los Am-ha-aretz, sermonéalos, reza. Diles, como predijo el compositor, que no queda nada más que conocimiento y evidencia, y el arte se ha convertido en una especie de rabadilla, vestigio de aquel buen rabo prensil del que en tiempos nos colgábamos. Diles que Pedro murió viejo, y bien boca arriba. Diles que María rompió sus votos para fugarse con un soldado llamado Pantera, y vagabundeó hasta dar a luz a su hijo. Diles, a los que perciben lo que les ocurre sólo en términos de lo que les ha ocurrido, los que sólo reconocen las cosas que han visto con sus ojos, diles que todo depende de una resurrección que sólo vio un lunático, uno y luego doce y luego quinientos, pues las visiones son contagiosas, y las resurrecciones estaban a la orden del día, y las calles estaban llenas de mesías propagando el descontento, que hoy detendrían en la calle tanto a Jesucristo como a Juan el Bautista, y los meterían en la cárcel, y por la misma razón. Diles la verdad, pues, que Cristo fue arrojado a una fosa para malhechores comunes, diles la verdad, pues, no que el poder corrompe al hombre, sino que el hombre corrompe el poder. Mi *yetzer hara,* háblales, sermonéalos, mi pérfido corazón, a los que miran por la ventana y no se sorprenden al ver el sol, consumiéndose a sí mismo, a noventa y tres millones de millas de distancia; los que sueñan con los muertos y confían en que algún día sueñen con ellos, los Am-ha-aretz, llenando las calles y buscando autoridad y nada más; escribe con un lápiz de latón en una limpia plancha de hojalata
I A O, I A E
; la corrupción no es más que el conocimiento que llega demasiado pronto; cuéntales la coronación de Atholl con una corona de hierro al rojo vivo, y cómo los egipcios quemaban a los pelirrojos y esparcían sus cenizas con bieldos; cuéntales lo del pavimento de Justiniano, construido como un océano y destruido cuando el techo de Santa Sofía se derrumbó; y lo de Ibn Tulun, el hijo del gobernador de El Cairo, que dormía en un lecho de plumas sobre un lago de azogue; cuéntales lo de Antíope y la cabra, lo de Pasifae y el toro, y lo del huevo que puso Leda para hacerlos reír si te escuchan. Los Am-ha-aretz, cuyas memorias no conservan más que sus fracasos; diles que sus sufrimientos los empequeñecen; diles, mi *yetzer hara,* di a los que sólo comercian con moneda falsa dónde pueden comprar ropa para llevar cuando están solos. Eso es todo, y la ley de Gresham, y la ley de Gresham, y la ley de Gresham por amor o por dinero. Mézclate con ellos y diles que su nostalgia de lugares en los que nunca han estado es sexo, los sudorosos Am-ha-aretz, y cuando oyen música diles que es su madre, díselo a Nicodemo, dile que no hay forma de volver a nacer otra vez, y otra vez y otra vez y otra vez de mil otras madres de otros nonatos; dile, mi *yetzer hara,* diles, diles, mi pérfido corazón, que no tienen ninguna esperanza; diles lo que es la condenación, y que están condenados, que lo que han estado falsificando todo el tiempo nunca existió.

En el sofá, Basil Valentine apoyó una mano en su frente y la movió lentamente.

—Tiene fiebre —dijo. Se levantó a encender una luz suave junto a las ventanas, y volvió al sofá—. Quédese tumbado. Un poco de coñac… tome…

—Sí, ¿entiende…? ¿Entiende?

—Intente no hablar durante un minuto. Y cierre los ojos. —Basil Valentine cogió entre sus manos el caliente cráneo cuadrado y apoyó suavemente los dedos en los párpados—. No hace falta decir ni una palabra. Aquí está seguro.

—Entiende, si… me he convertido en el que podía hacer más que yo.

Valentine pasaba suavemente la yema de los dedos por las sienes que latían debajo. Se rebulló un poco y se aflojó la bata.

—¿Y el que ha dejado atrás? —susurró—. ¿El que ha perdido?

—Sí, sí —se oyó un susurro por respuesta—. Sí, le echo de menos…

Valentine bajó un poco la cara, escondiéndola de la luz que daba en el respaldo del sofá, y siguió pasándole las manos por el cráneo.

—Aquí estamos seguros —dijo.

Sonó el teléfono. Las manos de Basil Valentine se juntaron por un instante, apretando entre sí el cráneo. Luego las levantó, y los ojos siguieron cerrados.

Se acercó rápidamente al teléfono, se volvió a echar un vistazo desde la puerta y lo cogió. Habló en voz baja, de cara a la pared que tenía delante, con los ojos bajos.

—Sí, todo bien —dijo—, pero… ¿este teléfono? Claro que es posible, ningún teléfono privado es seguro… *Meg van az informado ami kell, itt vannak a papirok. Eh…?, nem most, hivyon holnap reggel…*

Entonces cuelga, y se queda un momento apoyado en el aparato. Luego entra a lavarse las manos, y su cara y la del espejo intercambian confirmación a la velocidad de la luz, mientras las palmas frotan los nudillos y los pulgares raen las cutículas bajo el agua caliente.

Vuelve despacio, mostrando resolución en sus pasos, observando ante sí sus pies que siguen una línea entre allí y las ventanas, sin levantar la cabeza hasta que llega y mira hacia fuera, movimiento acompañado por la lámpara suave con un brinco negro en el techo.

—Incluso ahí abajo, entre ellos —dice—, los estúpidos de manos torpes, ¿hay alguno que no lo conozca, que no haya sufrido el ultraje de su mirada y no haya oído la burla de su risa?, de ese otro yo que puede hacer más, que siempre te esquiva, pero… ahora estás aquí, mi querido amigo, y nosotros… —Basil Valentine se detiene para apoyarse a medias en el alféizar de la ventana—. ¿Te sorprendería que te contara tantas cosas de mí como sé de ti? Pues sé que los odio, mientras que tú desearías poder amarlos. —Plenamente a la vista, descollante de luces, el Empire State Building yergue sobre la calle su rígido glande de mil cuatrocientos setenta y dos pies de altura—. Ahí está su santuario, su idea de la magnificencia, su maldito Hércules de Lisipo que Fabio trajo consigo a Roma desde Tarento, no porque fuera arte, sino porque era grande, spqr, todos lo admiraron por la misma razón, el pueblo, cuya idea de la necesidad consiste en pagar el recibo del gas, las masas que, como les aseguran sus radios, no tienen ningún compromiso. Sin compromiso alguno, más que tender sus rudas manos desmañadas, rompiendo, pidiendo, mancillando todo lo que tocan.

Aunque su tono sigue siendo sereno, se lleva la mano a la sien y encuentra la vena prominente; extingue con la punta de dos dedos la vida que late a través de ella, y se lleva la mano a la rodilla, medio apoyado en la ventana.

—Vivimos en Roma —dice, volviendo la cara de nuevo hacia la habitación—. En la Roma de Calígula, con un nuevo circo de sufrimiento vulgar y bestializado en los periódicos cada mañana. Las masas, las fétidas masas —dice, cargando todo su peso sobre sus pies—. Cómo pueden sospechar siquiera la existencia de un yo que puede hacer más, viviendo como viven sin ningún compromiso en absoluto. Hay tan pocas cosas hermosas en el mundo —dice Basil Valentine, dando un paso hacia el respaldo del sofá, donde todo está tranquilo, hacia donde no ha alzado aún los ojos— que deben ser protegidas. —Se queda de pie, mirando hacia abajo, para decir unas cuantas palabras más, como si fueran simplemente eso, un añadido, cuando lleva todo el tiempo encaminándose hacia ellas—. Nadie que pida compasión la obtendrá. Una vez llamé calumnia a tu trabajo, y lo era. Pero nadie puede tachar de mentira la cara de Cristo en tu Van der Goes. Y ahora —dice avanzando de nuevo— estás aquí, y te voy a enseñar, te voy a enseñar el único secreto que vale la pena saber, el secreto que enseñan los dioses, el secreto que Wotan enseñó a su hijo…

Su mano busca la pitillera de oro y encuentra el bolsillo vacío. Al levantar la vista lo primero que advierte no es el sofá vacío, sino el vacío pedestal donde estaba el toro de oro: el huevo sigue allí, intacto.

Entonces Basil Valentine se llevó una mano a la garganta, como para detener la náusea ascendente, y se

inclinó hacia adelante, con la mano aún en la garganta, los duros anillos de la tráquea subiendo y bajando sobre nada entre el pulgar y el índice, tragando saliva, mientras en otra pared, clara por inadvertida, la sombra dibuja una mano firme sirviendo coñac.

Un trago del líquido encerrado en cristal en su mano, y se aclara la garganta con brusca sonoridad.

—Por supuesto, la Atenas de Sócrates fue un fenómeno —dice, echando al pasar una mirada al sofá—, lo más civilizado que ha ocurrido en la tierra, mientras que la chusma de la República romana —sigue, acercándose a las ventanas—, Roma, sabes…

Con tres estrellas en el cinturón, Orion está oculto a la vista tras toneladas de opacos materiales de construcción disueltos ahora en oscuridad, que sólo sirven de soporte a puntos fijos de luz, el firmamento sólido de los primeros judíos, en el que las estrellas estaban clavadas para que no se cayeran; más allá, oculto a la vista, Orion persigue el vuelo de siete palomas.

Mira, cariño, ha encontrado mi collar

(La capacidad de este autobús)

Las nuevas Gemas Maravillosas Desarrolladas en el laboratorio

(Por favor no hablen con el conductor mientras el autobús esté en marcha)

Más brillantes que los diamantes

(Escupir en o desde este autobús es una infracción castigada por la ley)

(Apéense cuando se abran las puertas)

Por encima se yergue el acantilado que Alejandro escaló en la India, el acantilado tachonado de diamantes, con cadenas de oro rojo colgando, quinientos escalones hasta la casa del sol, hasta el paraíso.

Aunque sir John Mandeville confesara (en sus *Viajes,* uno de los primeros y más heroicos plagios en francés): «Del paraíso no puedo hablar con propiedad, pues no estuve allí», ¿qué importa? Aquí, en lo alto, los acantilados de hormigón han desaparecido, y sólo sus luces tachonan la oscuridad que hace las veces de espacio y fingido firmamento.

—¡John!

—¿Tú…? ¿Volver a tropezarme contigo en la calle de este modo? Pero tengo que darme prisa, tengo que coger un tren.

—Sí, un tren, un tren.

Las luces pasan de largo como centellas, enredando sus rayos en la oscuridad para confirmarla.

—¿Estás bien? ¿Qué es eso que llevas? ¿Es oro auténtico? ¿Adónde vas?

Por el mundo de la noche, almas perdidas aferradas a sus guías de viaje siguen al sol por la lobreguez de los pasos subterráneos, corredores oscuros y peligrosos: así construyó su tumba el rey, bien honda en la tierra, y sola vaga allí la oscuridad de la muerte por veinticuatro mil pies cuadrados de pasadizos y vestíbulos, escaleras, cámaras y fosos. Así en Egipto.

—De vuelta.

Rojo al oeste al ponerse, a causa de los fuegos del infierno, dice el Talmud: rojo al este por las rosas del Edén.

—¿De vuelta adónde?

—¿Podemos parar un minuto? ¿Una copa de coñac?

—Tengo que coger ese tren.

—Caballeros…

Pocos disentían en el mundo entero de que el sol, la luna y los planetas salían de un agujero por el este, se metían en otro por el oeste y regresaban de noche por un pasadizo subterráneo.

—Caballeros, yo también tengo una religión. Soy un borracho.

Recorriendo furiosamente el cielo de un lado a otro como una fiera en su jaula, dice el Talmud, e incapaz de escapar, encerrado en el firmamento, cuyas únicas puertas de entrada y salida están en los extremos opuestos.

—De acuerdo, sí, un tren. Espera.

—Caballeros…

—Date prisa…

Abajo: abajo se hundió Tammuz (muerto por el colmillo del verraco) entrando en Babilonia, el centro de la tierra, pues allí estaba la piedra que tapaba la entrada del mundo inferior.

Así invocaban los asirios al toro que guardaba las puertas: Oh, gran toro, oh, grandísimo toro que pateas con fuerza, que abres paso al interior…

Por favor, enseñen su billete a la entrada.

—Salida de la vía siete.

Persiguiendo su muerte en el descenso, los indios paiutes seguían al sol hasta aquel agujero por donde entraba a gatas al extremo de la tierra, por donde se arrastraba angostamente hasta el centro de la tierra, para dormir allí durante la noche, y despertar y arrastrarse hasta el exterior por la puerta oriental. Sale el sol, devorando mientras se eleva a sus hijas las estrellas, su único alimento; y los que al alba miran desde la tierra solo ven su vientre brillante, henchido de estrellas.

Este billete es un recibo y el resguardo de su equipaje. Por favor consérvelo hasta llegar a su destino.

¡Quiera el toro de la buena fortuna, el genio de la buena fortuna, el guardián de los pasos de mi majestad, quien da alegría a mi corazón, custodiarlo por siempre jamás! Ojalá nunca vuelva a cesar su vigilia.

(Así reza la inscripción de Esar-Haddon, cuyo padre, el asesinado Senaquerib, había destruido Babilonia; y él, el hijo, regresó para reconstruir la ciudad sagrada, para erigir de nuevo el templo de Baal y devolverle sus dioses).

Abiertas de golpe, las puertas de la fachada oriental del templo descubren el alba mientras las puntas doradas de los obeliscos flamean, y el aro rojo emerge del mundo inferior. Los que están en tierra se postran ante él, y las puertas se cierran sobre Baal, Quien ha entrado en Su Templo.

III

«Era un hombre, sí, que estaba ahí colgado;
Un joven, según recuerdo: le corté la soga.
Y si ahora resultara ser mi hijo…
¿Qué dices? ¿Qué dices? ¡Luz!».

KYD, *La tragedia española*

Por encima de los árboles, coronando el campanario de la iglesia, el gallo de la veleta reflejaba el sol, posado allí arriba sobre el pueblo como un gallo de fuego surgiendo de sus cenizas.

Pocos presenciaban este milagro inviolado, pues aquí la reverencia se restringía a los tejados: la adoración, como había advertido la infancia, era asunto de indecente encierro defensivo, y pocos eran en verdad los ojos que se alzaban a lo alto salvo cuando estaban seguros del abrazo protector de las vigas. En realidad, pocos eran los ojos que se alzaban nunca, pues más bien se bajaban con consagrada turbación, para cerrarse finalmente con rigurosa mortificación mientras la voz entonaba: «La misericordia del Señor alcanza de eternidad a eternidad a aquellos que Le temen».

Cuando los ojos se abrían era para clavarse en la nuca de otro similarmente ocupado; y aunque los ojos no se alzaban más allá, sí lo hacían las voces: «Oh, Dios,
guia-dos
por Tu mano Nuestros
pa-dres
exi-liados cruzaron el mar», cantaban bajo aquel tejado que se elevaba a la altura de las copas de los árboles circundantes, encumbrando el gótico de Nueva Inglaterra hacia la aguja blanca alertada por el gallo de la veleta que atrajo su mirada mientras subía la colina hacia el camino de posta. Pero incluso él, cuando llegó allí, recorrió la silenciosa nave con los ojos bajos.

A ambos lados observaban su paso los rostros de las casas, fachadas reservadas, indiferentes a su presencia, que aun así lo observaban cautamente cuando pasaba justo por delante de sus ventanas y vidrieras en abanico; y que luego, cuando con siete pasos más salía de su línea de visión, no se volvían con indecorosa curiosidad, sino seguían mirando fijamente al frente. Sin muros que las taparan, ni setos que protegieran su timidez, algunas con bocas fruncidas por columnas jónicas y dóricas (nunca por la alegría del corintio), aquellas caras de tablas estrechas y ladrillos del siglo XVIII miraban al transeúnte sin desviación ni interrupción, con miradas ni esquivas ni oblicuas, la mirada lineal de la decencia.

(Más allá, sin duda, había cúpulas dispersas, reliquias juguetonas del libertinaje decimonónico).

Pasó ante el monumento a la Guerra Civil que treinta años antes perforaba el cielo, y ahora aparecía empequeñecido por deferencia a guerras mayores. (Y el cañón fijo de hierro que tenía al pie había sido sustituido por uno móvil del 75, aunque mutilado por la pérdida de una de sus ruedas).

Al llegar al crucero, la punta de la aguja refulgió a su espalda con la luz del sol, y desde allí dio la campana la temprana hora. Tras la aguja luminosa el cielo aparecía sembrado de nubecillas que no se movían, no más que los retazos desflecados de nieve que reflejaban aquí el curso celestial del sol que él seguía por tierra.

Ya había dejado atrás la curva de la carretera (y la flecha indicadora que había allí, señalando en la dirección errónea para engañar a los bárbaros), y recorrido sin detenerse la milla desde la estación de ferrocarril; tampoco había alzado los ojos más que una vez, cuando se alzaron atraídos por la transfiguración del gallo de oro al sol. *Mirabile dictu;* otro día azul. Qué barbilla tan estrecha en su mano, cuando se lleva allí la mano, y luego se pasa dos dedos por los labios y mira rápidamente por encima del hombro. Campanas, allí lejos al fondo de la nave. «Dios de nuestros padres, conocido de antiguo, Señor de nuestra extensa línea de batalla» (los dedos sellan los labios), himno n.º 383. Por encima del hombro cantaban, y los mayores habrían preferido no oír la música, que les alarmaba al despertar en ellos algo vivo, y querían que sus hijos creyeran que no existía nada semejante para alzar sus talones por el aire. Pero oían, y oían además sin humildad, y ni aligerados ni extraviados se ponían al instante a componer, y azotaban a sus hijos para que ensayaran como los habían azotado a ellos para que descubrieran. Otra vez la campana. Otra vez. *Adeste —ad esse fidelis:* himno n.º 223, laringes distendidas a, m, d, g, *infra dig dominicus:* Oh por

una Fe que no mengüe.

Las motas de un rayo de sol son demonios, dijo el bienaventurado Reichelm (aunque serios estadísticos han estimado el número de huéspedes que pueblan el infierno exactamente en
1 758 064 176
): los sajones cruzando la corriente bendecida río arriba por obispos (conservaron seco el brazo de la espada). Bendito León X, no pudo *nitch anders*, las 95 Tesis clavadas en la puerta, en el principio este fin:

Pueblo fundado en 1666 *annus mirabilis* Oh caray Oh caramba s-Santo Cristo t-Tenemos una gran labor por delante interconfesional infra supra sub tiró el tintero: conferencia en el Convento de Monjas, ilustrada, ceremonia Pagana, curas con sotana, Monjas, altar mayor, &c. Un gemido de ultratumba. Vean chica en mazmorra. Tío Sam al rescate. Público invitado. Entrada 50 ¢ no nos dejes caer en la tentación.

¡Sorpresa!, que te besen así en la mejilla. Después de tanto tiempo. Vaya, por encima del hombro cumple el requisito sin tocarme. *Abscondam faciem meam* Cristo blanco el fugitivo. Imagíname sin nariz, toca madera, o pídele un trozo a Helena, ella la encontró: frótala, Aladino, Constantino, Nicodemo derribado por el viento del río h-Hijodelagranp… *et considerabo novissima eorum (sic)*.

El nacimiento de una nación. Dejad entrar la luz Abrid los conventos de monjas Y salvad a las chicas. Limonada gratis, Agua mineral, Duchas ¡Llegando!, a la Tienda del Evangelio Trasnochado Un drama de dieciocho personajes Ésta es una limpia conferencia de primera clase en la que se expone la entera Religión Católica Romana desde el Confesionario a los Conventos de Monjas, Sumos Sacerdotes, Madre Superiora, Monaguillo, Seis Monjas, Santo Altar, Cirios Santos, Agua Bendita, Dioses Sagrados Tal como es en todas las Iglesias Católicas en todas partes. Con la madre entregando a su hija a la iglesia para una vida supuestamente más santa, la hija haciendo el voto de las monjas carmelitas (Velo Negro), enterrada viva, arrojada a una mazmorra y cómo hay que rescatarlas.

Se detuvo a toser, atrapó la tos al vuelo cortésmente con la mano abierta y siguió andando. Cortés con esta marea de indecibles hiperdulíacos, ¿y por qué?, ¿que te rescaten para llevar un griñón apestoso a modo de barba? Si no es más que una mujer (pero un buen puro se fuma) con Eva cogida por los volantes, *Hae conni* (la captura más vieja que conocemos): Dido, una zafia; Cleopatra, una gitana; Helena y Hero, unas putas y unas guarras; *praebeat illle nates* (creo entender utilidad), pero el ojo gris de Tisbe clavado en Alfonso Liguori, «No hay misticismo sin María». *Stabat Mater* amortajada con la decente oscuridad de un lenguaje erudito, *foemina si furtum faciet mihi virque puerque:* dolorosa mientras el pecado Original empuña la espada. *Carnelevarium* (el corazón se sacaba mucho después) gozando en pródiga polimastia *(Zwei Brüste wohnen, ach! in meiner Seele)* ahora, en Martindad, san Martín les es dado o sólo Prestado a las ss Pelagia & María de Egipto, y por tanto a Thais, Kundry, Salomé, e incluso a santa Irene; Constanza (*Ds ac Redemptor,* S. J.), Valeria Mesalina, Marozia en el jardín, Mesalina en los jardines de Lúculo *hic jaceted* edad 26 años, Thrawn el negro de Janet que bajó por el muro del jardín, y los hombres *et ardet:* Anaxágoras apropiado *in contemptu Christianae fidei;* Lucrecio (muerto por una sobredosis de filtro amoroso) apropiado, «Religio peperit scelerosa atque impia facta». P. ej. exhomologesis (c. 218) por Calixto I. A millas pelágicas de distancia, en la Roca, monos de Berbería residentes tiran piedras a la Y.M.C.A. local. En España la cojera militante de Ignacio y Javier 4'6" exhomolojesuis abjura del derramamiento de sangre, y el Inquisidor De Arbues define el Amor *ex hac Petri cathedrâ* sin levantar una Ampolla. Amor perfectissimus explicar lo oscuro por medio de lo más oscuro: ¿Quién era, pues, el caballero?, (entiendo los excluidos). No Filón, *¡De Exsecrationibus!,* no Filón, desde luego no Aristóbulo atareado judío alejandrino para demostrar el plagio: Pitágoras Sócrates Platón Homero & Hesiodo, todos plagiaron a Moisés, absolutamente todos. «Pues dime Segismundo, di: El delito mayor del hombre es haber nacido». ¿Calixto, pues, después de todo? Politiqueos. ¡No, no, no los escuches, 1870! Nono el ganador: infalible (¿qué es ese estruendo?). El Colegio de Cardenales se vuelve a mirar. «Es Arkansas, gritando *Non placet*».

La nieve se había endurecido en grumos a lo largo del camino y estuvo a punto de caerse varias veces, pese a que ahora no miraba ya sino dónde ponía los pies. Ezquizofóbico, ¿cuánto puede acercarse al borde?, ¿cuánto tiempo seguirá desdeñando los trucos fáciles? «¡Dadme fuerza y materia, y renovaré el mundo!». ¡Entonces culpa a Descartes!, resistiendo con entereza la compra de un sombrero hongo, y llevando un puro, y aun así prefiriendo quizá un seco panatella relleno en Brasil, cerrado en Java y envuelto en Sumatra: pero un esponjoso puro habano resulta más grávido; y la tentación de pararse por el camino, cansado, malditamente cansado, malditamente cansado de ello pasando junto a los fuegos de campamento tantas tiendas sujetas con tanto cuidado a las estacas insistiendo en la permanencia cuando (Dios me ciegue) son tiendas por naturaleza y el Señor me ama por la naturaleza de las cosas que ellos arrebatarán, por la naturaleza de la fuerza y la materia arrebatadas y el maldito cartesiano con ellas. Maltratado por los lujos, pidiendo ya nada más que alguna enfermedad bien conocida para agitar las vísceras y obligarlas a

afirmar su existencia interna, la externa de los miembros. *Caveat:* «¿Por qué lado te vistes, Job?». Maltratado por los lujos, Oh el doctor Esculapio lo descubrió a las bravas fulminadoporunrayo. La realidad definida por el (lujoso) crimen gratuito. La paz por la (lujosa) guerra. El amor por el (lujoso) asalto, violación, Senta se retira con Sabina sonrisa de saciedad, Gracias señora. «E ucciso da una donna!
M'haitu
assai torturato?! Su! Parla! Odi tu ancora? Guardami…! Son la Tosca! Son la Diva…!».

Pregunta a san Bernardo por las mujeres, su cara es un viento abrasador, él te lo dirá, pregúntale, su voz, el siseo de las serpientes, te lo dirá.

(Fa un ultimo sforzo:) Soccorso…!

Repetición: Crisipo. Oleantes. Zenón. Pirrón. Otra vez la historia del cortejo de Hiparquia, no ahorres detalles (el traje de Telefos y Crates luego el novio son especialmente graciosos) más que uno: «Besado en la mejilla después de muchos años, ¿no?», A.M.D.G., secuencia de la no sorpresa (los ochenta y cuatro años de gestación de
Lao-tse)
, ¿de acuerdo, Nicodemo?, ¿de acuerdo?, bajo una zarza ardiente (perdí a mi mujer) *Ad Mariam Dei Genetricem, dixit, pinxit.*

Canta: «Varé tava soskei… soskei… El hombre sirena me robó el corazón».

(Verso:) *Ti soffoca il sangue…? Il sangue…?*

Configurando formas y olores (maldición) canta: «*Yetzer hara,* en la cruenta conspiración de la noche, cuando gritan quetedenporelc… Ven provisto de su morfidita».

Chúpale el culo a Alejandro VI para que te deje su esmeralda cóncava, contempla a través de ella la violación de (cristianas) muchachas. «Ah! è morto…! Or gli perdono…! E avanti a lui tremava tutta Roma!».

Entonces se cayó. Se cayó dos veces. La primera vez, una piedra se dio la vuelta bajo su pie cuando llegaba a la cuesta del prado oriental de la casa del párroco. Cayó sobre una rodilla, se levantó inmediatamente y tres pasos más allá volvió a resbalar. La tierra estaba dura, y se hizo daño en el dorso de una mano, y se quedó sentado durante más de medio minuto, mirándose el dorso de la mano que se había raspado, no gravemente pero sí lo suficiente para que brotara la sangre. Se quedó sentado hasta que recuperó el aliento; y el toro, en el suelo, mortecino su oro bajo la luz mortecina, atrajo sus ojos, que no brillaban más que las gemas mortecinas de su cuello. Por primera vez lo sobresaltó profundamente el filo cortante del aire, que le cortaba los pulmones cuando lo aspiraba. Alargó hacia el toro la mano marcada por la sangre y la apoyó en él; la otra se la pasó por la cara seca, y luego por la cabeza descubierta. Esta mano se detuvo allí y los dedos se cerraron sobre el cráneo como para exprimir el cerebro que lo ocupaba. Tenía un fuerte dolor de cabeza. Parecía llevar allí cierto tiempo, latiendo con insistencia. La mano alcanzó la nuca y volvió a cerrarse allí, estrujando con los dedos músculos y tendones. Estaban doloridos. Escupió en el suelo. Luego tosió. El aire estaba inmóvil. El frío le llegaba uniformemente. Se apresuró de nuevo a levantarse, pues su cuerpo estaba absorbiendo el frío directamente de la tierra.

Su expresión, que durante todo este tiempo había sido confusa, cobró poco a poco consistencia mientras se ponía en pie, levantando consigo el toro y poniéndoselo bajo el brazo. A medida que el aire difuso de desconcierto lo abandonaba, sus rasgos se fundieron en una concentración de ansiedad, con la mirada clavada en la casa, en lo alto. Allí, el sol acababa de alcanzar la punta del tejado y empezada a descender; y de nuevo, por primera vez, los ruidos que distinguía parecían llevar sonando cierto tiempo. Es decir, el tiempo que llevaran sonando al alcance de su oído: un
ca-clac, ca-clac, ca-clac
regular era el ruido menor, que parecía venir de la propia casa, junto con una serie irregular de martillazos más lejanos. Sin embargo, fue la voz lo que lo detuvo. No era cortante ni sonora, sino lenta y prolongada, y se extinguía y volvía a alzarse en aquel aire frío, deteniéndose y elevándose como el humo de un buque que desaparece bajo un puente, y volviendo a brotar.

—Júpiter. Amón. Adonis. Chemosh. Hércules. Osiris. Dionisos. Febo, Baco, Moloch, Baal…

La luz del sol se derramaba sobre la fachada de la casa, y su margen convergía gradualmente hacia la figura expuesta en el porche abierto. Las palabras se prolongaron y se extinguieron, dejando un vacío que el silencio, brotando de todas partes, se apresuró a llenar. Luego, cuando volvió a hablar, su voz sonó más baja, con un tono admonitorio ante el cual se retiró el silencio, pero no a mucha distancia, como lo había hecho ante los nombres del sol. Ahora el silencio apenas retrocedió hasta donde se acercaba la figura subiendo la cuesta del prado, y avanzó con ella, pero indeciso, delante y luego detrás, interrumpiendo el flujo de las palabras, «hombre o mujer… iniquidad… transgrediendo su alianza, y has ido a servir a otros dioses, y los has adorado, bien al sol, o a la luna, o a cualquiera de las huestes del cielo…».

Luego, mientras seguía acercándose cuesta arriba, el silencio no se interpuso ya, sino que lo siguió de cerca por detrás en el aire frío. «Y para que no alces los ojos al cielo, y al ver el sol, y la luna, y las estrellas, y aun la entera hueste del cielo, te inclines a adorarlos, y les sirvas, el Señor tu Dios…».

El reverendo Gwyon era un hombre grande. Y cuando la creciente luz del sol lo alcanzó y cubrió, y dejó de hablar y quedó exaltado a la luz, la luz solar y el silencio parecieron agrandarlo, hacerlo realmente más grande, solo en el porche. De repente gritó a la figura que se le acercaba:

—Vuélvete. ¡Allí, vuélvete!

El sol acababa de salir, con su gran vientre resplandeciente, y aparecía inmóvil tras culminar el esfuerzo de su salida, detenido sobre el borde de la tierra, confiado ante la perspectiva del viaje del día. Rompiendo de pronto su propia pauta de inmovilidad, el reverendo Gwyon bajó ruidosamente los escalones del porche y se detuvo en un punto donde podía abarcar con la vista el cielo entero.

—Mal momento para ello —murmuró escudriñando el cielo de un lado a otro y a la inversa, de este a oeste, de vuelta al este y al propio sol—. Hoy es un mal momento para ello.

—Mal momento para… ¿qué?

—Allí, el cielo sucio —dijo Gwyon, levantando rápidamente la mano—. Hoy tiene ante sí un sendero sucio.

Mientras hablaba bajó los ojos, y lo que en una cara más pequeña habría podido pasar por un gesto de sorpresa, se extendió por la suya como uno de ensimismamiento curioso e incluso inquisitivo, un gesto que invocaba todas las baterías de la historia para que apuntaran simultáneamente sobre el problema inmediato que tenía delante.

El reverendo Gwyon era un hombre alto; pero era su porte lo que lo hacía parecer indómito, eso y la sensación de que lo rodeaba un metro entero de silencio que sólo él podía atravesar, o apartar con el ardor alentador de su curiosidad. Tenía la cara profundamente arrugada, pero con arrugas que no eran en modo alguno los trazos fortuitos de fatiga malhumorada con que una generación tras otra proclama la abrogación de su responsabilidad hacia el futuro, y de su deuda con el pasado. La edad venerable no había dispuesto, para él, ese paisaje en ruinas contra el que es un privilegio sentarse a hurgarse la nariz, ventosear y maldecir el avance a tientas de la juventud entre los obstáculos, sumisamente erigidos antes por sus propias manos, que jalonan el camino de ese engaño sublime conocido como la búsqueda de la felicidad.

Sin confundirla con ese estado de intolerancia política, terquedad mental, seguridad financiera, atrofia sensual, penuria emocional y colapso espiritual que, bajo el nombre de «madurez», animaba las vidas que le rodeaban, podría decirse que el reverendo Gwyon había alcanzado la madurez.

También es preciso señalar que, aunque su posición en la comunidad tenía como cometido justificar el desorden acumulado de las cosas de este mundo a los ojos del venidero, tampoco estaba presente en su cara esa benigna expresión que delata una absoluta incomprensión de los designios de la eternidad, ni la concomitante suspensión del intelecto que tan cuidadosamente separa este mundo del venidero en todo el país los domingos por la mañana y, en los asilos del mundo entero, todos los días de la semana.

La cara de Gwyon estaba arrugada con líneas de necesidad. Surgían de los ojos que ahora apartó del cielo coagulado y paseó rápidamente por la cara que tenía ante sí, una cara también arrugada en la que todos los rasgos lo observaban ansiosamente. «Ahh», dijo Gwyon, «has venido…», y su mirada se posó en el toro de oro. Luego, cuando Gwyon alargó una mano resuelta y la apoyó en la cabeza de la figura del toro, una mano insegura y listada de sangre se levantó y lo cogió del brazo, y así seguían, cada uno mirando la mano del otro, cuando el sol se ocultó de pronto y se quedaron sin sombra, parados en medio del prado.

El cielo se iba cubriendo de fragmentos de nube. Procedían de un gran banco situado al norte. El banco de nubes aparecía gris e inmóvil, y no menguaba de tamaño.

Gwyon se estremeció de pronto bajo su mano, y alzó la vista hacia la estropeada salida del sol con un gesto de severa indignación. Luego le arrancó decididamente la figura del toro de debajo del brazo, y con ella se volvió y se dirigió a grandes zancadas hacia la casa.

Cuando llegaron al porche el sol estaba de nuevo destrabado. Había empezado ya a menguar en su ascenso, y a perder el violento colorido de su salida al cielo.

En el último escalón el reverendo Gwyon se detuvo ante él con tal brusquedad que estuvo a punto de hacerle perder el equilibrio.

—Mira —dijo Gwyon, haciendo un amplio ademán con la mano libre que abarcó el porche y el sol a su espalda—, cualquier tonto puede entender lo que perdieron las iglesias cuando orientaron sus entradas de cara al sol poniente. —Su voz vibró con la misma exhortación directa y perentoria que había reflejado su cara un momento antes; pero cuando siguió, alzando su gran cabeza hacia la presencia que al parecer esperaba encontrar a su lado, y que le sorprendió encontrar tambaleándose a su espalda, la voz de Gwyon

bajó de tono como si estuviera hablando a solas, y como si tuviera por costumbre hacerlo—. El templo cristiano en Tiro —murmuró—. El propileo daba al sol naciente, por supuesto. Así atraía con su brillo a los transeúntes.

Luego echó una rápida ojeada como para confirmar que lo seguía.

El martilleo empezó de nuevo al otro lado de la casa, hacia donde estaba la cochera, golpes nítidos y sonoros que parecían venir de muy lejos; ningún otro ruido turbaba el silencio, salvo las fuertes pisadas del reverendo Gwyon mientras cruzaba el porche delante de él. El sordo

ca-clac ca-clac

había cesado hacía un rato. Al ver a Gwyon inclinarse ante él para abrir la puerta principal, se sintió impulsado a hacer lo mismo una vez dentro de la casa, donde estaba más oscuro y sólo tenía por guía el rabo dorado del toro. Ciertamente no corría ningún peligro de darse con la cabeza en el marco de una puerta, pero la infancia prevalecía aún, y todas las puertas parecían más bajas, todos los pasillos más estrechos, los recodos más angostos y las habitaciones más pequeñas. De modo que se encorvó, y pasó ante Olalla como con frío y ante la *cruz-con-espejos* [3] para entrar finalmente en el comedor. Por lo demás, la casa estaba fría.

Por alguna razón se dirigió sin vacilar al sitio de tía May en la mesa del comedor y se sentó allí. Gwyon sirvió dos copas de jerez. Era un oscuro oloroso añejo, una botella llena aunque le habían quitado el corcho. Dejó la botella entre ambos y se quedó de pie, con una mano sobre la figura del toro, que no había soltado.

—Menudo viaje para llegar aquí.

—Sí, sí —afirmó inmediatamente Gwyon con aire agitado. Vació su copa de un trago y luego, un momento después, se la quedó mirando en su mano como si fuera un objeto desconocido y no supiera cómo había llegado allí. La dejó con cuidado en la mesa—. Vienes de muy lejos… una gran distancia —dijo, mirando de nuevo a la figura sentada ante él, de modo muy parecido, quizá, a como habría mirado la encarnación de una abstracción concebida mucho antes, turbado no tanto por la presente epifanía y su aspecto ojeroso e inseguro como por su permanencia familiar y duradera, a pesar del aire transitorio que había asumido en cuanto sintió en su propia mano el peso de la figura dorada del toro. Gwyon siguió de pie, con una mano inmóvil, pesadamente apoyada en la figura del toro, y la otra afanándose sobre nada a su lado, configurando refugios en el aire.

En aquel momento parecía atado allí, de pie en su sitio en la cabecera de la mesa. El sol entraba ahora por la ventana del comedor que daba al este, en el lado de la casa donde se interrumpía el porche.

—Bueno, esto… —dijo Gwyon a la figura sentada, que recibía el sol en el costado izquierdo—, para mayor seguridad, será mejor que lo guarde para mayor seguridad.

Agitó la figura de oro bajo un haz de luz y le dejó allí sentado al sol, de espaldas al aparador, mirando el sitio vacío al otro lado de la mesa. Cuando Gwyon salía de la habitación levantó la vista, pero demasiado tarde para ver algo más que la espalda fugitiva, el rasgo más notablemente distintivo del reverendo Gwyon.

Se quedó quieto un momento, y luego se llevó la mano a la frente y la encontró tersa. Dentro persistía el dolor de cabeza con una insistencia ignominiosa, haciendo hincapié en su presencia y nada más, ideando, quizá, una teoría cuántica de la memoria sobre la salida del anciano, que se había ido paso a paso, conduciendo al toro de oro que no mugía, ¿camino de Ooroma? Se habían ido Krakatoa y el día amarillo de Boston, el Gran Climatérico y Valeriano, ¿camino de Ballima?, mientras él seguía allí sentado a pleno sol de la mañana calentando el lado de la cara de tía May en la mesa del desayuno, mirando como nunca hizo ella hacia el sitio vacío enfrente. (A la derecha estaba el rincón oscuro donde se concebían todas las Buenas obras). «Cave, cave», se levantó, «dominus vulgus vult». Tenía los ojos fríos; ni siquiera el sol se los calentaba, obligándolo a bajarlos desde la gloria que entraba por la ventana a la mesa baja que había detrás, y la figura desvaída del centro de la mesa tembló por un instante, en paños menores, y se quedó quieta mientras pasaba, con los hombros encogidos, escuchando, bajo vigilancia, pensando de repente en Tyndale estrangulado y quemado por su labor de amor. «El diablo da trabajo a las manos ociosas», aquí, sin música, donde las reverberaciones de la voz humana, cansadas en recuerdo de generaciones agotadas en vano, negaban la misma posibilidad de la música. Un ruido agudo y hostil procedente de la cocina confirmó el silencio y la vigilante conspiración de las cosas inanimadas, atentas a cualquier quiebra en el modelo. Un movimiento lo quebró, su mano alargándose para dejar la copa en su sitio en la mesa; y se quedó en suspenso sosteniendo el peso que arrojaban sobre sus hombros los estáticos detalles de las molduras oscuras, manteniendo la inerte vigilia que impedía la música: la música como movimiento ideal, una presunción en sí misma manifiestamente pecadora, como se movía la Serpiente, reptando por el Jardín, con un movimiento incalificado, como se movería el sonido de un laúd que alguien tocara ahora aquí, por planos ondulados jamás explorados, hasta acabar acorralado y rápidamente asesinado por los ángulos

implacables de la habitación, demostrando así que esos planos no habían existido nunca, afirmando, con un áspero silencio unánime, la ilusión del movimiento, el pecado de la posibilidad, el absurdo de inspiración diabólica de la indeterminación.

Encima, otro día azul, (en el piso de arriba) el cuarto empapelado con caras rosadas de perros con gorros verdes, y el cajón de los botones, sólo las apariciones se mueven a la perfección, ¡eso es! Ruega al Señor que no te deje mentir, eso es, Oh espectral *stabat mater* puedo salir a tocar el violín por el pueblo llevando por dentro su lado pecador y ni un alma a la vista. Las campanas de la iglesia coagulaban el aire, dejándolo caer en fragmentos afilados. Se sentó a la mesa en su sitio, disculpado por la caída de los pesos de las campanas, e inmóvil cuando dejaron de sonar. Eso es, vieja casa del párroco, enhorabuena refugio mío, el lado sano exterior protegiendo el insano interior: presentar el estático lado sano exterior a otro lado sano exterior, para ser apreciado por ese lado sanoexterno mientras durante todo el tiempo el ladoinsano ataca a tu sanoexterno como si no estuviéramos ambos jugando al mismo juego, y allá va por Summer Street (cantando canciones poco cristianas) el inútil ladopecador, embolsándose un millón limpio llevando por fuera el ladogritador y por dentro el ladodudoso, el ladovil por dentro y el ladoviolín por fuera saltando bailando y prediciendo cosas venideras también acudid todos los fieles, lo que es tuyo a ti restituimos.

Tragó un poco de jerez oloroso, y su cálido curso le produjo una superposición de escalofríos en la espalda. Inmóvil bajo la ventana, la mesa baja parecía haberse descolorido, una parodia de perfección más Bosch que Hieronymus, los siete pecados capitales con complacencia medie-mal, pintados con cuidado condenatorio en torno a la mano amputada erecta en el *caveat*, como debajo el pardo entablado, y arriba los ángulos elaborados donde se juntaban las molduras con sucia y perlada intimidad, en medio los desvaídos recuadros desiguales de las paredes, y hasta una desconocida lámpara de pie erguida a su lado con la fría resolución de un centinela anónimo, vigilando, pacientes en todo caso con su prolija presencia ahora que habían acabado los años de espera, recompensados al encontrarlo doblado en tamaño, doblemente difícil de esconder. Ninguna parte de la habitación que no pudiera ver ahora, puntos y ángulos atentos que nunca había visto desde su silla lo veían ahora.

Levantó la copa. El rastro de sangre del dorso de su mano se había secado, formando una costra dura de sucio aspecto, hipóstasis en el exterior y la piel atraída hacia ella con mortales reparaciones, un coágulo del sedimento esencial encostrado en la superficie, postilla hipostática del mundo de formas y olores dotada de fuerza y materia para tocar una línea sin cambiarla, aquí, sin sufrir el tormento de la música, donde como en todas partes la materia despertaba su apetito de forma y era fácilmente saciada, circunspecta, bajos niveles de perfección provocando el tono compungido de la voz monogenética, La prosperidad de los piadosos ofenderá la vista de los inicuos, Salmo 112, «Habrá en su casa haciendas y riquezas: y su rectitud perdurará por siempre», gimiendo, inclinándose sobre la página impresa (cabeza gacha), Salmo 112, «¡GLORIA!» canta la soprano de Haendel, «¡Gloria!» por encima del océano y los siglos, «¡gloria!» a lo lejos.

Un agudo campanilleo procedente de la cocina estremeció el aire un instante. Luego, mientras sus dedos soltaban la copa vacía y apoyaba el codo en la mesa y con él el brazo y el hombro y todo aquel costado de su cuerpo, sus grupos musculares quedaron uno tras otro inactivos, e invertida la conciencia maquinal de las sensaciones de flexión y tensión (como el hombre que corta leña por primera vez en su vida, con una mano firmemente apretada justo debajo de la hoja del hacha, midiendo la longitud del mango entre manos cerradas, cae a pico, ninguna de las manos se mueve sobre el mango pulido por el roce de muchas manos, la hoja golpea un nudo, el extremo del mango su rodilla, y levanta la vista, pese a todo complacido, para decir: «Vaya, estoy usando músculos… —por la noche te dirá, y no sin orgullo, que se ha dislocado un tendón en alguna parte indiferente de su cuerpo—… usando músculos que no sabía que tuviera…», y no los descubre al golpear sino al recuperarse), del mismo modo partiendo del cuello, recuperándose de tan largo uso, sus músculos y tendones cobraron uno tras otro una conciencia desacostumbrada, y uno tras otro comprobaron ahora que se había quedado dormido.

El reverendo Gwyon volvió a la mesa del desayuno con las manos vacías. Se sobresaltó levemente al ver vacía la silla de su izquierda, y no pareció más sosegado al ver ocupada la de su derecha. Así que el reverendo Gwyon se sentó solo a la cabecera de la mesa, como hacía cada mañana, ante una segunda, una tercera y una cuarta copa del oscuro jerez oloroso de España, con la expresión en la cara de un hombre que acaba de encontrar una espina en un bocado de pescado.

—«Ah, aquella vieja Biblia querida de mi madre, Donde ella mi nombre escribió, Y me señaló muchos textos sagrados, Que antaño bien sabía citar yo…».

Estas palabras, que se elevaban en el claro aire matinal de Nueva Inglaterra, no eran ni claras ni sonoras,

pues el Carpintero del Pueblo estaba absorto en su trabajo, y los cinco clavos de diez centavos que tenía metidos entre las encías no facilitaban el canto como los dientes, aun siendo tan pocos, habrían podido hacer. Siguió dando martillazos, y la siguiente estrofa se fue haciendo más clara palabra a palabra, a medida que se iba sacando los clavos de la boca para hundirlos en la madera. Cuando llegó a la última estrofa, y retrocedió para contemplar su obra, tenía ya la boca enteramente vacía de todo lo que no fuera la canción, que brotó con toda claridad, y el perrito que estaba allí tumbado levantó la cabeza para escuchar:

> Así que ¿quién quiere una Biblia?
> Venderla ansío con premura.
> Vivamos lo que vivamos, hoy beberemos:
> No hay bebida en la sepultura.

Diciendo esto arrojó el martillo hacia el perro. El perro, con la rapidez del martillo, se levantó y le siguió por el césped meneando el rabo.

Janet estaba en la cocina, envejecida, con los hombros cuadrados, la barbilla oscura y el resto de la cara ligeramente azul a causa de aquel compuesto de mercurio del botiquín de tía May, renovado año tras año. Se acercó resueltamente al fogón, donde había dos cacerolas sobre el fuego. La que removió, con una cuchara grande que a fuerza de remover se había desgastado hasta cuadrarse, contenía gachas de harina de avena. La otra cacerola burbujeaba, y la única atención que le prestó Janet fue oler el vapor que de ella brotaba, tras lo cual volvió las amplias facciones de su cara, plegando el labio superior hasta cubrir casi las encías, y aparentemente sin respirar, cuidadosa y preocupada por muchas cosas.

Cuando llegó el Carpintero del Pueblo estaba de rodillas en el suelo, y él, que oyendo al acercarse el agudo campanilleo había reducido su paso desigual, se detuvo respetuosamente en la puerta. Esperó a que se levantara antes de entrar en la cocina diciendo: «En tus oraciones, ninfa, recuerda todos mis pecados», y acercándose luego a la otra cacerola puesta sobre el fuego, añadió: «Como dijo Tom Swift».

—¡Ese tenedor no, ese tenedor no! —dijo Janet, acercándose a quitarle el tenedor que había cogido.

—Pues… vaya —dijo él, con un gesto de desamparo que no lo abandonó hasta que ella le puso un trozo de listón en la mano de la que había cogido el tenedor—. Pero esto está manchado de pintura —dijo entonces, agitando el larguero en el aire.

—Pintura vieja vieja, vieja de años y años y dura y seca y era blanca —dijo ella con aire cansado, hablando en voz baja y seca sin esforzarse por hacerse oír, pero dándole de todas formas la satisfacción de verle mover los labios. Luego se volvió y se inclinó, atribulada por tantas cosas que atender.

Él se inclinó con aire absorto sobre la otra cacerola, de la que sacó algo humeante con la punta del larguero.

—Pues vaya —musitó, lo dejó caer y lo removió un poco—. La ropa interior de un mes no se limpia en un minuto.

—Cuatro días lleva ahí —dijo Janet distraídamente—, cuatro días al año, llorando a la hija de Jefté cuatro días al año…

Él siguió removiendo el contenido de su cacerola.

—Hoy has empezado tarde —interrumpió finalmente, mientras ella cobraba aliento para seguir y luchar en las batallas de Amón y Galaad, para ir tras la hija de Jefté llorando su virginidad por los montes. Su única respuesta fueron tres golpes secos con la cuchara en el borde del cazo.

—Llevabas tres minutos de retraso cuando oí ponerse en marcha tu imprenta —siguió el Carpintero del Pueblo, dirigiéndose al bulto cuadrado de su espalda—. Cuántas páginas has impreso, dime.

—No se imprimen una dos tres cuatro cinco —le contestó sin volverse—, seis siete ocho nueve diez once…

—¿Cuántas? —dijo, intentando verle los labios mientras cogía un tazón.

—Ocho uno cinco cuatro a la vez —dijo Janet con el mismo tono apagado—, dos siete tres seis a la vez…

—Pues vaya —musitó él, meneando la cabeza y volviendo a mirar en la cacerola que tenía en el fuego —. Todos tenemos que hacer nuestro trabajo.

—El Señor nos sustenta hasta que lo terminemos —dijo Janet.

La forma de aquellas tres primeras sílabas en sus labios pareció afectarlo como algo familiar, y el Carpintero del Pueblo apretó con fuerza los suyos, frenando el argumento que aguardaba impaciente tras ellos, pero no antes, sin embargo, de que su incitación escapara:

—Un hombre…

—El Señor…

—Un hombre debe correr sus propios riesgos —soltó rápidamente.

Janet se lo quedó mirando con aire preocupado, la frente y los labios fruncidos.

—Pues vaya, no quería decir nada. No pretendía faltarte al respeto —dijo él, que duplicaba su edad pero no por eso era más serio, ni siquiera ahora que se volvía lentamente con los brazos colgando y el botón superior de su ropa interior destacando como un tachón sobre su atuendo informal—. Después de todo —dijo gravemente—, después de tu curación milagrosa, que me devolvió el uso de las piernas, bueno, pues vaya, después de eso no podría faltarte al respeto.

—No a mí, sino a nuestro Señor que lo curó.

—Pues vaya —asintió él con un murmullo—, después de eso no.

—No debería hablar así de esas cosas —dijo ella—. Tú no deberías, él no debería, ellos no deberían…

—¿Te acuerdas de aquel hombrecillo tan raro, el viajante que vendía cepillos —dijo el Carpintero del Pueblo, iniciando una nueva conversación en vista de que había perdido el hilo de la anterior—, y que dijo al reverendo que era maniqueo…?

Janet salió por la puerta con un tazón de gachas. En cuanto salió, él cogió el tenedor que le había quitado y volvió a la cacerola que tenía en el fuego. Se inclinó para apartar el vapor soplando y luego arponeó dos veces, sacando cada una de ellas una patata cocida. Se pasó rápidamente el tenedor por la rodillera del pantalón, luego se lo quedó mirando, así como la mancha en su rodillera, con expresión casi culpable, y se metió los dientes del tenedor bajo la camisa para limpiarlos allí. Cuando volvió Janet, el tenedor estaba donde lo había dejado; pero no reparó en el hombre, que se estaba comiendo una de las patatas cocidas, ni en el perro, que inclinado sobre la otra esperaba a que se enfriase. Se quedó allí parada, retorciéndose las manos, con los ojos abiertos como platos.

—Pues vaya, ¿qué pasa? —preguntó el Carpintero del Pueblo, mirándola.

—Ha venido.

—¿Qué pasa ahora?

—Está aquí. Ha venido, como dijo.

El Carpintero del Pueblo se quedó inmóvil, absorbiendo la excitación de Janet. Ella sacó otro tazón.

—¿Otro tazón? —preguntó él con aire confuso—. ¿Ha venido alguien?

—Ha vuelto.

—De modo que no era la sombra sin peso de un cura lo que había allí, eso o el vendedor de cepillos maniqueo. ¿Es… es…?

—Él…

—¿El Preste Juan?

—¡El Preste Juan! —repitió Janet—. Si el Preste Juan es joven y viejo, y caliente y frío, y respira y no respira, tiene sangre en la mano, y ve sin abrir los ojos. ¡Maran-atha!

—¡Ha venido! Pues vaya —dijo el Carpintero del Pueblo—. Dale de comer. Dale de comer bien, es un largo viaje. Toma, una patata, toma una patata… —Pero ya había salido con otro tazón de gachas—. Pues vaya, ni una falta de respeto después de eso —musitó el Carpintero del Pueblo, acercándose a la puerta de salida—. Bajará. Lo esperaré ahí —dijo entre dientes; pero se quedó en la puerta hasta que Janet volvió a la cocina—. Vaya —murmuró entonces—, ni una falta de respeto, ya sabes. «No soy más que un terrón de barro, pero me pusieron junto a una rosa y cogí su fragancia…».

Se quedó un momento mirando a Janet, atareada sobre el fregadero de metal, torciendo la vista para mirarla. Luego el perro salió tras él por la puerta y lo siguió por el prado hacia la cochera, llevándose su patata caliente. Sólo había bajado la mitad de la cuesta cuando la voz de Janet atravesó el aire deteniéndolo, y se volvió.

—¿Y él, ha comido él? —gritó.

—Ése no quiere acercarse —gritó en respuesta el Carpintero del Pueblo, señalando hacia la valla que partía de la cochera y deslindaba el pastizal. La propiedad de aquel terreno, largamente disputada con un vecino, había recaído en el toro que pasaba los días allí y poco a poco se había convertido en una presencia familiar, incitado por la chica y el anciano con una cebadera e incluso, al final, con un pesebre en la cochera. Ahora salió Janet sin abrigarse a la fría mañana, y bajó la cuesta a grandes zancadas hasta la valla, donde hizo un ruido quejumbroso que provocó la inmediata aparición del toro. Era un toro enteramente negro, cuyos cuartos delanteros sostenían airosamente el peso de las prominencias musculosas que abultaban la gran masa de su cuello. Se acercaba sin esfuerzo, sin malgastar un movimiento, porque todo su cuerpo estaba en movimiento, un movimiento que absorbía su peso y lo convertía en avance sobre unas patas tan delgadas que por debajo parecían muñecas de hombre girando. Avanzaba ligeramente ladeado, lo

que le daba cierta sensación de deriva, como si estuviera resistiendo el viento que le empujaba por detrás; y su gran peso no se puso de manifiesto hasta que estuvo muy cerca, cuando hasta su aliento brotó al aire frío cargado de peso, y una pezuña que ya no iba a la deriva, sino que se afanaba en romper la corteza del suelo invernal, reveló la voluntad propia de su fuerza en reposo.

Janet había observado su avance con una expresión de asombro íntimo que casi quebró su cara en una sonrisa. Ahora que lo tenía delante removió con su mano cuadrada la comida de la cebadera y abismó sus dos ojos en uno; y no quedó claro cuál de los dos hizo el suave ruido que se alzó entre ambos cuando ella pasó un dedo por un rizo encima del ojo, y luego dejó al toro ante la cebadera, poniéndose seria mientras volvía hacia la casa, y el toro levantó la cabeza, y miró cómo se alejaba.

El Carpintero del Pueblo cogió un dos por cuatro y lo clavó cuidadosa y ligeramente desviado.

—¡Oh barcos piratas del piélago borracho! ¡Oh enormes cruceros tomados con engaño…! Pues vaya. Por fin ha venido.

Una vez dentro, Janet cruzó la cocina y se dirigió al comedor, donde cogió el tazón de gachas vacío del sitio vacío a la cabecera de la mesa y se quedó mirando la figura que tenía enfrente. «Ha venido», murmuró, y alargó una mano vacía en el aire. Luego acortó la mirada hasta la mano, que giró en redondo para enfocarla, para mirar la palma, y volvió a la cocina. Dejó el tazón vacío en el fregadero. Luego se puso unos guantes, se sacó un trozo de tela de esmeril del bolsillo de la falda, y arrodillándose empezó a frotarse la barbilla, la mejilla y el labio superior.

El sol estaba ya lo bastante alto para llenar de luz el comedor, derramándose sobre la mesa oscura y la mesa baja que había bajo la ventana, y calentándole la nuca cuando despertó sin mover más que los párpados, al abrir los cuales encontró delante el tazón de gachas de avena frías y nada más, aparte de una cuchara. Se quedó un momento, o un minuto, mirando el tazón y la cuchara, en esa suspensión del tiempo del despertar en la que la coordinación es imposible, en la que cada fragmento de la realidad se impone por sí mismo, separadamente, penetrando con estruendo, y la mente intenta agarrar cada uno al paso, sintiendo que esas cosas podrían entenderse una a una, de modo inconexo, si se pudiera detener la corriente antes de que se convierta en un torrente, y la mente se sumerja en la totalidad de la conciencia. Al-Shira-al-jamânija, considera la estrella Sirio: ¿muerte?, o Islam. Luego diamantes perfectos, y así cruzó esa antesala de insoportable soledad, y despertó del todo, sobresaltándose sólo por el silencio y la luz del sol cargada de motas en callado movimiento. Si había tenido un sueño, había vuelto a su lugar de origen para renovar su atrezo, probablemente para ser refundido, posiblemente reescrito, expurgado para hacerlo comprensible, memorable para el público y aceptable para el censor, pero todo ello con el mismo viejo director, el mismo empresario, esperando para disimular las mismas obscenidades ante el mismo público cautivo, que espera a que se alce de nuevo el telón del sueño. Sonrió mirando las gachas, y mientras lo hacía levantó una mano como para sentir la sonrisa en su cara y fijarla allí; había desaparecido ya cuando levantó la vista hacia el otro extremo de la mesa y lo encontró vacío, e inmediatamente ocupado por la memoria, pero una memoria que, asaltada de modo tan brusco, retrocedió de un salto demasiado lejos, y exhumó al emperador Valeriano cegado, tieso de dolor, desollado por orden de Sapor, el emperador persa que combatió el cristianismo en nombre del profeta del sol Zoroastro, cuyo dios, Ormuz, señor de la luz y del bien, guerrea sin tregua con Arimán y las huestes del mal.

Aquella casa estaba envuelta en un aire de duelo, aunque hacía mucho tiempo que nadie había nacido o muerto en ella. Los pasillos vibraban con opresiva familiaridad y, quizá fuera la distancia que cubría cada paso, la sensación de difusión persistía, difusión de la infancia esencial, moviéndose demasiado deprisa, demasiado despacio, descansando físicamente, llegando demasiado pronto sin gasto o latidos de esfuerzo, ocupando demasiado espacio y por tanto menos en vez de más poderosa, menos capaz de ocultarse.

Al pasar ante la enhiesta mano mutilada, o ante la desnarigada Olalla, sentía el impulso de detenerse y apoyar la mano sobre las cosas, afirmando su masa; y cada una pesaba bastante en respuesta, resistiendo su contacto, para afirmar su realidad, es decir, para desmentir las realidades que habían ocupado su lugar.

Dejad que la bárbara infancia dé y reciba despiadadamente; la edad civilizada aprende a proteger lo que tiene, a no dar ni aceptar nada gratis, a confiar en su propia desconfianza más que en la fe, y en los otros intrigantes más que en el inocente. Al fin y al cabo, la intriga es racional, algo en lo que la mente puede hincar el diente, y derrotarlo con la buena digestión de la razón, un panorama sin esperanza para el corazón desdentado, y sabe Dios lo que hará después la inocencia. De modo que la prudencia rescata las emociones, y las destierra a un lugar inalcanzable, permitiendo solo ansiosas ojeadas desde lo que otro héroe salió del desierto para llamar «el séquito vacilante de los matices más sutiles».

En el oscuro pasillo donde estaba Olalla en su nicho apoyó la yema de un pulgar en la nariz rota de la santa, y sonrió, la misma sonrisa involuntaria de reconocimiento que había iluminado su cara, y la había

abandonado y había vuelto, demorándose y extendiéndose un poco más cada vez, tanteando el terreno desconocido, desde su llegada.

La infancia lleva el corazón en la mano: nada se acerca a ella sin establecer una relación de intimidad. Son los visos de la experiencia los que abren paso a las sombras del miedo, pero el blanco y negro de la infancia descubre la intimidad del terror. Aquí, la benigna Olalla aguanta el saqueo de su cara con melancólica gravedad en sus ojos de piedra, vacíos ahora del rencor vengativo con que amenazaba de ciega justicia a los incautos que pasaban ante ella; y la mano, levantada antaño para aplastar sus cráneos, aparece ahora mansamente alzada en un gesto de bendición. ¿Qué mayor consuelo permite el tiempo que reencontrar los objetos del terror, y ver su fraudulencia expuesta a la luz violenta de la razón? ¡Triunfo!, como si hubiera algo más limpio, o más feliz, o más exento de desilusión que el choque amortiguador del rencuentro con el objeto del amor.

Canciones de inocencia y experiencia llenan la cabeza tan vacía de dolor que el dolor está olvidado, un alboroto, pero ordenado, una secuencia de decorosa violencia tan pulcramente desarrollada como la pelea entre los Pensamientos Agradables y Desagradables en la *Almira* de Haendel.

No había ningún reloj a la vista o al alcance del oído.

—Y ejemmm… lo hizo, ¿no? Y se llevó los caballos que los reyes de Judá habían regalado al sol, al entrar en la casa del Señor por la Cámara de Natán-melech…, ejemm, ¿Melech?, ¿Melich?, el chambelán, que estaba en los suburbios, y quemó con fuego los carros del sol…

Estas palabras, transportadas desde detrás de la puerta del despacho por el picante vehículo de la alcaravea, llegaron al pasillo cuando estaba a punto de llamar.

—Y depuso a los sacerdotes idólatras, y ejemmm a quienes los reyes de Judá habían ordenado quemar incienso en los lugares elevados de las ciudades de Judá, y en los alrededores de Jerusalén; los que también quemaron incienso ejemmm ejemmmf ante Baal, ante el sol, y ante la luna, y ante los planetas, y ante la entera hueste celestial…

Aunque las palabras cesaron, la alcaravea, descargada pero manteniendo una calma beligerante, siguió llegando al pasillo, donde bajó la mano sin llamar. Luego, volviendo la espalda a la puerta, se dijo en voz alta:

—Qué a salvo estoy aquí de accidentes.

—En la preciosa sangre de…

—¡Janet!

—Sí —contestó ella con un susurro claro y fuerte—, sabía que volverías.

Se quedó parada ante él con las manos enguantadas apretadas, y los ojos brillando a la escasa luz que había en el pasillo. Él hizo ademán de seguir adelante, diciendo:

—Mi padre…

—Todavía te aguarda —asintió ella ansiosamente—. Nuestro Padre…

—Janet —dijo rodeándola, y le sonrió, para calmar la gran agitación que, mientras le seguía lo más cerca posible sin tocarle, amenazaba con estallar en alguna expresión de bienvenida más vehemente—, sí, he vuelto.

—Los rabinos dudaron —dijo ella—. Yo no.

—Sí, verte aquí y… —titubeó—, yo… mi padre… —retrocediendo ante ella—, vuelto…

—¡De la tumba! —susurró ella claramente.

—Sí, en… en cierto modo —musitó, llegando a la puerta—, recuperándome de… Dios santo, yo…

Empezó a sacudir torpemente el picaporte a su espalda, y ella se mantuvo a distancia, reflejando tras de sí los vigilantes ángulos del maderaje.

—La… sensación tranquilizadora —siguió, agitando la mano en el aire entre ambos—, estar de nuevo en casa… —aunque el forcejeo con la puerta tapaba sus palabras para ella—, aquí, sentirme de nuevo yo mismo, aquí…

—No te conocerán.

—La razón por la que he vuelto…

—¿Debo decirles que eres tú, que has vuelto?

El frío del exterior le abrazó por detrás. «Yo… yo…». Empezó a tiritar contra él.

—¿O se lo dirás tú, a tu debido tiempo? —preguntó dando un paso hacia él.

—Sí, sí —dijo cerrando la puerta entre ambos, y dejando encerrada con ella en el oscuro pasillo su afirmación conspiratoria, profundamente sumisa.

Los retazos de nube que el alba había revelado flotando a la deriva sin propósito aparente se agrupaban aquí y allá, ahora que el cielo estaba iluminado. Una delegación de ellos bogaba hacia el este, hacia el sol; y

otros, oscuramente recortados al oeste, conspiraban juntos sobre el Monte de la Lamentación, hacia donde alzó los ojos. Era la más prominente de una cadena de colinas onduladas, erguida contra el único horizonte despejado; y algo tan simple había sido el horizonte tras el cual yacía el destino. El aire frío empezó de nuevo a apuñalarle a cada respiración. Fuera cual fuera su dirección en un mapa, era tras el Monte de la Lamentación donde estaba Laponia, aguardando el Evangelio. Dejó caer su peso paso a paso, a trompicones, mientras sus pies le frenaban por la empinada cuesta hacia la cochera; y allí, como dentro de la casa, resultaba notable la distancia que cubrían unos pocos pasos, cada uno una medida familiar de compulsión, pero sin la sensación del movimiento, de la carrera que aquella pendiente escarpada había impuesto antaño.

El Carpintero del Pueblo estaba en su plataforma, con una expresión ligeramente distraída pero aún expectante en la cara. De modo muy parecido, quizá, al del buen rey Wenceslao de Bohemia cuando contemplaba su capital inmóvil, postrada ante él por interdicto papal, el Carpintero del Pueblo contemplaba el pueblo extendido a sus pies bajo el frío inmóvil, provocado por su silencio diligente; y aquí, como allí, pendiente del hombre pálido y delgado de humilde atuendo que se acercaba.

Pero aunque el espectro de John Huss hubiera podido saltar hasta aquí desde más allá del Monte de la Lamentación para descubrirse con vida, dando diente con diente, los hombros encorvados hacia adelante y hasta las manos hundidas buscando calor en bolsillos vacíos más fríos contra los duros miembros temblorosos del armazón en movimiento que cubría su ropa, aquella perspectiva habría resultado quizá demasiado dura, y peor aún, demasiado familiar, demasiado miserable hasta para aquel esforzado mártir en un día tan frío: más allá una expresión borró otra (el Carpintero del Pueblo se volvió a escupir por encima de la plataforma), y Wenceslao IV, «el vacilante», abdicó y desapareció, y el espectro del mártir desapareció con él.

—¡Ven, no le ladres, por Dios no le ladres! —gritó el Carpintero del Pueblo al perro que saltaba ladrando por encima de una boñiga de toro—. No la cojas —siguió, bajando de la plataforma—. Te meará encima. Pues vaya —concluyó, y erguido sobre su visitante se le quedó mirando con franca y apremiante curiosidad—. Pues vaya —repitió—, sí que pareces cansado, y no me extraña. Viniendo como vienes de Etiopía y las tres Indias.

—¡Etiopía! Dios santo, sí, me siento como si hubiera venido desde tan lejos.

Los ojos del Carpintero del Pueblo brillaron mientras escuchaba fingiendo oír.

—Sabía que tarde o temprano llegarías, por supuesto —dijo—. ¿Y vienes solo? —Se acercó inclinándose, atento al gesto de cabeza afirmativo que recibió—. Sabía que vendrías así, por supuesto —siguió entonces —. Viajar hoy día con diez mil caballeros y cien mil infantes complicaría mucho las cosas.

A pesar de todo, el Carpintero del Pueblo parecía un poco decepcionado.

—Haber vuelto, me… bueno, gracias a Dios que he vuelto.

El Carpintero del Pueblo observó cómo se pasaba una mano por la barbilla y sonreía.

—Vuelto —repitió el Carpintero del Pueblo, apartándose para mirar al cielo por encima de ambos—, por supuesto, una vez hemos vuelto podemos reanudar las costumbres que nos son propias. Pero aquí… —barrió con la mano el panorama que tenía ante sí—, aquí, por supuesto, no tienen ni idea de lo que es un héroe. Vivo rodeado de gente que no tiene ni idea de lo que es un héroe. ¿Y sabes por qué? Bueno, porque no tienen ni idea de lo que están haciendo. ¡Ni idea! Ni la menor idea en este mundo o el siguiente de lo que están haciendo sobre la verde tierra de Dios. Oh, es una extraña tierra la que has venido a visitar para verme. Ni la menor idea de lo que es un héroe, sabes, pero los necesitan tanto que inventan juegos especiales, golpear una pelota con un palo y toda clase de tonterías, y los hombres que ganan esos juegos son sus héroes. Y luego —siguió, acalorándose con lo que al parecer era para él una profunda preocupación —, cuando se cansan de eso, organizan guerras enteras que no tienen más razón de ser que la gente que lucha en ellas, y un muchacho puede convertirse en héroe luchando por una vida que por primera vez vale algo, al estar bajo la amenaza de perderla, o bien muriendo para salvar las vidas de gente que no sabe qué hacer con ellas. Afortunadamente —siguió, y se acercó un poco más inclinando la cabeza—, hay una salida para la mayoría de ellos. Ganan dinero —susurró roncamente el Carpintero del Pueblo—. Y es bueno que puedan echar mano de ese recurso, pues les da algo que hacer, los mantiene apartados de nuestro camino. —Se enderezó, contemplando la plataforma de su globo aerostático, con los brazos todavía cruzados y unos sucios codos de camiseta asomándole por las mangas. Apretó con fuerza los labios sobre las encías, y asintió con la cabeza—. Afortunadamente, cada siglo más o menos aparecen hombres como tú y yo para mantener despejado el camino. Pero —gritó mientras se acercaba al rincón de la cochera y empezaba a desabrocharse la bragueta— debemos tener cuidado con ellos, sabes, para que no se entrometan. Porque —dijo agitando la mano libre hacia la plataforma del globo— intentan entrometerse. Viajando en sus trenes y sus aviones intentan entrometerse en la mayor empresa de un héroe. Sí, viajar se ha convertido en la gran ocupación de

la gente que no tiene nada que hacer, y encuentras dedicada a ella a reyes de segunda mano y a toda clase de gente inútil. Pues vaya, siempre te los encuentras estorbando en los lugares heroicos, tratando de sacar tajada de la labor de los hombres grandes, contemplando buena pintura y hablando como si supieran más del cuadro que el hombre que lo pintó, y lo mismo escuchando buena música, porque sospechan la verdad, pero no quieren pagar el precio, todos ellos sospechan que un hombre necesita algo que hacer —concluyó, erguido sobre la leve nube de vapor que dejó elevándose de las tablas grises de la cochera.

—¿Algo que hacer? La mayoría de los problemas que hay en el mundo los causa la gente que encuentra algo que hacer.

—Pues vaya —dijo el Carpintero del Pueblo, abrochándose la bragueta mientras se volvía, y asintiendo con la cabeza como si hubiera oído—. Por supuesto que usan mal las cosas, todas las cosas buenas que tenemos y hacemos y descubrimos, y son las mejores las que peor se usan. Los generales y los misioneros y… pero no podemos perder el tiempo con ellos —dijo alzando los ojos de la plataforma del globo al cielo —, sólo se puede hacer una cosa con un globo.

—¿Subir? Sólo se puede hacer una cosa cuando llegas allí arriba.

—¿Peligro? No saben lo que quiere decir, sentados allí arriba en sus aviones, y sorprendidos cuando caen del cielo. Bueno, no les da tiempo a asustarse, están tan sorprendidos, los suben con tanto cuidado, asegurados contra accidentes. Bueno, sus cabezas se despachurran como melones antes de que se den cuenta de lo que les ha pasado, sentados allí arriba con sus trajes de negocios a sesenta millas por hora preguntándose si a sus plumas se les saldrá la tinta, y luego aparecen desparramados por veinte acres de tierra ajena. No, no es el peligro. Es la soledad. Es la soledad el precio que no quieren pagar. —El Carpintero del Pueblo se quedó absorto durante cosa de un minuto, y el viento que acababa de levantarse sonó en torno a la esquina de la cochera. Alzó la vista hacia el sol, que se había enredado en una nube de forma muy parecida a un camello, un camello al que sin duda le sobraban patas, pero como el Carpintero del Pueblo se apresuró a señalar—: Bactriano. —Se quedaron mirándolo. El sol asomó casi entre las dos jorobas y luego, a juzgar por la velocidad de las cosas allí arriba, dio la impresión de que intentaba escapar, mostrando su cuerpo a lo largo del efímero borde como si fuera a desprenderse en cualquier instante—. Mira cómo sale, mira cómo sale —dijo el Carpintero del Pueblo, el cuerpo ladeado. Luego se volvió y dijo con un tono de confidencia y conmiseración—: La gran desgracia del sol es que no tiene historia. Por eso nunca se siente solo allí arriba.

Luego, con una agilidad sorprendente, rodeó la plataforma del globo, y desde el otro lado lo llamó:

—¿Esto? ¿Ves esto? Lo tengo escondido, todos están muy interesados en ello, la Legión Americana… — Agitó en el aire un tubo de dos pulgadas de ancho montado sobre un pivote—. Los he visto huroneando por aquí para mirar por esto, pero cuando no encuentran lentes dentro creen que lo he desmontado. Por supuesto que nunca tuvo lentes, no hacen más que confundir las cosas.

—Entonces ¿qué es?

—Sí, como no saben lo que están buscando, por supuesto no ven nada, merodeando por ahí a la luz del día. Hay tanta luz natural que no se puede ver nada allí arriba, a menos que abras un camino a través de ella. Vaya, una tarde de buen tiempo vi Aldebarán, el rojo Ojo del Toro, vigilando las Pléyades, sabes. Eso significa que es una estrella muy vieja, que sea así de roja. Sí, el rojo Ojo de Tauro —murmuró mientras volvía—, vigilándolas. Hace falta vigilarlas un poco, a las Pléyades… ¿Sabes? Una noche me atacaron en la oscuridad. Un hombre me golpeó de lleno entre los ojos, ¿y sabes lo que hizo ese golpe? Su fuerza me llenó de luz los ojos, y después lo identifiqué, lo vi con toda la claridad posible. Su gorra de la Legión Americana apareció con toda la claridad posible. —Entonces miró a su alrededor de manera evasiva—. Dime —dijo, acercándose de nuevo—, ¿te has traído tu gran Espejo?

—¿Espejo…?

—Pues vaya, imagino que no es fácil de transportar. El gran espejo en el que puedes ver todo lo que ocurre en tus reinos. Pero… lo necesitamos aquí —dijo encorvándose para acercarse un poco más, y echando otra rápida ojeada a su alrededor—, por la Legión Americana. Me vigilan todo el tiempo, sabes. Muy interesados, muy interesados en esto, por supuesto. —Abarcó con un gesto la plataforma del globo—. Aunque no es ningún secreto. Vaya, más de una noche han venido a acechar la casa. Con tu gran espejo podríamos tenerlos vigilados —concluyó el Carpintero del Pueblo, y observó atentamente cómo se registraba los bolsillos hasta que salió la pitillera de oro, vacía—. ¡Para los mensajes! —exclamó, cogiéndola —. Y con la inscripción secreta. Pues vaya, más tarde me la explicarás —dijo pasando el pulgar por las palabras; luego, con una súbita proeza de ilusionismo, la pitillera de oro desapareció entre los pliegues delanteros de su ropa, y un gran reloj de bolsillo apareció abierto en su mano—. Por supuesto que te habría reconocido en cualquier parte —dijo alzando sus ojos brillantes de la esfera del reloj—. Pues vaya, las once

y media. Más tarde simplificaremos las cosas. Bueno, todos los demás se están ahogando en detalles. Eso es lo que les pasa, sabes. En eso somos más listos que ellos. Debemos simplificar…

El viento se llevó sus palabras mientras se alejaba. El perro lo siguió. Antes de que se perdiera de vista se oyó el retumbo del trueno, rodando como un cuerpo para descansar en el sur. El Carpintero del Pueblo agitó el puño en aquella dirección, pero sin aflojar el paso.

El viento se había levantado de modo bastante brusco. Empezó a soplar con esa terrible propiedad característica del viento invernal, su falta de sentido, que no le hace menos cortante. Los vientos de marzo tienen cierto sentido borrascoso, arrastran semillas y vainas, se llevan los blancos síntomas pustulosos del invierno, despertándolo todo, preparándolo para el crecimiento; y en otoño tienen un sentido vengativo, mientras quede una hoja donde creció; pero el viento invernal no arrastra nada, no lleva nada a ninguna parte, y sopla con violencia destructora donde no queda nada por destruir, virulenta y rencorosamente empeñado en no dejar pasar una sola rendija sin meter los dedos dentro. Al levantar la vista, hasta la plataforma del globo es testamento de algo, erecta con la estúpida paciencia de los objetos así violados, un testimonio que parece fútil como el propio viento en su codicia, tan pronto desdeñado como ansiado luego. Las nubes que conspiraban sobre el Monte de la Lamentación habían perdido sus nítidos contornos y formaban una masa oscura, como si lo que había más allá estuviera sufriendo ya lo que el viento, aunque solo fuera para justificarse, amenazaba hacer más cerca. Soplaba por las esquinas de la cochera, sobre la nieve cuajada en el túmulo de lo que había sido el estercolero de la cocina desde que guardaba memoria, sobre la nieve encostrada en la tierra tras la cochera, mostrando su superficie aquí y allá como si aquella tierra nunca hubiera sido perturbada, como si la superficie fuera lo único de ella que existía.

Encogió todavía más los hombros, y estuvo a punto de perder el equilibrio mientras volvía la espalda a aquella desolación donde algo se movía con la súbita soltura sin esfuerzo de una aparición, indiferente a la inercia, ajeno a esa ingeniosa disposición de músculo y tendón, peso e intención cuya falta de coincidencia amenazaba ahora con derribarlo. Hizo el gesto que habría podido hacer si hubiera tenido un bastón en la mano y esperase que lo sostuviera; y luego giró como un hombre amenazado a un lado por lo mismo de lo que ha salido huyendo desde el otro. No quedaba tiempo para preguntarse si la cochera vacía había insuflado vida al espectro de Heracles, canturreando a la cabeza de una excursión misional más allá de las montañas; o si John Huss se había acercado por aquella lejana dirección para prevenir a los ya bautizados contra los falsos milagros y la codicia eclesiástica, y exhortarlos a buscar en cambio la evidencia tangible de la presencia de Cristo en Su mundo perdurable; o si ambos se habían reunido en el horizonte para fundirse, o competir, o simplemente comparar sus mercancías; no quedaba tiempo, pues al levantar la vista encontró delante al toro, con su gran cabeza erguida contra el viento y la tormenta con que amenazaba, los grandes globos de sus ojos abiertos de par en par, surcados de una red de venas rojas. De dónde había salido, o con qué fin, sus propiedades fortuitas y las preguntas que habrían podido hacerse un día de junio: nada de esto provocó la aparición del toro. Al llegar a la valla volvió los cuartos traseros y se detuvo allí, con una parada desafiante que retó al viento y lo dejó consumirse en su propia violencia.

—Día de ira será aquél, día de angustia y de congoja, día de ruina y desolación, día de tiniebla y oscuridad, día de sombras y densos nublados… —A solas en su habitación, Janet leía al profeta Sofonías, como habría podido oír cualquiera que hubiera pasado ante su puerta cerrada. Nadie lo hacía—. Y traeré aflicción a los hombres, para que caminen como ciegos, porque han pecado contra el Señor: y su sangre será derramada como polvo, y su carne como estiércol… —El viento paranoico hacía retemblar el cristal a su espalda—. Congregaos todos, sí, congregaos, oh nación no deseada… —El timbre inquebrantable de su voz reiteraba el fervor del profeta cuyas bendiciones seguía por la página, casi sin aliento al ir un paso por delante de él, muy alejada ya del lamento del Nuevo Testamento que la había catequizado por aquellos mismos pasillos, dejando luego que emprendiera sus propias incursiones por los sobresaltos del Antiguo—. El Señor será terrible con ellos: pues matará de hambre a todos los dioses de la tierra; y todos los hombres Lo adorarán, cada uno desde su lugar, incluso en todas las islas de los paganos.

Sofonías despacha su asunto rápidamente. Tres capítulos le bastan, y deja paso a Ageo, que tampoco se anda con linderos y arrabales. A pesar de su ensimismamiento, Janet leía con la confianza del lector del Antiguo Testamento que sabe que a continuación viene el Nuevo, que de hecho está ahí a mano con sus perspectivas más moderadas; igual que podía leer sin trepidación el Nuevo Testamento, sabiendo que cualquier insinuación de caridad vacilante por parte de sus autores se veía reforzada por una Figura que no toleraba ninguna tontería, que estaba al acecho, «afilando uñas y dientes», sobre aviso, entre las tildes y vírgulas inalterables de Su mascarada de setenta y dos letras en el Antiguo. Hageo Lo predice sacudiendo la tierra, los cielos, el mar, los continentes y las naciones, fenomenales payasadas dignificadas aún como actos de Dios, presentadas con una diligencia tan enérgica que el décimo profeta menor se agota en dos capítulos;

pero Janet se dio por contenta por el momento con «cuando yo haga volver a vuestros cautivos ante vuestros ojos, dice el Señor». Una vez concluyeron, sus labios azules siguieron repitiéndolo mientras se levantaba a mirar por el cristal, una ventana alta de la casa que daba a la cochera.

El viento había llegado al colmo del engaño. Ahora, delante mismo de sus ojos, le fue dado algo que hacer; aparecieron copos de nieve, creados por la propia locura del viento. Janet se acercó a la ventana. Con ambas palmas pegadas al cristal, su labio superior se alzó lentamente mientras miraba hacia abajo, donde vio tambalearse como si la atacaran por ambos lados a la figura entre la cochera y el cercado del toro, que luego recuperó el equilibrio, se quedó inmóvil, afianzándose, y echó a andar con lo que al principio pareció gran dificultad, hasta que salió corriendo cuesta arriba hacia la casa y se perdió de vista a su derecha. «Él ha venido», desgranaron sus labios azules; pero el superior descendió hasta la línea de sus dientes, dándole una expresión levemente perpleja, mientras se volvía para salir, dejando tras de sí dos huellas irregulares, casi traslúcidas, en el cristal.

El reverendo Gwyon estaba en el porche mirando hacia el cielo, reflejando en su porte y expresión el desdén del toro por lo que ocurría allí arriba. Sin embargo, en el caso de Gwyon la sencilla majestad del desprecio impersonal del toro por la tormenta quedaba paliada por arrugas de furiosa indignación, como para indicar que aquel celeste alboroto lo habían organizado como afrenta personal hacia él, o hacia alguien de cuyo honor estaba celoso. Gwyon no bajó los ojos hacia la figura que se acercaba por el prado hasta que sus pasos retumbaron en el porche debajo mismo de él, y entonces abandonó la contienda, murmurando algo, y se volvió precipitadamente para abrir la puerta principal.

—¡Por allí…! ¡Quiero decir por aquí! —oyó a su espalda entre un rechinar de dientes.

—Quién… ¿qué pasa? —exclamó Gwyon, mirando con ojos como platos por encima del hombro, con la puerta abierta.

—El terror viene por los dos lados… como ser de nuevo un crío. Sí, eso es, cierra la puerta…

El reverendo Gwyon cerró de golpe la puerta principal, haciendo sonar la campanilla. Luego echó a andar hacia el fondo del pasillo, pero encontró bloqueado el paso. Aunque ninguno de los dos se movió, en torno a ellos sonaban crujidos incesantes que llenaban el pasillo.

—Vaya, es… esta casa está completamente saturada de sacerdocio, de…

—¿Sacerdocio? —repitió Gwyon, buscando un resquicio.

—Pues de ministerio, de sagrado ministerio, ¿eh? Sí, aquí estamos, sin excepción, sólo que yo he llegado tarde. Aquí cada crujido, ¿los oyes?, cada crujido es un crujido de duda, generaciones de ellos, así que yo no soy una excepción, sólo que he llegado tarde. Pero me… para eso me educaron después de todo, ¿no? Esto resulta tan familiar, todo esto resulta tan familiar…

El reverendo Gwyon encontró un resquicio y pasó por él. Inmediatamente empezó a hablar, mientras se dirigía al fondo del pasillo.

—Familiar, sí —comenzó, midiendo sus palabras con el espacio que tenía delante—. La ciencia, la ciencia tiene una estúpida teoría sobre el reconocimiento. La mitad de la parte delantera del cerebro recibe una impresión, dicen, un instante antes que la otra mitad. Cuando llega a la segunda mitad, ¡el cerebro la reconoce! Una sarta de tonterías, por supuesto —se detuvo a decir en confianza—, pero eso da algo que hacer a esos estúpidos científicos, les impide mezclarse en cuestiones importantes que no les conciernen.

El reverendo Gwyon había medido perfectamente esta reflexión, pues llegó a las últimas frases cuando doblaba la esquina de su despacho. Su paso alarmó a las superficies inmóviles de los espejos de la *cruz-con-espejos*, pero demasiado tarde para que lo entorpecieran, pues la última palabra la dijo ya dentro, dejándolas vacías, pero ahora vigilantes. A solas entre libros y papeles amontonados en pilas precarias, el reverendo Gwyon se sentó. Había libros abiertos y cerrados, algunos con veinte tiras de papel entre sus páginas; pasajes subrayados, anotados, tachados. Un revoltijo de revistas y recortes de periódicos lo cubría todo. Junto a una rodilla, un titular decía: «"La ciencia demuestra que Dios existe", declara el papa». Gwyon apoyó un codo sobre un ejemplar del Osservatore Romano. («¿Quién es capaz de clavar los ojos en el sol radiante?». Era aquel número en el que el cardenal Tedeschini atestiguaba la visión papal: «Pero él fue capaz de hacerlo, y durante aquellos días pudo presenciar la vida del sol bajo la mano de María»). Gwyon sacó de un estante a san Juan de la Cruz. («El agitado sol se convulsionó y transformó en una imagen de vida, en un espectáculo de movimientos celestes, y transmitió al Vicario de Cristo mensajes silenciosos pero elocuentes»). Esto atrajo la atención del rabillo del ojo de Gwyon, que se estrechó, y gruñendo con impaciencia lo tapó con otro periódico, el *Scientific American* del 11 de abril de 1891. Por un momento se quedó mirando una foto del doctor Variot y un colega que evacuaban consultas junto a un bebé espetado en un electrodo en un baño electrometalúrgico. «… Mejor que rescatar nuestros cadáveres de los gusanos de la tumba», leyó entre dientes con frívola satisfacción, y se recostó en su asiento mirando hacia la puerta.

La figura dorada del toro estaba a su lado entre los papeles de la mesa. Más allá, al otro lado de las ventanas, el viento flagelaba con nieve las ramas de los tejos. Pero la mirada del reverendo Gwyon no estaba vacía, detenida por aquella superficie en blanco. Miraba como si viera a través de la puerta cerrada, y era plenamente consciente de los dos ojos que, en aquel instante, miraban directamente en línea con los suyos desde el oscuro pasillo, donde los claros espejos de la *cruz-con-espejos* de la pared, a su espalda, habían atrapado y retenían oscuros fragmentos del brazo levantado para llamar.

Gwyon esperó un momento; luego abrió el libro en su regazo, y metió la mano en la cavidad despiadadamente abierta entre las páginas de *La noche oscura del alma.*

> —¡Bebed, bebed! ¡Vaciad, vaciad el vaso!
> Otro eslabón para la Cadena del Diablo,

iba cantando el Carpintero del Pueblo entre los dientes blancos de la violación. Calló durante un momento inquieto mientras se acercaba al monumento a la Guerra Civil, junto al que nunca pasaba con mal tiempo sin adoptar una expresión de intranquila solicitud, aunque había transcurrido casi medio siglo desde el último obstinado vivac de su madre allí.

Ahora que tenía uno, el viento seguía su curso con extravagante júbilo. Arrastraba la nieve a lugares donde solo su fuerza paranoica podía molestarse en acumularla de ese modo; aunque avanzar a través de ella suponía caer en el engaño de la propia tormenta, convirtiéndose en el objeto de su hostilidad, prestar por tanto bruscamente una dimensión validatoria a esta fase maníaca de una realidad que, abandonada a su suerte, reventaría en insensatez. En consecuencia, para redimir estas absurdas extravagancias, que a fin de cuentas es lo propio de un héroe, hace falta una meta digna; entonces la violencia gratuita sólo amenaza ese sendero, y cuando el viento se levanta tanto más digna es la meta, y más heroico el viaje.

La Taberna de la Estación estaba presidida por la cabeza de un ciervo de doce puntas, cuyo gesto de resignación implicaba la comprensión del hecho de que sus cuernas jamás volverían a mudar y a renovarse, un destino paliado por un adorno de tres bombillas navideñas que en aquel momento eran apropiadas a la estación, pero que soportaba con gran paciencia fuera cual fuera el solsticio. «Otium cum dignitate», parecían decir allí arriba los belfos apolillados, y con gran dignidad, teniendo en cuenta sus circunstancias, el ciervo miraba hacia abajo con ojos cubiertos de polvo clavados en el presente.

En aquel preciso instante, este presente estaba siendo engatusado hacia un futuro desfigurado por un hombre que llevaba una mujer tatuada en el brazo izquierdo. Ella descansaba allí mientras él hablaba o escuchaba; pero cuando se interrumpía para levantar el vaso, quedaba estrangulada. Aunque llevaba muchos años sufriendo este trato, lo soportaba torciendo los labios con la misma expresión de sorpresa cada vez que se repetía; y cuando acababa, volvía a adoptar la misma actitud de confiada tranquilidad. (Es verdad que no era completamente inocente: cuando se la volvía hacia otro lado, descubriendo otra porción de su anatomía, adoptaba una pose que nadie que no la conociera hubiera sospechado de su plácida actitud).

—¡Los resurreccionistas! —dijo el hombre, y quedó estrangulada.

—¿Los resurreccionistas? ¿Qué tiene que ver eso con los saqueadores de tumbas? Fue el sermón sobre la medicina hecha con momias. Momias desmenuzadas en polvo para utilizarlas como medicina —dijo un hombre lo más alejado posible de la intemperie, al otro extremo de la barra.

—Ninguno de vosotros ha oído jamás uno de sus sermones —dijo un hombre que estaba en medio—. Os fiais de lo que os repiten vuestras mujeres.

—Y supongo que tú estarías allí en persona, ¿no?

—Sí que estaba. Fue el sermón en el que condenaban al gallo suizo a morir quemado por haber puesto un huevo.

—Mil cuatrocientos setenta y cuatro. También me sé ése.

En todo esto había un aire de rencorosa conspiración; y si las voces se elevaban discutiendo, las insinuaciones se reprimían levemente, lo que sugería, como en toda sociedad totalitaria, paredes con orejas, el ubicuo dictador establecido de antiguo *hic et ubique,* sin disputar ningún billete, pues Él no iba a ninguna parte.

—Pero aquel hombrecillo que vendía cepillos…

—Un maníaco…

—Maniqueo…

—Lo enviaron aquí, pero el Reverendo nos libró de él. «Si el bien y el mal fueran absolutos, todos nosotros seríamos herejes maniqueos», dijo el Reverendo. «Yo estaba allí, entendéis. Si no fuera porque el

mal es una cualidad depravada del bien», dijo el Reverendo, «todos deberíamos ser maniqueos como el pequeño vendedor de cepillos».

—Mira que vender cepillos paganos a personas honradas…

—¡Ja!, en eso te equivocas, pues los maniqueos eran cristianos. Para ellos, dijo el Reverendo, el propio sol era el símbolo visible de Cristo.

—No lo eran.

—Sí que lo eran. Cómo puedes hacer que el sol…

—No lo eran, y lo que es más…

—Ahí viene el sacristán, él estaba allí.

—No lo eran, y qué si estaba, ese va a la iglesia y se inventa su propio sermón, y después te cuenta que el sermón del Reverendo fue así y asao, cosas que nadie ha oído más que él. Como el sermón sobre la Legión Americana… ése, ése está más sordo que una tapia.

Todas las cabezas menos la del ciervo se volvieron para ver abrirse la puerta, haciendo temblar la hoja de cristal y la configuración ИÓICATƧƎ A⅃ ƎD AИЯƎBAT entre el hombre y la tormenta. El Carpintero del Pueblo entró, perseguido por un trueno lejano.

—Maldito alboroto —dijo, cerrándole la puerta.

—Es extraño que se oigan truenos mientras nieva —dijo el hombrecillo del medio con tono apaciguador.

—Ojalá salga por piernas y se lleve consigo mi maldición —rezongó el Carpintero del Pueblo una vez en la barra. Cuadró los hombros, irguió la cabeza y miró a su alrededor—. ¿Sabéis que después del Gran Diluvio no hubo ningún Dios? Bueno, no lo hubo. Como el mundo estuvo empapado durante cien años, no había truenos, y los hombres andaban por ahí con la cabeza alta, solos y sin miedo, como deben andar los héroes, sabéis. Luego todo se secó, y allá arriba se recuperó la atmósfera. —Se detuvo para sacudirse la nieve de las botas dando patadas contra la barra, y el perro esperó a que acabara para tumbarse a sus pies —. Y entonces empezaron esos malditos truenos, y los asustaron tanto, al levantar la vista y no ver nada, que se sacaron las imágenes del terror de sus propias mentes y las colgaron allí arriba, en el espacio vacío que había sobre sus cabezas vacías. —Se bebió su vaso de un trago—. Pues vaya —dijo, dejándolo vacío en la barra, e irguió la cabeza, como si la del ciervo fuera la única cara que estaba dispuesto a consentir—. Tengo un visitante muy importante —soltó por fin.

—Debe de ser Tom Swift —murmuró el estrangulador observando atentamente al Carpintero del Pueblo.

—Si le vierais, no imaginaríais qué héroe es. Por supuesto, yo le reconocí inmediatamente.

—Esta mañana se bajó del tren un tipo extraño —dijo el hombre del medio—. Sin sombrero ni abrigo. Oh, nunca se sabe, nunca se sabe. Borracho, quizá. Nunca se sabe.

El Carpintero del Pueblo miró a hurtadillas a aquellos dos, con una expresión de astucia en la cara. Era un gesto que a todos resultaba familiar; y su sagaz cualidad adivinadora (más el consiguiente paralelo lógico de su conversación) hacía que a menudo lo acusaran de oír perfectamente.

—Pues vaya —dijo, atrayendo hacia sí un vaso lleno—, puede que os sorprendiera verlo, un hombre servido cada día del año por siete reyes, sesenta duques y un conde, tan modesto y callado como él.

—Ese tren viene de la ciudad —dijo el hombrecillo de la cerveza.

—Los he visto, gente de ciudad en el campo —dijo el estrangulador—. Los conozco, se aterrorizan al ver cosas moviéndose sin trepidar ni humear.

—Un hombre que se sienta con doce arzobispos a su derecha y veinte obispos a su izquierda.

—Viven en ciudades donde nada crece. ¿Sabíais eso? Nada crece en la ciudad. Hasta sus mentes echan vapor todo el tiempo. Tienen por horizonte alféizares sucios.

—Borracho, quizá. Nunca se sabe.

—Cuyo chambelán es obispo y rey, y su jefe de cocina, rey y abad, no podría rebajarse a tomar títulos como esos.

—¿Sabéis lo que le pasa a la gente en las ciudades? Os diré lo que le pasa a la gente en las ciudades. Se pierden las estaciones, eso es lo que les pasa. Se pierden los extremos, el invierno y el verano. Se pierden los medios, la primavera y el otoño. Se pierden el comienzo y el final del día, y nada crece salvo sus cuentas corrientes. La vida en la ciudad no es más que algo intermedio, nada nace y nada muere. Las cosas aparecen y se las mata, pero nada empieza y nada termina.

—Sus dominios se extienden desde las tres Indias hasta las ruinas de Babilonia, desde la Lejana India hasta la torre de Babel. Ese es el viaje que vamos a hacer. Los reyes atienden sus menores deseos, jamás lo creeríais por sus humildes trazas, jamás le reconoceríais por sus calladas maneras. Por supuesto, yo le reconocí inmediatamente.

—No se encuentran héroes en las ciudades. Un hombre de ciudad se dispersa demasiado.

—Si alguna vez habéis acechado a un topo bajo la tierra, si habéis intentado seguir el silencioso movimiento del curso de su túnel, donde nada se mueve más que hojas de hierba aisladas, cada una moviéndose sin razón aparente, y luego se mueve la tierra, y vuelve a moverse, bueno, ésa es la clase de cara que tiene.

—Un hombre sencillo que está en un aprieto, un hombre que sabe en qué aprieto está. Tenéis que ir a buscarlo al campo. Al campo o al mar.

—En sus dominios no hay ningún pobre, ni ladrones, ni bandidos, ni discordia alguna. Allá de donde viene no hay ningún vicio, ni avaros, ni aduladores, ni mentira alguna.

La nieve se arremolinaba contra el cristal. La mujer azul estuvo retorcida durante medio minuto entero. El Carpintero del Pueblo se lamió los labios, y alzó la vista hacia el movimiento de los belfos raídos del ciervo de doce puntas, que sin inmutarse por la mosca seguía mirando hacia abajo a través de vidriosas convexidades de polvo.

Ráfagas de sonido traspasaban el maderaje, partiendo de las intrincadas molduras para atravesar los manchados listones de juntas machihembradas que entablaban el vestíbulo, como si algo se moviera por allí.

—De modo que consumió con fuego el trono del sol, ¿no? ¡El trono del sol…! Nueve… seis —murmuraba el reverendo Gwyon, inclinado sobre su mesa atestada, pasando las páginas de Job con tres dedos juntos—. Él sacude la tierra en su sitio, estremécense sus columnas. Se estremecen, ¿no? Él manda al sol, y el sol no sale, y apaga las estrellas. No sale, ¿no? Él creó la Osa, Orion y las Pléyades, y las cámaras del cielo austral, ¡no! —Gwyon alzó la vista con impaciencia, nada más que para apartar los ojos del libro que tenía abierto sobre las *Cartas* del emperador Flavio Claudio Juliano. Sus ojos claros se clavaron en la puerta, y permanecieron allí un momento, esperando. Luego volvió a las páginas que tenía delante—. Diecinueve… cuatro… Hizo erigir en ellos un tabernáculo para el sol, que semejante al esposo que sale de su tálamo se regocija como un hombre fuerte corriendo una carrera. Del extremo del cielo sale, y llega en su curso a los últimos confines, y nada se sustrae a su calor… vaya, esto está mejor —murmuró, volviendo más páginas—. Siete… once… y provechosa para los que ven el sol… ejem… once… siete… Suave ciertamente es la luz, y agradable a los ojos ver el sol… sí… ejemmmm… Suave ciertamente es la luz —repitió, alzando los ojos ahora directamente hacia la ventana y el cielo encapotado.

El inexpugnable metro de silencio le envolvió en cuanto dejó de hablar, y permaneció allí erguido y solo. No había en su cara nada que delatara o siquiera sugiriera duda; pero sus manos no apoyaban sólo su propio peso, como al principio podía haber parecido, en las páginas que tenía delante. Mientras seguía así, sin moverse, la débil coloración bajo sus uñas se volvió más débil aún, apagándose desde los bordes hasta que palidecieron del todo por la tensión que soportaban, rayadas de vida por la vida que las sustentaba.

—Un día más que agoniza —murmuró Gwyon mirando hacia el cielo. ¿Habría tiempo? Las puntas de sus dedos recobraron el color. Aun así, la parte inferior de su cara perdió grosor, como si ambas partes estuvieran conectadas, o como si no hubiera dos, sino un sólo proceso, un drenaje continuo; y se mordió con inquietud el labio inferior. ¿Habría tiempo para dar prueba cabal de su ministerio? Escudriñó el cielo como buscando una respuesta—. Un día más que agoniza —repitió, escudriñando el cielo en busca del sol.

La casa del párroco tenía casi un siglo de antigüedad, y no era extraño que el viento la hiciera crujir de aquel modo. Sin embargo, dentro y bien dentro, por encima de otras evidencias, el viento no daba más que una explicación arbitraria: tanto daba decir que los ángulos agudos de la pared y el entablado, de las molduras y los zócalos se quejaban así por la despiadada imposición mutua de las puntas donde se veían obligadas a encajar; o que crujían por el esfuerzo de sostener la cruz, y por la vigilancia de su presa, suspendida allí casi a oscuras ante los pequeños espejos que parecían abrillantados por su labor, como si, tras dejar estigmatizada a sor Patrocinio, la hubieran reanudado aquí. ¡Cómo habría vilipendiado John Huss aquella cosa!, como había señalado tristemente tía May; pero no había prevalecido contra ella, y tendía a evitarla. Gwyon, al pasar por delante muchas veces al día, la sobresaltaba y le cerraba de golpe en la cara la puerta del despacho antes de que pudiera aislar y fijar una fracción de su movimiento. (Es verdad que más de una vez había sorprendido a Janet allí; y a menudo, cuando se acordaba, intentaba mirar a hurtadillas las palmas de sus manos sin guantes, pero en vano). Los crujidos continuaban, pero nada se movió en el oscuro pasillo hasta que los labios delgados se separaron con un chasquido, aunque apagado, y musitaron: «¿Qué era? ¿Qué se supone que debo preguntar? ¿Soy yo el… *homoousion* u *homoiousion?* ¿Soy yo el hombre que…? ¿Qué me retiene…? ¿Por Quién…? ¿Qué era…?».

El reverendo Gwyon se agarró las solapas de la chaqueta y miró con ojos de miope el lado interior de la

puerta.

—Maldición —murmuró—, ¿qué me retiene? —Y empezó a buscar algo revolviendo los libros y papeles que tenía delante. Echó a un lado el Antiguo Testamento y las *Cartas* de Julián el Apóstata, luego el *Contra Celsum* de Orígenes, uno tras otro apartó los libros hasta que formaron una pila inestable alrededor de la figura dorada del toro—. Volumen dieciocho —murmuró—, PLANTS a RAYM… dónde… —Se detuvo, con el *De corona* de Tertuliano en la mano. Luego empezó a buscar entre la pila desechada, murmurando «*Cathemerinon*», pero cuando lo encontró y se irguió con él abierto en la mano, habló sin mirar la página.

—Bondadoso Guía —dijo el reverendo Gwyon al cielo exterior—, creador de la luz radiante, que gobiernas el curso fijo de las estaciones, si tu sol se esconde nos rodea un caos sombrío, devuelve tu luz, oh Cristo, a tus fieles discípulos…

Gwyon se detuvo como si hubiera oído un ruido. Ante él, el cielo se oscureció mientras lo observaba; y mientras observaba, el libro que tenía en la mano se cerró lentamente, y sus uñas palidecieron contra las tapas.

Los golpes en la puerta eran débiles. El reverendo Gwyon dejó resueltamente a Prudencio en la mesa y se volvió; pero cuando llegó a la puerta se detuvo con una mano en el picaporte y se quedo así, escuchando con gran atención algo que no había oído.

Quedaron inmóviles a ambos lados de la puerta, una mano alzada y una mano extendida, sus brazos tendidos abscisa y ordenada del punto de ordenación donde sus ojos se encontraban en la curva desordenada de la duda.

Se oyó un estrépito en el pasillo. El reverendo Gwyon abrió de golpe la puerta del despacho. La *cruz-con-espejos* estaba en el suelo. Destellos de luz hirieron sus ojos desde los cortantes fragmentos plateados que la rodeaban, y lo dejaron deslumbrado por un momento.

Al doblar la esquina de la cocina, Janet chocó con la figura que venía del otro lado. Retrocedió espantada.

—¿Ya ha empezado? —logró decir, retorciéndose las manos enguantadas.

—¿Empezado? Dios santo, yo… yo no he…

—¿Es hora ya? —preguntó ella ansiosamente—. ¿Hora de decirles… que has vuelto?

—Sí, díselo —dijo él, rodeándola con la velocidad de una sombra cuando se mueve una luz—, he vuelto para predicar, pero me…

—Ellos dudaban —dijo ella plegando el labio superior con la súbita modestia de un velo—, pero yo…

—¡Janet! —El reverendo Gwyon salió del despacho, y apartó la cruz con el pie—. La comida —dijo avanzando.

—Padre… padre, yo…

Janet desapareció. El reverendo Gwyon, saliendo del oscuro pasillo, parecía agrandarse a medida que se acercaba a la luz, y la figura que retrocedía a saltos, retirándose aún como una sombra, siguió diciendo:

—Tengo que preguntarte algo, yo… ¿qué era…? Tú…

De este modo llegaron al comedor. Tras decir una o dos veces un expletivo «Gracias a Dios», la voz se había elevado y seguía hablando con mayor rapidez, atrayendo a Gwyon con la expresión de su cara, la expresión de un hombre atormentado por una pregunta cuya respuesta conoce el resto de los que están en la habitación.

—Te pareces a Valeriano, muchísimo, sí, te pareces mucho al emperador Valeriano… —siguieron fluyendo las palabras, cada sílaba expletiva y cada vez más rápidas, el sonido sustentándose a sí mismo con ágil sorpresa, acechando las palabras adecuadas, el momento en que brotaría la pregunta adecuada para rescatarla y repetirla.

El reverendo Gwyon llegó a la cabecera de la mesa y se quedó de pie en su sitio. Durante un instante se movieron las ventanas de su nariz. De hecho, les llegó desde la cocina el olor del pescado friéndose.

—En el cuadro de Memlinc, sabes, el cuadro de Memling, Valeriano en el cuadro de Memlinc…

—Entonces, ¿cuántos reyes quedan en el mundo? Ahora mismo, hoy, ¿cuántos reyes quedan?

La mujer azul estaba tendida cuan larga era, mientras su amo alargaba un vaso vacío por encima de la barra.

—Prefiero trabajar para ganarme la vida —dijo el hombrecillo de la cerveza, mirando fijamente el letrero «La ley prohíbe hacer efectivos en este local los cheques de la asistencia social».

—¿Contando al papa de Roma? —preguntó el hombre más alejado de la tormenta, al fondo de la barra.

—He dicho reyes. El papa no es más rey que mi abuela.

—Es una especie de rey, sí, el papa. Todo aquel que tiene un poder temporal es un rey, eso dijo el Reverendo.

—¿Y cuándo dijo eso?

—En su sermón sobre los druidas. Por eso los druidas hicieron al roble rey de los árboles, porque era fulminado por el rayo con tanta frecuencia, y eso era un signo de favor divino.

—¿Y cuándo fue fulminado por el rayo el papa de Roma?

—El derecho divino de los reyes, ¿nunca has oído hablar de eso? Pregunta al sacristán.

El Carpintero del Pueblo, que llevaba varios minutos callado, cazó al vuelo en alguna parte la palabra reyes, y apartó los ojos del ciervo para encontrar otras miradas, menos polvorientas, dirigidas hacia él.

—Reyes —respondió—, reyes de segunda mano y toda clase de gente inútil, ahora se dedican a eso. Pues vaya, fijaos en la forma en que la gente viaja ahora; no tienen ningún sentido del viaje. Hace poco emprendí yo mismo un viaje, un viaje de descubrimiento, podría decirse. El tren iba a sus buenas sesenta millas por hora y me levanté y tiré del freno de emergencia. No se puede ver nada a esa velocidad. ¿Y sabéis que me metieron en la cárcel? Sí que lo hicieron, sin una palabra de disculpa. Fue en la cárcel donde perdí éstos —siguió, señalándose la boca vacía—. Me quedé dormido, y el hombre que estaba encerrado conmigo, un hombre peligroso, se adivinaba en sus ojos, me robó los dientes mientras dormía. ¡Ojalá se ahogue con ellos!

—¿Sabéis cómo conserva su poder temporal el papa de Roma? —preguntó el estrangulador tras haber ahogado a conciencia a la dama azul mientras el Carpintero del Pueblo hablaba, aprovechando ahora la pausa mientras el Carpintero del Pueblo bebía—. Con dinero que le mandan desde aquí, desde América, el dinero que le mandan desde los Estados Unidos es lo que lo mantiene en el poder…

—Donativos…

—¡Donativos! ¿Crees que calienta su hermoso palacio del Vaticano, todas sus mil cien habitaciones, con donativos? Para empezar, está patrocinado por una compañía panificadora americana, lo sé de buena tinta.

—Id vosotros mismos a una estación de ferrocarril —prosiguió el Carpintero del Pueblo, empujando hacia adelante su vaso vacío—, o a una estación de autobuses. Id a un aeropuerto y miradlos, toda esa panda de desgraciados con ojos vacíos y caras vacías, que no tienen ni idea de lo que están haciendo aparte de salir de un agujero para meterse en otro, cansados y preocupados sólo por las comodidades del cuerpo, temerosos sólo de poder descubrir algo entre entonces y el momento en que lleguen adonde creen que van. Pues vaya, yo también he estado en el aeropuerto, donde salen los aviones que van a El Cairo y a Damasco, ¿y podéis creer que miras a la gente que va a El Cairo y a Damasco, las caras demacradas, y los ves llegar de El Cairo y de Damasco y no han cambiado absolutamente nada? Por la cara que tienen, lo mismo podrían haber ido a la tienda de la esquina. Lo que pueden contar de El Cairo y de Damasco no es más que lo que puedo contar yo de mi viaje en tren, sesenta millas por hora y ningún servicio a la vista; eso es lo que saben de El Cairo y de Damasco.

Recuperó su vaso, lleno, y lo levantó.

—¿Habéis tenido alguna vez úlceras bucales? —preguntó el hombrecillo de la cerveza—. Al principio creí que sólo tenía la garganta irritada…

—Firmó un contrato de cincuenta mil dólares al año, lo sé de buena tinta. Ahora, cuando reza el padrenuestro, al llegar a lo de «danos hoy nuestro pan de cada día», dice: «Danos hoy nuestro pan de cada día, enriquecido, crujiente, cocido a fuego lento, en finas rebanadas…».

—Ah, eso es un chiste, un chiste viejo —dijo el hombre más alejado de la tormenta.

—¡Un chiste! ¡Un chiste, eso!

—Dicen que las úlceras bucales pueden ser fatales si te llegan a la garganta y a las glándulas que hay ahí…

—Ahora voy a deciros la verdad —siguió el Carpintero del Pueblo, resonante la voz con esta confidencia —: nunca han estado en El Cairo ni en Damasco. Con todos sus billetes y sus pasaportes, y sus buenas maletas cubiertas de publicidad, nunca han salido de sus cuartos de baño. Hoy día es tan fácil ir a cualquier parte —dijo, y se detuvo a mirar a su alrededor, para ver si aparte de los suyos se movían algunos labios—, que hasta un tonto puede ir a cualquier parte, y son los tontos los que lo hacen. Hay hombres que han dado la vuelta al mundo una docena de veces y no han encontrado más que incomodidades y molestias de vientre sin cuento. Los viajes han perdido su significado, hoy día es tan fácil —concluyó, mirando por encima de la cabeza del hombrecillo de la cerveza, cuyos ojos le llegaban a la altura del botón superior de su ropa interior, y que dijo: «Debería estar en la cama, como me mandó el médico, y no probar una gota de alcohol».

Al otro lado del cristal, tres figuras que se habían cambiado de acera para evitar la Taberna de la

Estación pasaron de largo bajo la tormenta.

—Las Damas —dijo alguien.

El Carpintero del Pueblo también las había visto.

—Allá van —dijo—. Me ofrecí a cantar una bonita canción de abstinencia en la cena de Navidad que dan esta noche en la iglesia. *El brindis.* ¿Os la sabéis?

> —Por las penas de la madre del borracho,
> Por sus hijos que mendigan pan…,

empezó en voz baja

—Yo no me atrevería a irme a casa ahora —dijo el hombrecillo de la cerveza, mirando por el cristal—. Me moriría.

—¿Un chiste? —dijo el hombre más alejado de la tormenta, contemplando a la mujer azul boca abajo—. ¿Os sabéis el del negrito que se encuentra por la calle a un cura católico y le dice?: «Hola, padre». Y el cura dice: «¿Me has llamado padre?». Y el negrito dice: «Sí, padre». Y el cura dice: «¿Eres católico?». Y el chico dice: «Soy negro, ¿no es eso ya bastante malo?».

Todos rieron, menos el Carpintero del Pueblo. Había ido al servicio de caballeros.

—Llevas un cadáver a cuestas —se desquitó el estrangulador—, y le preguntas cuánto le debes, y no dice nada. ¿Está muerto?

—Yo soy el tipo de hombre que querría ser un caniche —dijo el hombrecillo de la cerveza, observando cómo volvía el Carpintero del Pueblo con el perro, que lo había seguido al servicio, y se quedó esperando.

—¿Un caniche?

—Si tuviera que ser perro, querría ser algo que me gustara. —Dio un sorbo moderado a su pequeña cerveza y se volvió hacia el cristal. El viento había amainado, y la nieve seguía cayendo—. ¿Creéis que alguna vez volverá a brillar el sol? —preguntó a nadie.

El viento había amainado, y sin su fuerza impulsora, la nieve caía en partículas residuales, restos de violencia que se movían libremente por el aire, sin dirección aparente. No se había acumulado demasiado en torno a la casa del párroco, debido a la pequeña y expuesta elevación, pero todas las rendijas y rincones estaban repletos, como si el viento hubiera soplado de todas partes en su breve carrera paranoica. La nieve había cuajado alrededor de la ventana del comedor, donde, bien adentro, la cara del reverendo Gwyon reflejaba la leve claridad del cielo con las cejas arqueadas. La mesa del comedor, ante la cual estaba sentado con las manos apoyadas, era un óvalo que podía ampliarse para acomodar a una docena de personas, aunque hacía años que no había hecho falta echar mano de ese recurso. En realidad, precisamente lo contrario habría servido mejor a los intereses de la economía implícita en todas partes, no una economía de penuria sino «sensata», es decir, sensible al derroche, la prodigalidad, el despilfarro, que habría podido exigir que la mesa contrajera aún más su superficie, hasta la estricta necesidad del lugar de un hombre: y bien podría haberlo hecho para un hombre distinto de aquel (considerando la mirada huraña de la mayoría de los antepasados de Gwyon, muchos de los cuales comían en la cocina cuando estaban solos, y uno, mucho antes de que se inventara la lámpara incandescente, se subía sus comidas a un cuartito del piso de arriba, como todavía revelaba su suelo; o el austero John H. —cuyo retrato no se veía por ninguna parte—, del que no se supo que, una vez alcanzada la madurez, volviera a comer nunca bajo techo). Y no es que Gwyon se sentara nunca ante una mesa vencida por el peso, o que la utilizara como mesa de bufé: rara vez tenía delante más de un plato monocromo a la vez. Pero su presencia necesitaba de tal modo aquella amplia superficie extendida ante sí que cuando comía acompañado levantaba incesantemente la mirada, como pensando que la mesa estaba llena, y cuando su invitado se sentaba a su derecha, cada vez que Gwyon dirigía la atención hacia aquel lado agarraba el borde de la mesa por el otro, restableciendo el equilibrio que aquella presencia extraña amenazaba, o se quedaba sentado mirando directamente al frente, sujetando la mesa con las palmas de las manos apoyadas. Así estaba sentado ahora, murmurando a cada momento un «Ejemmm» estabilizador, y alzando la mirada como un peso excéntrico, sin saber muy bien dónde caería.

La erupción expletiva que había brotado con un tono alterno de expectación ante lo que debía ocurrir, fuera lo que fuera, y de sorpresa cuando no ocurría, había cesado con la misma brusquedad con que empezó. Ahora sólo llegaban pausas y breves comienzos desde una u otra parte de la habitación, desde el rincón donde sé concebían todas las Buenas obras hasta la mesa baja junto a la ventana.

—*Superbia… Ira… Invidia… Avaritia,* sí, eso… «Desearía que esta casa y toda la gente que hay en ella se

convirtieran en oro, para poder guardarte en mi buen cofre: ¡Oh mi dulce oro…!», ¿te acuerdas de eso? Yo… bueno, da igual, no importa. Avaricia, no importa… —Y la voz se extinguió de nuevo.

El reverendo Gwyon espiró, y olió a alcaravea.

—Bueno, el sacerdocio… el ministerio, quiero decir… sí, me hablaron de ti, hace tiempo, John… John… ¿cómo se llamaba? Te había visto, se había parado a verte, quiero decir a oírte y luego a verte. Un sacerdote. John…

Sus ojos se encontraron durante un instante a través de la habitación.

—Sí, sí —dijo Gwyon bajando rápidamente los ojos, hablando con un tono desdeñoso—. No tenía ninguna consistencia. Pretendía ser sacerdote. Ninguna consistencia. —Se detuvo, sujetando la mesa—. Ningún misterio —añadió con un murmullo.

Pero un movimiento lo hizo alzar los ojos de nuevo, y vio las manos enlazándose, separándose, tendiéndose, cogiendo una jarrita, haciendo juegos malabares con ella y casi dejándola caer, hasta que una de ellas dejó la jarrita y la otra cogió un recorte de periódico.

—¿Qué es esto?

El recorte de periódico se deslizó por la mesa.

—Sí, es algo que he estado buscando —dijo Gwyon, alargando la mano para cogerlo—. Un… cómputo, un cálculo.

Escrito a lápiz en el margen se leía esto:

$$\text{Μείθρας} = 40 + 5 + 10 + 9 + 100 + 1 + 200 = 365$$
$$\text{Αβραξά} = 1 + 2 + 100 + 1 + 60 + 1 + 200 = 365$$

—Sí, eso —dijo el reverendo Gwyon, cogiéndolo. Lo puso boca abajo sobre la mesa, y lo tapó con el antebrazo. Sus labios se movían. Miraba directamente al frente, hacia el cielo, a través de la ventana.

Entró Janet, y dejó dos platos en la mesa.

—Bueno, ¿qué es esto?, ¿qué es esto? —preguntó Gwyon, mirándolos.

—Esto es pan, y esto es pescado —dijo Janet, y alzó los ojos hacia el otro lado de la mesa.

—¿Pescado? —repitió Gwyon.

—Y pan —confirmó ella, inclinada sobre la exigua ración como esperando que ocurriera algo. Su encía superior estaba a la vista, olvidada.

—Tráeme unos huevos —dijo secamente Gwyon.

Ella no se movió. El reverendo Gwyon irguió bruscamente la cabeza. Una rápida mirada desconcertada a la comida que había sobre la mesa, y a la figura inclinada sobre ella, y Janet desapareció. Luego se oyó el tintineo de una campanilla procedente de la cocina, y Gwyon chasqueó los labios ante esta señal de retraso, clavando los codos en la mesa como para afianzarla mientras la figura que tenía al lado se sentaba.

—¡Pescado…!

Gwyon recogió los remos, o en cualquier caso se quedó sentado como si lo hubiera hecho, con las manos recogidas ante la cara. Los dedos siguieron moviéndose agitadamente, encubriendo el único elemento persistente en la variedad de expresiones que surcaba su cara. Cada expresión adoptaba sus rasgos familiarmente: cada una resultaba familiar a su cara, pero pocas veces se habían sucedido unas a otras con tan rápido decurso, a medida que aumentaba la velocidad con que permutaba un pasado por otro, el pasado lejano por el más reciente, y las sacudidas del presente, esos intervalos en los que quedaba suspenso como si estuviera cambiando de vehículo, llegaban con más frecuencia. Sin embargo, en los ojos de Gwyon persistía un destello, una mirada de atención perspicaz que empezaba a brillar con algo cercano a la astucia cada vez que la volvía subrepticiamente hacia su turbulento pasajero, que ahora, inclinado sobre el plato de pescado, comía vorazmente.

Janet entró llevando un único plato en sus manos enguantadas. No miró dónde lo ponía, sino que mantuvo los ojos clavados al otro lado de la mesa. El pescado había desaparecido casi del todo. El reverendo Gwyon bajó una mano y apartó el recorte de periódico para dejar sitio al plato que le ponían delante, advirtiendo mientras lo hacía el recorte, recordando: «¿Y ese paquete de comida, Janet?». Ella no dijo nada, y Gwyon tuvo que alzar la vista hacia su cara para ver el leve gesto de asentimiento que hizo con la cabeza. La cara de Janet parecía más azul que de costumbre, pues en los últimos minutos se había puesto bastante pálida. Salió diciendo «No quedan huevos» por encima del hombro, y dejó a Gwyon mirando de hito en hito un plato de alubias blancas.

El pescado desapareció del todo, y la erupción empezó de nuevo bruscamente con:

—Esa cruz, ¿sabes?, esa cruz, siempre me ha… pero quiero decir que antes no quería… —La mano se

detuvo en mitad de un gesto dirigido hacia el pasillo, donde la *cruz-con-espejos* yacía aún en el suelo.

Sujetando el borde de la mesa con una mano, Gwyon alargó rápidamente la otra hacia el recorte de periódico. Llegó demasiado tarde, y no pudo sino mirar cómo lo cogían como si lo hubiera arrastrado el viento, y lo desplegaban en el aire entre ambos. En un lado, una niña con medias blancas miraba oblicuamente desde una fotografía borrosa; en el otro se veían los ojos penetrantes de un hombre bajo la raya divisoria de un reluciente pico de viuda.

—Esto…

—Ese —dijo Gwyon, poniendo una mano sobre el papel cuando volvió a caer en la mesa— es el señor Hermoso Hermoso. No lo entiendo. No lo entiendo en absoluto. «Confesión del agresor», dice aquí. Pero si éste es el señor Hermoso Hermoso. ¿Y esta foto?, tomada por supuesto cuando era joven, pero éste es el señor Hermoso Hermoso, un hombre muy respetable de San Zuinglio. Lo conocí allí —siguió murmurando el reverendo Gwyon—, años después del crimen. Años después. —Su mano abierta sujetaba el papel sobre la mesa entre ambos—. Años después —repitió Gwyon, tapando con la manga los cálculos del margen.

—Sí, pero ella… ella…

—¿Ella?

Como no seguía, Gwyon alzó la vista ansiosamente y lo vio detenerse con aire confuso y preocupado. Era una espina, en el último bocado de pescado, y hasta la cara de Gwyon se crispó observando cómo se la sacaba.

—Pero ahora —siguió con más soltura, libre ya de la espina—, ahora me siento recuperado. Muy recuperado. Sí, aquí estoy —dijo, y aunque sus ojos se habían encontrado ya desde diversos ángulos, ahora miró cara a cara por primera vez al reverendo Gwyon—. Y yo… debes de preguntarte qué he estado haciendo durante todo este tiempo, ¿no?

Gwyon bajó los ojos. Empezó a hacer un ruido tranquilizador, pero se vio interrumpido en cuanto su voz brotó de su garganta, de modo que empezó a comerse las alubias.

—Sí, aquí estamos ahora, y… porque allí, allí las cosas se volvían confusas, espantosamente confusas. No podría ni empezar a contarte todo lo que ha pasado, todo… apenas lo sé yo mismo, salvo… apenas me lo creo ahora, apenas creo que haya pasado realmente. Y por eso lo… bueno, allí, por eso lo he dejado todo allí, de todas formas estaba empezando a ser tan irreal que… y yo… bueno, aquí, aquí para empezar de nuevo desde donde se interrumpió la realidad, para recuperarme y… A fin de cuentas me educaron para eso, y me… el sacerdocio, una carrera con los tiempos, acorde con los tiempos. —Levantó una mano del borde de la mesa para pasársela por la cara—. Y toda esa… ficción, no hay razón para creer que existió alguna vez, y esa… ¿esa ciudad? ¿Si caí entre ladrones? Bueno, hay lugares más reales, hay lugares en libros, hay gente en obras de teatro más real que… todo eso. Se estaba convirtiendo en un… un auténtico carnaval. —Alzando rápidamente la mirada de su plato, Gwyon lo vio sacudir ligeramente la cabeza, con cuatro dedos apretados contra una sien, y luego siguió con la misma risa constreñida—. Sí, un carnaval, ¿recuerdas? ¡Oh carne, adiós! —y se puso en pie de un salto tan brusco que Gwyon dejó caer el tenedor y agarró la mesa con ambas manos, como un hombre aferrándose a las regalas por miedo a zozobrar.

—Pero aquí, aquí me siento como si me vigilaran. Siempre me he sentido así, pero… seguro, bajo vigilancia. —Se detuvo en el rincón donde se concebían todas las Buenas obras—. Tú me vigilas, ¿no? —Se encontró con el ojo brillante de Gwyon, y entonces se volvió hacia la ventana, pero antes de llegar a ella se vio detenido por la mesa baja, y se la quedó mirando—. Es… ¿entiendes? —dijo volviéndose, y su cara entera se suavizó con una sonrisa forzada—, esto… «en el infierno hay toda suerte de deleites…» —tosió—, ¿cuando los Siete Pecados hacen una visita? Pero no importa —sus rasgos volvieron a crisparse y desvió la mirada—. Ya no —susurró.

Gwyon, firmemente sentado, con los pies bien separados y plantados en el suelo como si el casco oscilara, lo contempló allí parado mirando por el cristal. Al otro lado de la ventana, la nieve caía en copos más pesados y pequeños, en diferentes ángulos con respecto a la tierra, de derecha a izquierda en primer término, y más allá de izquierda a derecha, sin arremolinarse sino aparentemente en planos independientes. Hubo una larga pausa antes de que volviera a hablar, ahora con más calma, sin apartar la vista del cristal.

—Y cuando la simiente empezó a crecer, fue como un jardín lleno de nieve… ¿te acuerdas de eso?

Aunque estaba atento, el reverendo Gwyon no parecía escuchar: toda su atención se concentraba en sus ojos, que no habían perdido su brillo mientras se estrechaban y ensanchaban siguiendo las expresiones de su cara. Desde el momento en que había estado a punto de desplomarse sobre el extremo de la escota, según pareció, estaba erguido y más firmemente sentado a la cabecera de la mesa. Su cara, que había reflejado el avance de su memoria hasta el presente, y luego su retroceso hasta los remotos confines del recuerdo de otras épocas, muchos siglos anteriores a la suya, pareció ahora abarcarlas todas con súbita

intensidad mientras se inclinaba hacia adelante.

En aquel momento entró Janet con una vela de papel de envolver.

—Si el Reverendo quisiera escribir ese nombre aquí —dijo arrizándola—, porque yo no sé escribir en extranjero —y le tendió un trozo de lápiz negro. Sumisa, echando una rápida ojeada a la raspa del pescado y a ninguna otra parte, cogió aquel plato con una cuadrada mano enguantada y salió, dejando a Gwyon con los ojos clavados en el papel de envolver, borrada la concentración de su cara con la misma brusquedad con que había aparecido. Luego su mano se elevó lentamente y trazó las palabras de la dirección de Extremadura. Sus labios se movían, y parecían atraer hacia sí el claro susurro uniforme sobre la lisa superficie de la mesa.

—¿Y si la belleza incitara a los ladrones más que el oro? El sendero que he descubierto, te acordarás, aquí, he aventajado como un… mono a la naturaleza. El sendero que mantienen limpio los espíritus malignos, pero se terminó. Por todo lo que es feo, se acabó.

«Real Monasterio», escribió Gwyon, moviendo los labios, «de Nuestra Señora de la Otra Vez», mientras el susurro se acercaba, y se quebraba en una voz por encima de su cabeza.

—¿Qué es esto? ¿España?

—¿España? —repitió Gwyon. Dejó caer el trozo de lápiz, alzando la vista, y su gran mano tembló sobre el recorte de periódico.

—¿Te vas a España?

—Allí no nieva —dijo Gwyon bajando los ojos, hasta que se clavaron en la niñita de largas medias blancas—. Pero el frío, en la colina donde… —Se estremeció—. ¡Aquella tierra! —exclamó—. Una tierra maldita, vacía, cuando estás allí formas parte de ella. Parte de ella, esa tierra reservada, y cuando estás fuera, en el exterior, excluido, y vuelves la vista hacia ella, vuelves la vista hacia su vacuidad desde la tuya, paseas la vista por sus contornos quebrados hasta su… duro rostro, se niega a admitir *que* alguna vez lo tocaste.

Miraba sin expresión el recorte de periódico.

—Pero eso no es… no te puedes ir ahora, ¿verdad?

Gwyon le miró cara a cara por primera vez.

—España es una tierra para cruzar huyendo —dijo sin moverse, forzando a la otra cara a inclinarse con desazón a la vista de sus rasgos indefinidos a medida que la pérdida se extendía desde sus ojos hasta los bordes de la cara, la vacuidad en el ocular de un telescopio donde un punto de luz se expande hasta abarcar un campo espacial y un universo sin mundo.

—Ella… —exclamaron los dos al mismo tiempo.

—Ella se me apareció allí —siguió Gwyon con monótona somnilocuencia—, en ese monasterio. Estaba casi dormido, y sentí su mano. Me levanté, me acerqué a la ventana lo más deprisa que pude, y allí estaba la luna, arrojando un chorro de luz a través del cuarto, atravesando el cuarto hasta llegar a mí. Allí estaba en el cielo. La luna… cálida, como la luna…

—Sí, pero no puedes… ¡ya no soy un crío!, y no puedes… me contabas que las brujas tesalonicenses intentaban hacerla bajar… —Gwyon observó con aire ausente cómo se volvía y alejaba, movimientos bruscos en torno al extremo opuesto de la mesa, como eludiendo la imagen o una imagen fingida de la figura que Gwyon había evocado—. ¿Y si está parada encima de nosotros…?

—«La luna está siempre en movimiento», dice Arnobio.

—Al infierno con Arnobio.

—«Según nuestra representación es una mujer, con un semblante que no varía, aunque su mudanza diaria la hace adoptar mil formas» —terminó Gwyon, y su voz quejumbrosa se extinguió.

—Eso… eso, ¡todo eso no importa! —Las palabras brotaron ásperas y cortantes mientras sacudía la cabeza, sacudiéndose de encima la paraselene—. ¡He venido por ti! —gritó a Gwyon.

—¿Sí…? —susurró Gwyon, mientras sus manos se encontraban ante sí sobre la mesa, sus rasgos se recomponían y sus ojos recuperaban su brillo.

—Si he venido por el sacerdocio, y tú…

—Sí, tú… Has traído el toro, el toro de oro —dijo el reverendo Gwyon inclinándose hacia adelante.

—¿El qué? Sí, eso, pero escucha…

—Y has venido por el sacerdocio —siguió Gwyon tensamente.

—Sí, he vuelto. He vuelto a ti, porque tú puedes decirme… lo que debo saber. —Bajó los ojos, y luego los alzó refulgiendo antes de que Gwyon pudiera interrumpirle de nuevo—. Aunque por qué tú, mejor que otro, porque yo… entonces seré sacerdote, sabré lo que estoy haciendo… predicaré mejor que san Bernardo. Las madres esconderán a sus hijos, las esposas esconderán a sus maridos por miedo a que mis sermones les

tienten a marcharse. Sí, destrozó tantos hogares que las esposas abandonadas fundaron un convento de monjas. Yo fundaré setenta y dos conventos de monjas. Sí, «Y el hermano entregará al hermano a la muerte, y el padre al hijo, y se levantarán los hijos contra sus padres, y les darán muerte…». Sí, iré a Laodicea, y… seré el mismo Loco por Dios —terminó, volviéndose de nuevo hacia la ventana con tal brusquedad que se golpeó una mano contra el marco. Se la agarró rápidamente con la otra, y luego volvió a soltarla—. ¡Mira! Mira, el reyezuelo, ¿lo ves? —exclamó.

Fuera revoloteó hasta un árbol de hoja perenne un reyezuelo, que no pesaba lo suficiente para sacudir la nieve de la ramita en la que se posó.

—Saldré como salían en Navidad los primeros misioneros cristianos, a cazar el reyezuelo y matarlo, sí, cuando el reyezuelo era rey, te acuerdas, tú me lo contaste… Cuando el reyezuelo era rey —repitió, recuperando el aliento—, en Navidad.

El reyezuelo había remontado ya el vuelo cuando volvió la espalda a la ventana y se acercó con los ardientes ojos verdes clavados en Gwyon.

—Rey, sí —repitió—, cuando se mataba y se comía al rey, he ahí el sacramento. He ahí el sacramento. —Entonces se detuvo al lado de la mesa y bajó la cabeza, con una muñeca apoyada en la nuca, musitando —: *Homo… homoi…* lo que quiero decir es: ¿sufrió Él realmente? Y… no, no es eso, quiero decir… —Se detuvo, y agarrándose al borde se dejó caer en su silla.

El reverendo Gwyon se erguía sentado al timón, gobernando el barco, con las manos extendidas hasta el borde de la vela de papel de envolver, mirando abajo, hacia él, como si estuviera intentando trepar a bordo. Entonces:

—¿Estás preparado? —exclamó, brillantes los ojos con el reto.

—¿Preparado?

—Para el sacerdocio. Las pruebas que te aguardan, para el sacerdocio.

—¿Pruebas?

—Debe haber sacerdotes fuertes y desapasionados, capaces de renunciar a las cosas de este mundo… —Gwyon alargó la mano y lo cogió de la muñeca, como para subirlo a bordo—. Para anunciar a Aquel que ofrece descanso del pecado, y esperanza más allá de la tumba. Nacido de la Roca, Él viene a ofrecer Remisión de los pecados, y Vida Eterna.

—Sí…

—Sacerdotes para administrar el Bautismo, la Confirmación, y la Señal sobre la Frente, y la Comunión del Pan y el Cáliz. Para predicar la Redención, la Gracia Sacramental y la Salvación, por el Señor de los Ejércitos, el Dios de la Verdad que recompensa los actos de piedad…

—Sí, sí…

La mano de Gwyon le apretaba la muñeca con tanta fuerza como un torno de banco. Aumentó la presión.

—¿Estás preparado para ser su sacerdote? —repitió Gwyon—. ¿Para curtirte en las privaciones?, ¿fortalecerte contra la tentación?, ¿y vaciar tu cuerpo de toda pasión?

—Pero si yo… sí, Dios santo, ya no queda en mí ninguna pasión.

—¿Para renunciar a las cosas de este mundo?

—Aquí no hay nada que quiera… Nada.

—Y cuando te ofrezcan la corona… —siguió Gwyon, apretando con más fuerza.

—Sí, la tercera tentación, «Todas estas cosas te daré…». No, ya he acabado con todo eso. —Retorció la mano bajo la presión de Gwyon—. Me ofreció todo eso, y lo he dejado atrás. Me dio todo eso, y lo he dejado atrás. Sólo convenir aquí he renunciado a él, sólo con venir aquí he renunciado a todo lo que me dio. —Se detuvo, y como Gwyon no habló, sino que siguió apretándole la muñeca y concentrando toda su atención en los ojos, como había hecho antes, siguió—: ¿Crees que no me subió a una alta montaña y me mostró todos los reinos del mundo?, ¿y la gloria de ellos?, ¿y me los ofreció?, ¿y me los dio? Y aquí… ahora… si esto no es Renunciación…

—¿Podrías afrontar cincuenta días de ayuno? —preguntó de repente Gwyon.

—Pues… pues sí, si…

—¿Podrías aguantar dos días expuesto a un calor extremo?

—Pero…

—¿Y veinte días en la nieve?

—Pero yo…

—Hay doce pruebas de fortaleza —siguió Gwyon con una voz de intensa confianza—, debes afrontar el calor y el frío, el hambre, la sed y los terrores del ahogado antes de recibir el *sacramentum* y ser marcado en

la frente como su sacerdote.

—Pero todo eso…

—No puedes ser su sacerdote sin pasar por todas las disciplinas —dijo Gwyon, aflojando un poco la mano, hablando con un tono admonitorio—. Debes dar prueba de dominio de ti mismo y de castidad, como dice Nono en su *In Sancta Lumina*. [4] Volverte fuerte y desapasionado, a fin de convertir primero al ejército —siguió Gwyon, mirando hacia la ventana, bajando la voz con tono reflexivo.

—Pero padre… Padre…

—Sí —dijo Gwyon apretando de nuevo la muñeca, clavando otra vez los ojos en los ojos que le miraban con fijeza—. Por supuesto, yo he pasado por todos los grados para ser el *Pater Patrum*. Y luego —siguió, de nuevo absorto—, después de tu muerte…

—¿Mi muerte…?

—Después de los *cruciati* debes morir, por supuesto, después de los tormentos, cuando hayas pasado por todas las disciplinas, cuando hayas llegado a *Cryphius,* y a *Miles,* y a *Leo,* y a *Perses,* y a *Heliodromus*… [5]

—¿Morir…?

—¿De qué otro modo puede librarse el alma de la espantosa necesidad de su naturaleza inferior? —preguntó Gwyon inclinándose hacia él.

—¡Padre…!

—Sí, a manos mías —dijo Gwyon mirándolo fijamente—, debes morir a manos del *Pater Patratus,* como todos los iniciados.

La cara de Gwyon se cubrió de un rubor que se acentuó mientras seguían sentados, rígidamente unidos por la mano y la muñeca; y al mismo tiempo, la cara que observaba Gwyon perdió todo su color hasta que la piel quedó casi traslúcida, de forma que podían haber sido no dos procesos sino una continua filtración de vida.

—Nadie puede enseñar la Resurrección sin sufrir primero la muerte en carne propia. Nadie puede volver a nacer sin morir. Nadie puede ser sacerdote de Mitra sin volver a nacer… para enseñarles a guardar el domingo, y a celebrar el sagrado veinticinco de diciembre como el cumpleaños del sol. *Natalis invicti,* el Sol Invicto —terminó Gwyon, volviendo la cara hacia la ventana.

—Pero yo… tú… ¿adorar al sol?

Gwyon soltó bruscamente su muñeca, y se echó hacia atrás.

—Tonterías —dijo Gwyon, enérgico ahora—. Los dejamos creer eso —confió—, a los que son ajenos a los misterios. Pero nuestros devotos saben que Mitra es la deidad superior a él, de hecho el poder que hay tras el sol. Aquí puedes ver su nombre… —Gwyon mostró las notas en el margen del recorte de periódico—. Abraxas y Mitra tienen el mismo valor numérico, el ciclo del año según lo describe la órbita del sol. Abraxas, ya sabes, el habitante del más alto cielo gnóstico…

Fuera, en el porche, se oyó un restregar de pies. Detrás de ellos, Janet cruzó precipitadamente la habitación. Gwyon volvió a alargar la mano en busca de su muñeca. No estaba allí, y la mano de Gwyon agarró el borde de la mesa.

—«Los dioses son benévolos y considerados con la raza humana», dice Elíseo —dijo Gwyon casi con un susurro—. «Si los hombres reconocieran al menos la grandeza de los dioses y su propia insignificancia, y se complacieran en los dones de la tierra distribuidos por las manos del rey…».

Se oyeron los pasos de Janet en el vestíbulo de entrada, y la puerta se abrió de golpe, derramando voces dentro de la casa. Gwyon se detuvo. Su mano se estremeció en el borde de la mesa, y le temblaron los labios.

—Mitra significa «amigo» —dijo—, «mediador». Mitra es el mediador entre los dioses y el mundo inferior.

Esperó ansiosamente, como buscando una confirmación, mientras los pasos se acercaban por el pasillo.

—¿El infierno?, ¿el mundo inferior es el infierno? —oyó que le preguntaban con aire aturdido.

—Nuestra propia tierra —respondió Gwyon, y se quedó callado hasta que la voz de Janet cayó sobre ellos desde el umbral, y entonces se puso en pie de un salto.

—Son las Damas de Úseme que vienen a verle, Reverendo —dijo Janet.

El reverendo Gwyon cruzó el umbral en la otra dirección antes de que terminara la frase, murmurando «Volveré… dentro de un minuto» mientras pasaba a su lado. Se oyó el portazo de la puerta del despacho, y un momento después, desde dentro, el ruido de un libro tirado al suelo.

Janet huyó a la cocina, mientras los pasos se acercaban directamente al comedor por el pasillo. Entraron tres damas. Con ellas entró el frío, que se quedó flotando a su alrededor cuando se detuvieron.

—Reverendo…

—Reverendo…

—Usted perdone. Veníamos a ver al reverendo Gwyon.

—Oh, yo… yo… Acaba de salir.

—¿Salir?

—¿Salir?

—Pero si nunca sale con este tiempo. El reverendo Gwyon está siempre de mal humor cuando el cielo se nubla y tenemos mal tiempo.

—No, quiero decir que… acaba de salir de la habitación. Volverá enseguida.

—Ya veo.

—Esperaremos. ¿Y usted está aquí de visita?

—¿Yo? Bueno, en cierto modo…

—Debe de haberle sorprendido que le tomáramos por el reverendo Gwyon.

—Pero hay un parecido.

—*Hay* un parecido. Claro que el reverendo Gwyon es mucho más grande.

—Mucho mayor. Pero tal como va vestido usted, podrá entender por qué nos hemos confundido. ¿Trabaja usted en la obra del Señor?

—¿Yo? Bueno, yo… Sí, yo soy…

—No entiendo dónde he visto el parecido.

—… el reverendo Gilbert Sullivan.

—Pero por un momento…

—Por un momento yo también lo he visto. Puede que sólo se deba a que esta misma mañana hemos estado hablando del hijo del reverendo Gwyon.

—Que lleva fuera mucho tiempo.

—El hijo pródigo.

—Pero no tiene hermanos.

—Sí, pobre muchacho.

—Pobre Camilla.

—May fue una auténtica madre para él.

—Pobre May.

—Fue una dura prueba para todos.

—No era un chico fuerte.

—Pero la propia Camilla…

—Pobre Camilla…

—La pobre Camilla nunca fue fuerte.

—Arrebatada y abandonada en tierras extranjeras. Abandonada allí entre católicos romanos.

—Confío en que el reverendo Gilbert Sullivan no sea un sacerdote católico romano. El nombre…

—El nombre…

—¿Yo? Dios santo, no. Quiero decir…

—El nombre sugiere extracción irlandesa. Quizá sus antepasados son del *norte* de Irlanda, ¿no?

—Quizá podamos pedir al reverendo Gilbert Sullivan que asista a nuestra cena navideña de esta noche.

—Claro que podemos.

—Claro que puede.

—¡Hurraaa…! Ten cuidado, o por Dios que te rompo el cráneo. Sacúdete la nieve antes de entrar. Oh, buen día, señoras. No las había visto, señoras. No se preocupen por nosotros, el perro y yo. Hemos estado fuera, como pueden ver. Hemos estado trabajando, los dos muy cansados. ¡Ahora a subir las escaleras! ¡A subir las escaleras!

—Trabajando, claro.

—¡Claro!

—¡Claro!

—Vaya, si le olía desde el otro lado de la habitación.

—Quería cantar en la cena de esta noche. Una de sus canciones de taberna.

—Es una desgracia tenerle de sacristán.

—Es una desgracia tenerle viviendo aquí bajo el techo de la casa del párroco.

—Pero el reverendo Gwyon…

—El reverendo Gwyon…

—El reverendo Gwyon siempre huele de un modo tan *fresco*.

—Hasta su caridad llega demasiado lejos.

—Desde luego que sí. Pero he estado pensando…

—He estado pensando, no me entendáis mal, exactamente lo mismo. Al fin y al cabo, el sacristán está envejeciendo.

—El Señor se lo llevará.

—El Señor le liberará.

—El Señor tendrá piedad del pobre hombre.

—Vaya, reverendo Gwyon.

—Reverendo Gwyon…

—Hemos venido a preguntarle por nuestra cena, la cena navideña de esta noche en la iglesia.

—La señora Dorman va a cantar. Mi hermana va a tocar el piano.

—Y hemos organizado la visita de un conferenciante.

—Un antiguo oficial de la Y.M.C.A. Va a dar una charla humorística.

—Nada trivial. Nada frívola.

—Oh, no, querida, su charla tendrá sustancia.

—Tengo entendido que ha estado en África. No simplemente viajando, perdiendo el tiempo. Estuvo enteramente ocupado en la obra del Señor.

—Y vendrá su invitado.

—Sí, va a venir. Les veremos allí a los dos esta noche.

—Al reverendo Gwyon le gustaría quizá oír nuestro poema.

—Al reverendo Gilbert le gustaría quizá oír nuestro poema.

—A ambos les gustaría quizá oír el poema que hemos escrito para la cena navideña de esta noche.

—Los dos últimos versos. ¡El resto tendrá que ser una sorpresa!

Y como miembros de la Úseme
Y como miembros de la Úseme
Y como miembros de la Úseme

Esperamos vencer al mal
Esperamos vencer al mal
Esperamos vencer al mal

Ofreciendo la hermandad de Jesús
Ofreciendo la hermandad de Jesús
Ofreciendo la hermandad de Jesús

A quienes le necesitan más
A quienes le necesitan más
A quienes le necesitan más

Pues cuando lleguemos al cielo
Pues cuando lleguemos al cielo
Pues cuando lleguemos al cielo

Un premio allí aguardará
Un premio allí aguardará
Un premio allí aguardará
A quienes vivieron cada día
A quienes vivieron cada día
A quienes vivieron cada día
Con el lema «Úseme siempre más»
Con el lema «Úseme siempre más»
Con el lema «Úseme siempre más»

Cuando miraron a su alrededor estaban solas en la habitación. Cuando salieron buscando sus huellas, habían desaparecido bajo la nieve; y las huellas de su marcha se borraron tan deprisa que no dejaron ningún testimonio de que su visita hubiera tenido lugar alguna vez.

Pero el reverendo Gwyon, de nuevo a solas en su despacho, encontró tiempo para musitar:

—Había un grado de mujer en los Misterios. Porfirio lo menciona… ejemmm… —Abrió varios libros sobre la mesa—. Hiena. Eso era. Hiena.

Su mirada cayó sobre la Biblia.

—¡La Navidad ya! ¡La Navidad! —dijo casi con rencor, mientras sus ojos seguían las líneas por la página abierta—. Y se turbará la luna, y se avergonzará el sol… —Su mano pasó rápidamente las páginas de Isaías —. Ya no será el sol tu lumbrera, ni te alumbrará la luz de la luna: el Señor será tu eterna lumbrera, y tu Dios será tu luz. Tu sol no se pondrá jamás, y tu luna nunca se esconderá, porque será el Señor…

De repente la mano de Gwyon barrió la Biblia de la mesa, tirándola al suelo. Se quedó allí parado, temblando cuan largo era. Luego arrugó el recorte del *Osservatore Romano*, y tras él tiró al suelo uno a uno todos los libros, el *De Praescriptione Haereticorum* de Tertuliano, el *Adversus Nationes* de Arnobio, el De *Errore Profanarum Religionum* de Fírmico Materno… No se detuvo hasta llegar a san Juan de la Cruz, que abrió, sacó el contenido y dejó caer la hueca *Noche oscura del alma* tras los demás. Entonces enderezó sobre la mesa la figura dorada del toro, y agarrando sus cuernos con las manos clavó la mirada en el cielo que se oscurecía.

—¿Es que no ven que está agotado? —susurró.

Se oyó un trueno más allá del Monte de la Lamentación, y luego otro. Entonces profirió:

—Heracles ornado de estrellas, rey del fuego, soberano del universo, oh sol, que con tus luengos rayos eres el guardián de la vida mortal, y con tu carro fulgente recorres el amplio circuito de tu curso… Belo te llaman en el Éufrates, Amón en Libia, Apis del Nilo eres por nacimiento, Cronos arábigo, Zeus asirio… pero ya seas Serapis, o el radiante Zeus de Egipto, o Cronos, o Faetón, Mitra copioso en títulos, Sol de Babilonia, o Apolo de Delfos en Grecia, o Himeneo, a quien Afrodita engendró en la tierra sombría de los sueños… ya seas conocido como Paieón, aplacador del dolor, o como Eter de variado ropaje, o como Noche sembrada de estrellas (pues el manto estrellado de la noche ilumina el cielo), presta un oído propicio a mi plegaria.

Se detuvo, y luego siguió con más ímpetu:

—Oh rey, el más grande de los dioses, oh sol, señor del cielo y de la tierra, dios de dioses, tu aliento es poderoso, si ello te complace hazme avanzar en mi camino hacia la suprema deidad que te engendró y te formó, pues yo soy el hombre Gwyon.

—Yo te invoco, oh Zeus el
Dios-Sol
Mitra Serapis, invencible, donador de hidromiel, Melikertes, señor del hidromiel, abraalbabachaebechi…

Se quedó inmóvil, la mano en los cuernos del toro, y en la cara la expresión de un hombre a la espera de algo que ocurrió hace mucho tiempo.

Cada vez que los ojos de Janet llegaban al pie de la página, los hacía volver al principio, al versículo octavo del capítulo vigésimo cuarto del Evangelio según san Mateo, «Todo esto será sólo el comienzo de los dolores», y volvía a leer la columna de cabo a rabo. Siguió de pie y resistió esta silenciosa repetición durante cierto tiempo, hasta que al fin, tras detenerse un momento en el versículo vigésimo cuarto, su mirada se acortó hasta las manos desnudas apretadas ante sí, que se abrieron bajo la vigilancia de sus ojos, recibiendo el impacto de sus pupilas en dos cicatrices oscuras que tenía en las palmas. Las palmas estaban limpias, pero el resto de las manos no, desde las uñas hasta los pliegues y nudillos de los dedos, según se vio cuando las volvió. De pronto se cerró la mano izquierda, y clavó la uña del índice en la firme carne del dorso.

Al otro lado de la ventana la nieve caía copiosa y velozmente, perdida la pausada dignidad de los copos perfectos en ráfagas cortantes de aguanieve que se precipitaban atierra, pasando a cada momento con un declive más frenético hasta que el artificio de su identidad desapareció por completo, y se convirtió en lluvia.

El ruido de un trueno la atrajo a la ventana. Se quedó mirando hacia fuera. Luego levantó las manos y trató de borrar las dos huellas que había dejado antes en el cristal, pero no pudo, y sus manos se movieron cada vez más despacio hasta que se detuvieron, y se quedó mirando hacia la cochera, apenas visible allí abajo. Mientras miraba, una mano se elevó hasta su cara y empezó a moverse sobre ella, sin acariciar su superficie, sin apresurarse, sino posándose pausadamente sobre sus rasgos en una posición tras otra; hasta que aquella mano se detuvo, el pulgar a lo largo del puente de la nariz y la palma sobre la boca, y se llevó convulsivamente la mano izquierda a los pliegues vacíos de su pecho.

Un minuto después había sacado la caja de tipos de la imprenta manual del rincón, la había abierto y había derramado las letras por todo el suelo, había cerrado la Biblia de golpe, había vacilado un momento sobre ella y luego la había arrojado al revoltijo de letras metálicas, para salir finalmente por la puerta de su cuarto. Sus pisadas crujieron en el pasillo, pero la voz del Carpintero del Pueblo siguió sonando a su paso

detrás de la puerta de su cuarto, apaciblemente absorto como estaba leyendo en voz alta al perro: «Ahora que vamos a sacar a colación al Errabundo, no debe olvidarse que la casa, completamente amueblada, lo está esperando, y que sólo tiene que llamar a la puerta y entrar para estar en casa…». (Estaban en el volumen I de la obra de Lew Wallace *El príncipe de la India, o Por qué cayó Constantinopla*).

En el extremo opuesto del pasillo, Janet llegó al cuarto de costura vacío y entró sin detenerse entre las rosas boca abajo, los perros de caras rosadas y gorros verdes desvaídos en la pared del oeste tras la tumbona, donde de repente le vio sentado, rígidamente erguido, con el puño cerrado hundido en el cuello de modo que el brazo sobresalía como un ala, y las cejas llamativas por estar fruncidas tan enérgicamente que parecían haber agarrado la cara y sujetarla con una presa sofocante. Aparentemente estaba dormido. Janet se inclinó sobre él, contemplando la cara enjuta, la nariz ligeramente curva, la áspera barbilla y la garganta desnuda. La mano izquierda yacía en su regazo tan rígida como el resto de su cuerpo, los dedos doblados sobre sí mismos y las venas sobresaliendo alrededor de la sangre coagulada, hacia donde Janet alargó la mano para tocar la herida con el índice. Ni un solo músculo se movió en su cara, ni en ninguna otra parte de su cuerpo; y Janet se volvió y salió corriendo al pasillo, bajó las escaleras y salió de la casa, dejándole en la habitación cada vez más oscura, donde durmió en aquella misma postura tensa y entumecida hasta que las rosas se deslieron en rayas, y las propias paredes desdibujaron sus límites.

Se despertó mirando de frente a esa plena conciencia que sólo alcanza el terror puro: su sangre se detuvo. Todo quedó detenido durante un prolongado instante, y la sangre, sin movimiento, se le cuajó como un sólido de peso insoportable e impenetrable densidad.

—*Nadie sabe quién soy*.

Pasó un minuto entero antes de que se moviera, y cuando lo hizo se levantó bruscamente, como para hacer añicos aquel tramo irregular de espacio cercado por sólidos implacables. «Nadie me conoce en esta casa», articuló, pero tenía la boca tan seca que las palabras se hicieron pedazos antes de que las expeliera adonde su oído pudiera solventarlas, y empezó a lamerse el interior de la boca para volverlo en sí, acosando con su lengua insensible la árida cavidad, de repente desconocida, hasta que sus rasgos se disolvieron y pudo repetir: «Ninguno de ellos sabe quién soy».

Pero antes incluso de que brotaran estas palabras lo había asaltado algo más. Empezó a escudriñar frenéticamente la habitación, donde las formas se negaban a identificarse, y persistían sólo en función de las otras, cada una una presencia hecha posible sólo por todo lo demás que no lo era, cada una permitiendo que el espacio que ocupaba la aceptase sólo como parte de un todo que perecería si una de sus partes se adelantara para identificarse.

«¿Quién estaba aquí?», susurró. El interior de su boca estaba ya a flote con saliva, de modo que tragó, elevó el charco con la lengua y agotó su superficie contra el velo del paladar y volvió a tragar. «Ella estaba aquí», dijo, agarrándose la barbilla con la mano.

Al empezar de nuevo a circular, la sangre había encendido lancinantemente todas las superficies internas de su cuerpo con la sensación de su propia existencia, y golpeó el suelo con los pies y agitó las manos en el aire. «Esto… esto…», susurró roncamente. Luego se agarró una mano con la otra y la apretó con todas sus fuerzas, hasta que este equilibrio cesó y las cambió, apretando la segunda con la primera, y finalmente salió de la habitación con las manos entrelazadas ante sí, la punta de los dedos de cada una presionando sobre los huesos de la otra.

Durante la última hora había habido bastante ruido, libros tirados y dejados caer, las palabras de tipos metálicos golpeadas violentamente para formar componentes sin sentido, puertas cerradas de golpe, y todos estos fragmentos se resumieron ahora en el trueno, mientras irrumpía en el pasillo y bajaba las escaleras repitiendo: «¿No me conoces? ¿No sabes quién soy? Tú sabes quién soy. ¿No sabes quién soy…?», palabras que quebraban la superficie, y se sucedían unas a otras como articulaciones discordantes de su jadeante respiración.

El reverendo Gwyon había salido un momento antes, destocado, hollando con tanta fuerza el entablado del porche que todavía parecía no haber recuperado el silencio cuando apareció él y divisó la gran figura de Gwyon bajando resueltamente la cuesta hacia la cochera. Lo siguió a toda prisa, resbalando y deslizándose sobre los poros empapados de la nieve como si fuera la cuesta escarpada de hacía veinticinco años; y antes de llegar al final se cayó de bruces, con lo que la costra de la nieve le rajó la mejilla, y durante el momento que estuvo allí tendido amortiguó su repetición: «Tú sabes quién soy. ¿No sabes quién soy? ¿No me conoces…?».

La lluvia se precipitaba cada vez con más fuerza sobre la saturada superficie que la esperaba, y cuando se puso en pie estaba ya calado. En aquel preciso instante se oyó el estampido de un trueno.

Gwyon había llegado ya a la cochera y abierto la puerta de golpe. Había electricidad allí, y Gwyon se

quedó al lado de la entrada, tapando el interruptor con su manaza y apretándolo una y otra vez con el pulgar sin otro resultado que un clic.

—Maldición —murmuró, y luego, consciente de alguien a su espalda, dijo—: El toro. He bajado a ver cómo está el toro…

Pero apenas habían brotado estas palabras de su boca cuando sintió que le agarraban el brazo alzado en la oscuridad con tanta fuerza que estuvo a punto de caerse; y el relámpago siguió con tanta rapidez a las palabras que siguieron que uno y otras se habían extinguido, y la transformación fue completa, cuando Gwyon oyó:

—Padre… *¿Soy yo el hombre por quien murió Cristo?*

Más fuerte que la carcajada, el estampido los levantó y separó en una cegadora agonía de luz en la que nada existió hasta que acabó, y la lápida de la oscuridad delató la imagen vivida, inmóvil, apagada y persistente del toro ante el pesebre y Janet doblada y abierta debajo de él.

Luego pareció que pasaban minutos enteros hasta que el grito, persiguiéndolos con su cola flageladora, atravesó la oscuridad y los dejó clavados en tierra. El agua caía entre ellos por un agujero del techo. El olor del humo les llegó en la oscuridad.

Sin un solo parpadeo de aviso se encendió la luz. Ante ellos había en el suelo una tina metálica con un agujero cuadrado en el fondo. La puerta estaba chamuscada y humeaba por los goznes y la cerradura.

Entonces las sombras de la pared empezaron a danzar desdoblándose, cada oscura forma fija remedada por una imagen distorsionada que brincaba a su alrededor, cuando apareció el Carpintero del Pueblo con un farol y se quedó en la puerta balanceándolo.

—¡Pues vaya! —dijo, y aunque no la elevó, su voz sonó confirmativa mientras entraba y se acercaba al pesebre del toro—. ¡Vaya! —dijo girando en redondo, y el farol con él—. ¡Magnífico vergajo tenemos aquí!

El toro se revolvió, haciendo crujir con su peso las tablas del suelo, y volviendo la cabeza se retiró.

Gwyon había desaparecido. Ambos se volvieron al mismo tiempo para mirar hacia la puerta, y cuando llegaron juntos a ella divisaron la figura de Gwyon a mitad de la cuesta, subiendo hacia la casa.

—Pues vaya —dijo el Carpintero del Pueblo, meneando la cabeza y balanceando el farol. Llevaba abierta la chaqueta, mostrando hasta la cintura los botones de su ropa interior. Se había puesto los pantalones y los chanclos para salir, y llevaba los pantalones al revés—. Es que he bajado a echar un vistazo —dijo, señalando con el farol hacia la plataforma del globo, que estaba como la había dejado. Luego sostuvo en alto el farol sobre la figura detenida a la entrada de la cochera.

—¡Mira, se ha caído!

El Carpintero del Pueblo alargó la mano y le agarró del brazo. Ambos veían a Gwyon tendido en el suelo cerca de la casa.

—Se ha caído. ¡¿No vas a dejarme que vaya a ayudarlo?!

—¿Y vas a humillarlo —respondió el Carpintero del Pueblo sin soltarlo— ayudándolo a levantarse?

Quedó sujeto por la mano del Carpintero del Pueblo hasta que Gwyon se recuperó y subió los escalones del porche. Entonces el Carpintero del Pueblo abrió lentamente la mano, los ojos clavados en él, hasta que de repente se desasió y echó a correr riendo cuesta arriba.

El Carpintero del Pueblo bajó el farol y volvió a mirar dentro de la cochera, murmurando. Luego apagó de un manotazo la luz eléctrica, cerró la puerta y subió penosamente la cuesta, abrochándose al tiempo la bragueta. En la entrada de la cocina levantó el cristal del farol, lo apagó y entró, tirando de un cordón de la luz mientras se acercaba directamente a su cacerola sobre el fuego apagado. Se oyeron voces, o una voz, en el comedor o al fondo del pasillo, no lo sabía ni les prestó atención.

—«¡Fuera, al infierno, al infierno!». ¿Te acuerdas de eso?

El Carpintero del Pueblo se arremangó, cogió un trozo de jabón amarillo del fregadero metálico y metió las manos en la cacerola.

—«Oh, si pudiera ver el infierno y volver. ¡Qué feliz sería entonces!». ¡Sí, sí, eso es! ¡Volver allí!

El Carpintero del Pueblo encontró el jabón entre pliegues en el fondo de la cacerola, lo sacó y se secó las manos.

—Algo va mal —murmuró mientras apagaba la luz—, debemos simplificar —mientras se dirigía pesadamente hacia las escaleras traseras.

Janet salió por la puerta de la despensa. Se detuvo al oír la voz al fondo del pasillo, o en el comedor; no estaba segura, pero se quedó escuchando un momento, calada hasta los huesos, la falda desgarrada, el pelo desgreñado. Luego siguió adelante.

—¡Sí, volver allí, ése es el sitio! ¡Están esperando! Sí, el descenso a los infiernos. Eso es.

Entonces se oyó astillarse la madera en el comedor. Janet lo encontró solo allí. Acababa de rajar por la

mitad el tablero de la mesa baja junto a la ventana.

—¿Qué pasa? —preguntó Janet serenamente, acercándose.

—Condenación —contestó él, retrocediendo alrededor de la mesa.

—¿Condenación? —repitió ella clara y quedamente, mientras la esquivaba y retrocedía hasta la puerta.

—¿Condenación? —repitió él en tono inquisitivo, deteniéndose mientras ella se acercaba, agarrado al marco de la puerta.

—Eso es Adda sin amor —dijo Janet—. ¿Quién llora por ti?

Él se volvió y salió atropelladamente al pasillo.

—¿Por quién lloras tú? —lo persiguió. Llegó a la puerta principal y se volvió a mirarla, avanzando hacia él con la falda desgarrada y manchada de sangre—. ¿No conoces ese lujo, el lujo más exquisito que tenemos? —siguió hasta alcanzarle.

—Tú… —exclamó él, sosteniendo ante sí una mano temblorosa—, ¿estabas tú… allá abajo en la… cochera?

Janet estaba pegada a él, tan cerca que sus ásperas mejillas casi se tocaban.

—Ningún amor se pierde —dijo, y lo besó en el lugar de la mejilla que le había rajado la nieve.

Se la quedó mirando un instante más, y salió a escape por la puerta principal.

Al entrar en su habitación, el Carpintero del Pueblo había encontrado una nota bajo la puerta. Se la leyó en voz alta al perro, que levantó la cabeza de la almohada para escuchar: «Mañana al alba, mucho trabajo por hacer en la iglesia». Era un trozo de papel de gran tamaño, firmado *Gw*. Al pie decía: «Devuelva vol. 18 Britannica Plants a Raym». Todo esto estaba escrito con letras muy grandes.

El Carpintero del Pueblo lo acercó a la luz, y como no encontró ningún otro mensaje se dispuso a archivarlo en un cajón, que tintineó con ruido de botellas cuando lo abrió. Pero luego se volvió con el papel todavía en la mano, y sacó su enorme reloj de oro, lo sopesó durante un momento sin abrirlo y lo metió en el cajón. A continuación sacó una pitillera plana de oro y empezó a pasar el pulgar por la inscripción.

El perro dejó oír un gañido, y un minuto después se apagó la luz, y la voz del Carpintero del Pueblo sonó cansada en la oscuridad. «Córrete, ocupas demasiado sitio. ¿Te he cepillado los dientes? Vaya. Córrete. Duérmete. Mañana nos espera un montón de trabajo».

La Taberna de la Estación era una de las pocas luces encendidas en aquella parte del pueblo.

—Yo no me atrevería a salir con este tiempo —dijo el hombrecillo de la cerveza, contemplando por el cristal la noche despejada—. Me caería de cabeza en alguna parte.

El hombre con la mujer azul tatuada en el brazo estaba a punto de hacer un comentario cuando la puerta se abrió de golpe, y la desastrada figura que entró pidió coñac antes de llegar a la barra.

—No hay coñac, sólo tengo un poco de brandy.

—De acuerdo, brandy. Una copa de brandy. Espere, he dicho una copa, no… no eso.

Le pusieron delante un vaso grande medio lleno, y sacó un billete de veinte dólares.

El hombrecillo dio un sorbito a su cerveza, y se quedó mirando con aire perplejo aquella extravagante diversión.

—Oiga, ¿qué es eso? ¿Qué es eso?

—¿Qué…?

—Justo detrás de usted. En la vitrina.

—¿Esto de aquí? ¿Este coco?

—Dios santo… es un huevo de grifo. Déjeme verlo.

—Esto es un coco.

—Déjeme verlo. ¿De dónde lo ha sacado?

—Me lo mandó un tipo que estaba haciendo el servicio…

—Déjeme verlo.

—Agítelo, oirá la leche moviéndose dentro. ¿La oye?

—Sí, sí, la oigo. Dios santo… ¿me lo vende?

—¿Venderlo?

—Tome. ¿Quiere más?

—Bueno, yo… por un coco no podría pedirle…

—Tome, veinte más ¿Es suficiente?

La mano del hombrecillo temblaba cuando dejó su cerveza en la barra, silenciosamente, para no interrumpir. El vaso era casi opaco, cubierto como estaba de huellas de dedos, pues llevaba sosteniéndolo

toda la tarde.

Un poco más allá, en la barra, la mujer azul, que llevaba un rato recostada, quedó bruscamente doblada y estrangulada hasta tocarse casi las rodillas con la frente.

—¿A qué hora llega el próximo tren?

—¿Adónde va usted?

—Abajo.

—¿Dónde abajo?

—Abajo del todo.

—Dentro de un minuto, dentro de tres o cuatro minutos llega uno —logró decir el hombrecillo, sumamente excitado al oír su propia voz—. Dentro de tres o cuatro minutos llega uno —repitió—. Llega uno dentro de tres o cuatro minutos.

Contuvieron el aliento basta que la puerta volvió a cerrarse de golpe, haciendo temblar el cristal entre ellos y la noche. Entonces se quedaron mirando el vaso vacío, y los dos billetes de veinte dólares en la barra. Hasta el ciervo de doce puntas parecía tener clavado en ellos un ojo polvoriento.

El tren llegó a Nueva York aquella noche a las once.

El taxi se deslizó por el pavimento mojado, entrando y saliendo de los charcos de nieve fangosa que flanqueaban los bordillos, adelantándolo todo en el frenético movimiento de las calles, rasgando la penumbra de las laterales con sus luces y su ruido.

Cuando frenó junto a la acera se apeó de un salto, dejando en la mano del taxista varios billetes sin contar, y se apoyó contra la puerta mientras alargaba la mano para llamar al timbre. Pero la puerta no estaba cerrada con llave, y de pronto se vio en el vestíbulo de entrada. Allí lo detuvo una voz que gritaba furiosamente desde arriba:

—Le dije que iba a hacerlo, señor Brown… —Se oyó un fuerte golpe sordo, y luego tres más—. Le dije, le dije que iba a matarle, y ahora lo estoy haciendo…, señor Brown —y ruido de golpes una y otra vez mientras atravesaba el inmenso cuarto de estar y subía las escaleras, pasando junto al santo de madera polícroma que alzaba desde el nicho el muñón de su brazo en gesto de bendición.

Encendió la luz de la galería, y se hizo el silencio. Miró en el dormitorio de Recktall Brown. Estaba vacío. Luego fue hasta el fondo del pasillo, dobló la esquina y llegó a la última puerta.

Fuller estaba solo. Estaba en ropa interior, con su paraguas roto en la mano, inclinado sobre su cama hundida, cuya colcha aparecía arrugada y desgarrada en los lugares donde la había estado golpeando.

—Le advertí que iba a hacerlo —dijo Fuller sin mirar apenas a su alrededor, y el oro de sus dientes relució fugazmente con la luz que entraba desde el pasillo.

Al pie de la cama había dos maletas repletas, ambas de cartón y atadas con fuerte bramante. Encima de ellas estaba el sombrero de copa de paja. En la mesa, entre varias colillas de puro y la cuchilla de afeitar que usaba Fuller para cortarlas, estaba el puro cuya hoja se había abierto cuando Recktall Brown le cortó la punta de un mordisco, ahora envuelto en un pañuelo perfumado con colonia. Bajo la mesa, el suelo aparecía cubierto de trozos de papel: RECKTIL BROWN, REKTELL BROWN, RECKTILL BROWNE… que tapaban los crucifijos amontonados contra la pared.

—¿Dónde está?

—El señor Brown ha salido de viaje, dijo que volvería mañana. A veces cuando está irritado se vuelve muy imprevisible.

—¿Qué ha pasado?

—Me ha quitado un billete —contestó Fuller, mientras su pecho se estremecía bajo la pechera abotonada de su ropa interior, amarilleada por su vida en ella.

—Pero ¿ese olor? ¿Qué es ese olor tan horrible? Como pelo ardiendo.

—Eso es lo que es, un olor maligno —dijo Fuller—. Así huele el mal.

IV

«“He tenido un buen sueño, caballeros”, dijo con una voz extraña, con una nueva luz, como de alegría, en la cara».

DOSTOIEVSKI, *Los hermanos Karamazov*

«Sempre con fe sincera… la mia preghiera… ai santi tabernacoli salì…».

Tras la puerta de Esme no se oía más mido que éste, el de la radio. Otto levantó la mano para llamar otra vez, y cuando sus nudillos golpearon la puerta se abrió bruscamente cuatro pulgadas. Su sonrisa se torció en sorpresa, cada rasgo de su cara se transformó en su contradicción.

Chaby le miraba por encima de la cadena. Chaby llevaba una chaqueta de ante con el cuello levantado por detrás, y su pelo parecía un triunfo de pastelero.

«Nell’ora del dolore… perché, Signore, perché me ne rimuneri così?».

—¿Está Esme?

—No.

—¿Sabes dónde está?

—Cómo coño voy a saberlo. Ha salido a tomar café.

—¿Sabes dónde?

—Cómo coño voy a saberlo.

Chaby no dio el portazo hasta que Otto llegó a las escaleras.

Esme estaba sentada ante una barra comiendo una tostada. Llevaba por todo maquillaje unos bruscos trazos tenues en las cejas. Sonrió, y tendió la mano a Otto, que mientras se sentaba a su lado se dio cuenta de que estaba desayunando con el individuo de cuello grueso que tenía a la derecha. Le estaba enseñando unas fotos tamaño instantánea.

—Han salido bien —dijo—. Mucho mejor que la mayoría de las chicas que conseguimos, con pinta inocente. Pero mira éstas, mira estas mías. —Las fotografías lo mostraban en actitudes teatrales. En una sostenía un cuchillo. En otra una pistola. En otra una soga, lista para dar garrote. En todas llevaba un sombrero (como lo llevaba ahora), y una colilla embutida en la comisura de la boca (como la tenía ahora) —. ¿Qué dices?

—Es muy amable por tu parte —dijo Esme sonriéndole.

—Vendré a verte el viernes, ¿eh?

—¿Qué era *eso?* —preguntó Otto cuando se fue el hombre.

—Es un hombre muy majo que va a actuar en el cine —dijo Esme.

—¿Qué quería de ti?

—Creo que quería que actuase en el cine.

Ambos habían sonreído, y por un momento estuvieron juntos. Luego Otto dijo:

—Vengo de tu apartamento —y retiró la mano.

—¿Y has visto al señor Sinis-te-rra? —preguntó ella, sonriendo aún.

—Sí. ¿Qué está haciendo ahí?

—Vino a verme.

—Ya supongo. ¿Cuándo, anoche?

—Otto, eso no está bien —dijo poniéndose seria, decepcionada.

—Lo siento. —De repente, Otto no pudo soportar que le abandonaran así: se había retirado como se retira una mujer, para que la sigan. No hubo seguimiento en los ojos de Esme, que los apartó de él—. Lo siento, Esme.

—No lo sientes, Otto. Sólo lo dices. Es un hábito.

No había reprensión ni sensación de dolor en la voz de Esme; le hablaba con sencillez.

—Esme… Oh, mira, no quería decir eso…

—¿Por qué dices que ha dormido conmigo?

—No quería decir eso en absoluto —dijo Otto (y en aquel instante estuvo apunto de replicar: «Bueno, ¿lo ha hecho?»). Pero Esme estaba ya sonriendo de nuevo alegremente. Sonreía a alguien que estaba tras él.

—Hola, Stanley —dijo con dulzura—. ¿Conoces a Otto?

Stanley asintió con la cabeza y dijo «hola», pasándose el libro que llevaba de la mano derecha a la izquierda para estrechar la mano del otro, pero no hizo más. Su mano derecha cayó vacía a su costado.

—Pobre Stanley. ¿Por qué estás tan
tris-te
?

—Estoy bien —dijo Stanley. Se quedó allí parado, balanceándose levemente hacia ellos, como si el bigote le pesara en aquella dirección. Finalmente dijo—: ¿Os habéis enterado de lo de Charles?

—No, ¿qué le ha pasado?

—Está en el Bellevue. Lo llevaron allí anoche.

Entró Max. Iba sonriendo. Los saludó, y pidió café.

—¿Qué tal con tu obra, Otto? —preguntó.

—Bueno, la verdad es que estoy un poco preocupado —dijo Otto—. He perdido una o dos copias de ella. En una cartera. Una cartera de piel de cerdo. ¿No has oído nada…?

—No, no he oído nada —dijo Max afablemente.

—He oído hablar de tu obra —dijo Stanley.

—¿*La has* encontrado?

—No, sólo quería decir que he oído hablar de ella.

—¿Y qué has oído, que es un plagio?

—No, no quería decir eso. Me gustaría leerla.

—Te gustaría, claro… —murmuró Otto.

—Otto tiene una conciencia culpable —dijo Esme, y Max cogió su taza de café y no dijo nada.

—Creo que será mejor que me vuelva a la parte alta —dijo Otto con tono forzado, despreocupado gracias a un gran esfuerzo.

—¿De verdad, Otto? —dijo Esme, sorprendida, mientras él cogía la cuenta de su desayuno—. Entonces gracias por el desayuno.

—¿Has tomado huevos con beicon y fruta y pastas?

—No, eso ha sido el caballero del cine —dijo Esme.

—Muy bien —dijo él, arrugando la cuenta en la mano.

—Gracias, Otto.

—¿Quieres que me vaya?

—Pero Otto, ¿por qué iba a querer que te vayas?

Otto encendió otro cigarrillo y pidió otra taza de café. Cuando levantaron la vista, Stanley había desaparecido. Al volverse, Esme lo vio fuera, parado con aire indeciso en la esquina de la calle.

—Pobre Stanley —dijo dulcemente, y sonrió.

—Lo único que necesita es una mujer —dijo Max.

—Necesita dinero —dijo Esme.

—En el caso de Stanley, el dinero no es más que un sustituto de la madre. Tiene sentimientos de culpa porque está en el hospital, y cualquiera que le dé dinero ocupará el lugar de la madre, el sustituto alimenticio.

—Supongo que Hannah le da lo que necesita —dijo Otto con un taciturno tono confidencial.

—Le gustaría.

—Bueno, hace un par de noches estaba durmiendo con él.

—¿Dónde has oído eso?

—Estaba allí desvestida a las cinco de la mañana. No sé qué más estaba haciendo.

—¿Estaba Stanley allí?

—Claro que estaba allí —dijo Otto de modo desafiante.

—Bueno, así que al fin se lo tiró —dijo Max. Sonrió y terminó su café—. Todavía no has visto mis cuadros, ¿verdad, Otto? Hace dos días que inauguraron la exposición. Luego me voy a pasar por la galería, ¿me acompañas?

—Ahora no, Max —dijo Otto, mirando a Esme.

—Ya han vendido siete —dijo Max al marcharse.

—Lo odio —dijo Otto cuando hubo salido por la puerta.

—Otto, qué tontería has dicho.

—Sí, lo… desconfío tanto de él. Cuando está delante me gustaría llevar una pistola en el bolsillo. No para hacer nada con ella, sólo para llevarla ahí —añadió, y blandió el cabestrillo.

—Sí —dijo Esme, llevándose de pronto la mano a la frente y pasándose los dedos por el pelo—. Porque

él sobrevivirá.

—Esme, quiero hablarte. Esme… —Ella alzó la vista, sorprendida, y pareció asustarse—. Quiero hablarte.

—Háblame —dijo, y sonrió.

—Pero no aquí, no en este lugar, me… Pueden… Alguien puede… ¿Me acompañas a dar un paseo?

Otto pagó cinco desayunos, y salieron. Caminaron hacia Washington Square.

—¿Qué, Otto? —le preguntó, una vez sentados en un banco.

—No sé. Quiero decir, mira.

—¿Qué te has hecho ahí? —dijo ella, señalando su mejilla.

—Me he cortado con una cuchilla asquerosa. Mira, Esme. Quiero decir, ¿estás realmente conmigo? Quiero decir, ¿estamos tú y yo, bueno, juntos? Quiero decir que siempre tengo la sensación de que te estoy compartiendo con todos los que están delante.

—Otto, qué difícil te lo pones todo.

—*¿Yo?*

—Sí, Otto. Aprietas algo y lo aprietas hasta que se rompe.

—No quiero hacer eso, Esme. No lo pretendo.

—Pero lo haces cada vez más, Otto.

—Te quiero, Esme. No he parado de decírtelo. Te quiero.

—No, no me quieres, Otto.

—Sí. Te quiero.

—No, no me quieres, Otto. Ni siquiera sabes quién soy.

Esme le hablaba serenamente, como explicando a un niño una verdad de adultos.

—Sí que lo sé. Y aunque no lo supiera, ¿tengo yo la culpa?

—Me tenías completamente ocupada antes de conocerme, Otto. No quedaba nada de espacio para mí.

—No seas ridícula, Esme.

—No es ridí-culo, Otto. Sólo es la verdad, no sabes quién soy.

—Pero yo he… tú has… y ni siquiera sé si me has sido fiel —exclamó.

—Sólo se puede ser fiel a las personas de una en una, Otto.

Se la quedó mirando a la cara, medio vuelta hacia el otro lado. Luego alargó la mano y la hizo volverla hacia él. Ella pareció asustarse.

—¿Por qué eres bella? —preguntó perentoriamente. Ella abrió más los ojos, e intentó bajar la cara—. ¿Por qué lo eres? —repitió, mirándola. Ella apartó la barbilla, y bajó la cara en silencio—. Porque tú… miro tu cara, esta cara de carne y hueso con tantas pulgadas de alto y de ancho, y la nariz sobresaliendo y las… ventanas de la nariz, y tus labios y yo… y esas dos cosas que son ojos, y yo… por qué ha de ser eso bello, al fin y al cabo. ¿Qué es…? —y la voz de Otto se constriñó de repente—. ¿Qué es la belleza… —se aclaró la garganta— para que tu cara sea bella…?

—Si no fuera bella para alguien no existiría —dijo ella.

—Sí, bueno… bueno… —murmuró, bajando los ojos—. Mira —dijo, alzándolos de nuevo—. ¿Tengo yo la culpa de que ni siquiera me hayas dejado saber quién eres?

—Pero si nunca lo has intentado, Otto. Ninguna parte de ti lo ha intentado.

—Mira, he hecho todo lo que he podido por ti, ¿no? Me… estoy más que harto de todas estas tonterías, estas… Siento haberme comportado como lo he hecho con algunos de tus amigos, pero…

—Tú eres el único al que haces desdichado cuando te portas mal, Otto. Te conviertes en la víctima de tus propias observaciones.

—¿Me quieres?

—No es tan sencillo, Otto.

—Pero tú has dicho que me querías. —Se quedó callada—. Me… maldita sea, me hago un lío con los demás —exclamó finalmente, aferrando con su mano libre la que sobresalía del cabestrillo—. Me… es como intentar hacer un nudo ante un espejo, sé exactamente lo que hay que hacer y luego lo hago todo al revés. —Se quedó mirando hacia abajo. Luego levantó los ojos de repente y dijo—: Crees… ¿me parezco a Chaby?

Esme alzó la vista hacia él. No sonrió, pero su cara se despejó e iluminó como la habría iluminado una sonrisa.

—Otto —dijo—. No. ¿Por qué me preguntas eso?

—No lo sé. No importa —dijo, bajando de nuevo los ojos—. Sólo que… a veces siento mi caray… o me siento moviéndome o mirando algo de un modo que me… bueno, no importa, eso no importa. No me hagas caso.

El esbozo de sonrisa que no había aflorado se desvaneció de su cara, y dijo en voz baja:

—De acuerdo.

—Pero no, quiero decir, no lo sé. A veces lo sé, a veces casi lo sé, y luego se me escapa. Como una historia que oí una vez, me la contó un amigo, alguien a quien traté hace tiempo, una historia sobre un cuadro falsificado. Era un Tiziano falsificado que alguien había pintado sobre otro cuadro antiguo, y cuando rasparon el falso Tiziano encontraron debajo un cuadro antiguo sin valor, el falsificador lo había utilizado porque era un lienzo viejo. Pero había algo más bajo aquel cuadro sin valor, y cuando lo rasparon encontraron debajo un Tiziano, un Tiziano auténtico que había estado allí todo el tiempo. Era como si cuando el falsificador estaba trabajando, y no sabía que el original estaba debajo, quiero decir que no sabía que lo sabía, pero ello lo sabía, quiero decir que algo lo sabía. Quiero decir, ¿entiendes lo que quiero decir? Que debajo de eso está el original, que lo… auténtico está ahí, y en la superficie… si solo puedes ver… ¿entiendes lo que quiero decir?

Ella había apoyado la cabeza y cerrado los ojos. Él le pasó el brazo por los hombros, y entonces se inclinó hacia adelante.

—Esme… —Las breves pinceladas de ansiedad y las bruscas pinceladas de detalle quebraban los fragmentos de expresión en la cara de él, y parecía incapaz de atrapar ninguno de ellos y fijarlo de modo congruente sobre aquella imagen de honradez original a la que tan desesperadamente se aferraba bajo la superficie, y en la segunda superficie, más confusa a cada instante con la sucesión de burlonas pinceladas de parodia que no podía controlar. Hubo un momento en que podría haber pensado, e incluso entendido; pero no tuvo tiempo para abarcarlo, y pasó de largo—. Es sólo que… maldita sea, Esme…

—Por favor, no maldigas delante de mí —dijo apagadamente, los ojos bajos siguiendo a una paloma que pasaba ante ellos.

—Lo siento, pero me… —Entonces se echó a reír de forma brusca y ronca—. Te acuerdas de una vez que… Mira, ¿no lo entiendes? Quiero decir, no puedes vivir de ese modo, no puedes… espera, ¿adónde vas?

—Tengo que irme ya, Otto.

—Pero no, Esme, por favor no te vayas, tengo que hablarte.

—Ya hemos hablado —dijo, mirándolo a la cara; y Otto levantó la mano y dio una pincelada correctora a su bigote.

—Quiero casarme contigo, Esme. Yo, no puedes seguir así, quiero decir tan insegura, la forma en que vives, y quiero hacerlo, si puedo salvarte de…

—¡Salvarme de! —lo interrumpió burlonamente—. Siempre es salvar de —dijo bajando los ojos—, y nunca salvar para. Todo el mundo lucha contra cosas, pero la gente no lucha por cosas.

Otto estaba de pie a su lado con aire inseguro, como dispuesto a detenerla si se volvía para marcharse.

—Y yo… aunque ahora no me quieras, yo… como dijo san Juan de la Cruz, «Donde no hay amor, pon amor y saca amor», y yo…

Al oír esto, alzó la vista hacia él, sorprendida. Luego dijo:

—¿Es eso lo que él quería decir? —Antes de que Otto pudiera responder siguió adelante, bajando los ojos de nuevo—: No, cómo iba a saber lo que quería decir. Cuando la gente dice una verdad no entiende lo que significa, la dice por accidente, los atraviesa y no la reconocen hasta que alguien los acusa de decir la verdad, entonces intentan recuperarla como propia y se les escapa. Los santos eran gente muy mezquina.

—Sí, yo… sí, eso es, y yo… quiero casarme contigo.

Ella alzó la vista y le sonrió.

—¿Cómo podría casarme contigo, si no tengo estómago?

—Esme, para ya. Lo digo en serio. Quiero decir que sabes que soy sincero. Siempre he sido sincero contigo.

Ella puso la mano sobre la suya.

—Otto —dijo—. La sinceridad termina siendo la honradez de la gente que no puede ser honrada consigo misma.

—Esme…

—Tengo que irme.

—Pues muy bien, maldita sea, vete.

Ella se volvió y se alejó de él. Luego apareció él de nuevo a su lado.

—Esme…

—¿Qué pasa, Otto? —preguntó en voz baja, mirándolo como a un extraño al que no conociera.

—Esme, yo… mira, por favor…

—Adiós, Otto —dijo dulcemente.

—Esme…

Se alejó tranquilamente de él. Sólo eran las once de la mañana.

Con una niña de seis años cogida de la mano, Anselm contemplaba melancólicamente un escaparate lleno de prendas de lencería, entre otras un sostén de encaje negro con manos de raso negro que tapaban el pecho sintético del maniquí. En la otra mano, Anselm llevaba *El reino de Dios* de Tolstoi, pero envuelto en una revista con una chica y un paraguas, y nada más, en la portada, de modo que lo único que se veía del librito era el lomo. La niñita miraba calle arriba, por donde se acercaba Stanley, y tiró de su acompañante en aquella dirección, pero él la retuvo, frotándose las ásperas inflamaciones de su barbilla, y siguió mirando el escaparate de la tienda.

Stanley habría podido pasar de largo sin interrumpir aquel ensueño, e irse a casa a trabajar (llevaba su teclado de prácticas de cartón y un libro), pero por la otra esquina se acercaba Max, que ahora se detuvo a saludar a Otto, que venía de la dirección del parque.

Sin decir palabra, Anselm le cogió el libro de la mano a Stanley, lo miró y se lo devolvió murmurando algo. Luego dijo bruscamente:

—Anoche soñé contigo. —Stanley puso cara de inquietud—. Sé que eras tú, debías ser tú —siguió Anselm, antes de que los otros se acercaran—. En el sueño estaba cruzando una calle y alguien, alguien al que conocía bien, debías de ser tú, cruzaba desde la otra acera con algo acunado en los brazos como un bebé. Iba envuelto en un chal negro, di por supuesto que era un bebé, y entonces él dijo, entonces dijiste: «Quiero que conozcas a mi madre». Miré y era una viejecita diminuta, una viejecita diminuta que iba envuelta en el chal…

—Sí, pero… muy bien, pero…

—¿Qué pasa? —dijo Anselm, mirándolo con profunda curiosidad.

—Simplemente me gustaría que no… —Stanley miró a uno y otro lado y hacia abajo—. Es un poco…

—Era, era extraño, era una especie de pesadilla.

Stanley alzó los ojos, y se quedaron mirando fijamente el uno al otro hasta que Max llegó a su lado. Entonces Anselm se echó a reír de repente, metiendo a la niñita entre ambos, y habló como si reanudara la misma conversación.

—Vamos, tócanos algo. Mira, Stanley ha traído su instrumento —dijo, señalando con la revista el teclado de prácticas que Stanley sostenía defensivamente ante sí—. Nos va a tocar algo de Vivaldi. Vamos, Stanley, por el amor de Dios, no seas tan tímido, tócanos algo de esa bonita música barroca jesuítica, bi-dú-bi-bú,

bi-bi

, budi dudi bú… ¿Sabéis el del chico que estaba sentado en la roca?, y se ataba cuerdas de violín…

—Por favor… —empezó Stanley.

—Aquí viene Otto —dijo Max.

—Y con cada erección tocaba trozos escogidos de Johann Sebastian Bach.

—Tengo que irme a casa —dijo Stanley.

—¿A qué, a tu luna de miel de cinco dedos?

—A… a trabajar —dijo Stanley, mientras Anselm se volvía a mirar hacia la otra acera, donde un hombre alto y encorvado, vestido con una camisa verde de lana, hizo un gesto de reconocimiento con la cabeza, lo bastante leve como para renegar de él si no obtenía respuesta. Max se lo devolvió afablemente—. ¿Quién es ése? —preguntó Stanley a Max.

—Un crítico de mierda —dijo Anselm—, tres veces psicoasnalizado. —Escupió junto al bordillo—. Con su falsa conversión a la Iglesia. ¿Os acordáis de aquella chica diminuta con la que salía?, apenas le llegaba a la cintura. Se la llevaba a casa, la vestía de niñita y la violaba.

—Demasiado Dostoyevski —dijo Max.

—El estúpido cabrón con su conversión de mierda —murmuró Anselm, apartando la vista de la niña que llevaba de la mano, y clavándola vidriosamente en la acera—. Cristo —dijo, frotándose la barbilla—, eso es lo que me mata, un tipo como ése… —Mientras una chica de color, con una falda escocesa que Max identificó por detrás como tartán Stuart, pasaba diciendo «Leer a Proust no es simplemente leer un *libro,* es una experiencia y no puedes rechazar una experiencia» al chico que iba con ella.

—Es la Guardia Negra —dijo Anselm, y volviéndose hacia Stanley—: Por qué no cambias tu suerte, Stanley. Tú… maldita sea, ¿por qué me miras de ese modo?

—Yo… tengo frío —dijo Stanley, bajando los ojos. Le temblaba la barbilla.

—¡Frío! Tú… tú… ¿Qué te has hecho en la cara, a todo esto? ¿Qué le pasa a tu barbilla, a todo esto? —exclamó Anselm de repente.

—Esta mañana me confundí —dijo Stanley, pasándose la mano por la barbilla—, y me afeité con la pasta de dientes en vez de…

—¡Con la pasta de dientes! —dijo Anselm, retrocediendo con una rápida carcajada—. Deberías probar con una manzana ahuecada llena de crema cosmética, deberías…

—Y anoche tuve una experiencia terrible —siguió Stanley, con aire agitado, alzando la vista hacia ambos—. Entré en una tienda para comprar una lata de sopa y un poco de pan, y el hombre que estaba tras el dinero… quiero decir tras la caja, estaba contando el dinero y había algo en una bolsa de papel sobre el mostrador, y yo la cogí por error y estuve a punto de salir con el dinero, y cuando volví con él y dije que lo sentía… bueno, no estuvieron nada agradables.

Un chico rubio con un mono ajustado pasó diciendo: «Zheeed…».

—Bueno, ¿y por qué demonios volviste con él?

—Estuvieron a punto de llamar a la policía.

—El espíritu cristiano de Stanley nos arruinará a todos —dijo Max, que había estado algo apartado.

—Sí, lo haríamos santo si no fuera tan jodidamente caro —replicó Anselm, mirando a Stanley—. Tres millones de liras por una puñetera canonización —murmuró.

—No, no serviría. —Max retrocedió un paso y miró a Stanley de arriba abajo—. Come carne. Su cuerpo se pudrirá antes de que puedan ponerle la aureola. Las campesinas pobres del sur de Europa son las mejores para eso, porque se alimentan de alubias.

—Es verdad —dijo Anselm con aire pensativo, bajando la vista. Luego la alzó quejumbrosamente hacia Max.

Del *drugstore* que tenían a la espalda salió un joven gordo que a aquella distancia parecía tener pintada la barba. Le goteaba por un lado en la barbilla. «Si ella no reza por mí, no sé *quién* lo hará», iba diciendo animadamente, esparciendo las palabras ante sí con gruesas manos revoloteantes. El chico que lo acompañaba lo cogió del brazo mientras cruzaban la calle.

Max había saludado con un gesto de cabeza.

—Ha escrito una buena crítica de mi exposición —explicó.

—¿Lo conoces? —preguntó Stanley.

—No puedes ir a una sola inauguración sin encontrártelo. Dice estupideces con gracia, ¿sabéis?, tiene cierto estilo, así que la gente lo recuerda como inteligente.

—Ese tipo de gente me pone nervioso —dijo Stanley.

—Qué tipo de gente.

—La que es tan… marica.

—¡Marica! —exclamó Anselm, y siguió mirando cómo cruzaban la calle—. ¿Marica, ése? Ése no es homosexual, es una lesbiana. —Max se echó a reír, y Anselm siguió—: Y ese chico poeta que va con él, por el amor de Dios. ¡Poeta…! Esos… lánguidos poetastros de culo fofo, que se sientan a esperar que alguien les meta el chisme por el… Jesucristo, esos chicos poetas y su asfódelo común. —Anselm volvió a reír, una risa tirante y constreñida, mirando hacia la pareja que se alejaba por la acera de enfrente—. Su asfódelo común —rio, cogiendo la revista que llevaba Max bajo el brazo, y cayendo de nuevo, mientras volvía las páginas, en el ensimismamiento en el que había estado sumido un momento antes.

—Me gustó tu poema —dijo Stanley a Max—. El que acaban de publicar. Ese verso sobre la Belleza, que desdeña serenamente destruirnos.

—Sí, ten… casi se te cae esto —lo interrumpió rápidamente Max, enderezando el teclado de prácticas que Stanley tenía aferrado entre las manos, y echando una rápida ojeada a Anselm. Pero al parecer Anselm no lo había oído. Levantó la mirada de la revista para señalar con la cabeza por encima del hombro a la figura que se acercaba, y dijo:

—¿Otto? ¿Es el tipo que se ha estado tirando a Esme?

—Ella se lo ha estado tirando a él —dijo Max.

Otto se acercaba con la cabeza baja, como vencida por el peso de la barahúnda que llevaba dentro, y sus rasgos decaían hacia los bordes de su cara, con la expresión de alguien en busca de algo, o quizá de alguien, una persona con la que pudiera hablar a fondo de ello, alguien que hubiera sufrido que otros se aprovechasen de sus buenas intenciones, y que pudiera comprenderlo (por lo que Otto, para sus adentros, entendía compadecerlo); alguien lo bastante sensible (quería decir débil) para apreciar, y lo bastante experimentado (quería decir amargado) para justificar su dilema. En su barahúnda interior apareció Stanley, encorvado, comprensivo, sensible experimentado: alzó los ojos y apareció Stanley, hablando con (el

indigno de confianza) Max y (el odioso) Ansel.

—¿Por qué va por ahí con ese estúpido cabestrillo? —preguntó Anselm; pero Otto no pareció ofendido, pues cuando llegó a su lado estaban hablando de Charles—. Lo vi esta mañana —decía Anselm—. ¿Quién era el vejestorio que iba con él?

—Era su madre —dijo Max—. Ha venido de Grand Rapids para sacarlo del Bellevue.

Stanley había retrocedido con expresión afligida y, como siempre, a punto de irse pero incapaz de hacerlo. Otto y Max intercambiaron sonidos, y Max alargó la mano para coger la revista que Otto llevaba metida bajo el brazo en cabestrillo, dejando allí un periódico enrollado.

—La acabo de comprar —dijo Otto sin ningún motivo aparente, mientras Max abría la *Gaceta del coleccionista.*

—La llevabas cuando te vi esta mañana —dijo Max, alzando la vista para sonreír.

—Ah, sí, te… te vi antes, claro —dijo Otto, inmediatamente desautorizado, y se puso a buscar un cigarrillo como quien echa mano a una pistolera sobaquera.

—¡Cristo! Mirad esto, ¿queréis mirar esto? —exclamó Anselm, sosteniendo en alto la revista que le había cogido a Max. Era grande, de grueso papel satinado, llena de fotos: el semanario más popular del país. La página que enseñaba Anselm era una fotografía de moda—. ¿Queréis mirarla? ¿Os imagináis metiéndosela a eso? ¿Quién podría querer tirársela? —Enrolló la revista y se la embutió a Otto bajo el brazo, cambiándola por el periódico—. Escuálidas, de pecho plano, sin pelo en la cabeza y con menos formas en las bragas que un crío de diez años, esa es la facha que intentan dar a las mujeres esos maricones… ¿qué es ese olor? —Se detuvo y olfateó. Se miró los zapatos, y luego los de Stanley—. ¿Ya has pisado una, Stanley?

—¿Una qué? —preguntó Stanley con aire desvalido.

—¡Una qué! ¡Cristo…! No dirías mierda aunque dieras un bocado. —Entonces levantó la vista, y vio que Otto se había apartado de ellos y estaba restregándose el zapato contra el bordillo. Empezó a decir algo más, pero entonces se fijó en la reproducción de la *Gaceta del coleccionista* que tenía desplegada Max. Era *La Venus del espejo,* de Velázquez. Anselm emitió un sonido de admiración—. Dios, ¿no os gustaría tener eso colgado en la pared y jugar al zurriago cada noche? —La niñita tiró de su mano. La frenó en seco, dejando caer casi el libro que llevaba bajo el brazo envuelto en la revista, y abrió el periódico por el reportaje de la primera plana. Era una crónica de sucesos, y volvió a estallar—: Mirad esto. En una ciudad de ocho millones encuentran media docena de chicas alquilando el trasero por la calle y es la mayor redada de la historia. Eso me mata. Toma, no quiero leer esa mierda —terminó, metiéndolo de nuevo bajo el brazo en cabestrillo de Otto, que volvía murmurando algo entre dientes.

—Tengo que irme —dijo Stanley.

—Hicieron una gran cosa cuando limpiaron de prostíbulos la ciudad de Nueva York, una gran cosa para las colegialas —dijo Anselm mientras el periódico caía a la acera—. Ahora, si una chica no ha pescado unas buenas purgaciones antes de cumplir los dieciséis es solo por su puñetera culpa. —Luego se volvió hacia Otto, que intentó arquear las cejas mientras se enderezaba, sacudiendo el polvo de su periódico—. ¿Qué te parecería asociarte con Stanley y conmigo para un negocio? —preguntó bruscamente Anselm.

—No suena demasiado…

—Inseminación artificial —siguió Anselm, elevando la voz—. Fabricamos el producto clandestinamente. Vamos a anunciarlo en los noticieros cinematográficos. ¡Chicas! Tened un niño de vuestra estrella de cine favorita. Yo lleno los barriles y Stanley lo vende de puerta en puerta…

Stanley había retrocedido, bajando la vista hacia la niñita de la que Anselm tiró hacia adelante al agitar en el aire el desnudo con el paraguas.

—¿En qué parte del negocio quieres entrar?

Otto murmuró algo, mirando su periódico.

—Vamos. Tengo unas fotos muy bonitas —siguió Anselm con creciente excitación—, cuerpos bonitos con cabezas de estrellas de cine montadas…

—Déjalo ya —lo interrumpió Max.

Anselm se volvió hacia Max.

—Qué pasa —dijo. El viento, que soplaba del norte, había inflamado los granos de su cara, y tenía el pelo de punta—. ¿Nunca la has tenido empalmada y te ha escupido?

—Déjalo ya, por el amor de Dios. Estás chiflado.

—Y quién no lo está, con todo… esto —jadeó Anselm, agitando la revista de modo que el libro que llevaba envuelto salió volando. Resbaló por la acera y cayó junto al bordillo—. ¿No es preferible cualquier tipo de locura a… todo esto?

Anselm estaba temblando. Entonces vio que Stanley se acercaba a recoger el libro del suelo.

—¡No lo toques! —gritó—. ¡No lo toques! ¡No lo toques! ¡No lo toques!

Stanley se detuvo y retrocedió, no sin ver antes el título del libro. Anselm se agachó ante él para recogerlo, tosiendo y escupiendo en el suelo mientras se enderezaba ante Stanley. Limpió el libro en sus pantalones, tapándolo con la mano mientras lo hacía.

—Por el amor de Cristo —murmuró, recuperando el aliento.

Stanley tendió la mano con la palma hacia arriba y dio un paso hacia él.

—Y deja… deja de ser tan… —Anselm retrocedió un paso—. Deja de ser tan puñeteramente humilde —dijo, mientras la niñita lo cogía de la mano y lo hacía retroceder otro paso. Max había cogido a Stanley del brazo.

—Sabes puñeteramente bien que… la humildad es un desafío —siguió Anselm inconexamente—. Y tú… que la sencillez… la sencillez es hoy compleja… que la sencillez es hoy la máxima complejidad…

Le habían vuelto la espalda y estaban cruzando la calle. Max llevaba a Stanley del brazo.

—Eh, ¿qué dijo la gallina cuando puso el huevo cuadrado? Eh, Stanley, esta noche volveré a soñar contigo. Eh, Stanley, esta noche volveré a soñar contigo. ¿Qué dijo la gallina cuando puso el huevo cuadrado…? —gritó Anselm mientras se alejaban.

Ninguno de ellos habló mientras caminaban juntos, hasta que Otto, tras echar una mirada aprensiva por encima del hombro, dijo:

—Dios, está chiflado, ¿no? —Levantó la mano para acariciarse el bigote, que le temblaba, y preguntó—: ¿Quién es esa cría?

—La hija de Don Bildow, Anselm se la cuida a veces.

—Yo no lo dejaría acercarse a mi hija si tuviera cinco años. Ni siquiera lo dejaría aunque tuviera uno, ni siquiera me fiaría de él como cuidador de bebés, ¿sabes? No bromeo, no me haría.

Max levantó los ojos de la *Gaceta del coleccionista* con una sonrisa.

—Esa historia que ha contado sobre ese tipo que vestía a la chica con ropa de niña, ese era él.

—¿Quién? —preguntó rápidamente Stanley, parándose en seco.

—Anselm. Es él quien lo hacía, él mismo.

Stanley siguió andando con la cabeza baja, mirando la acera, caminando con cuidado.

—¿Creéis que es verdad que se alimenta de comida para perros? —preguntó finalmente.

Otto rio de modo desagradable.

—¿Quién te ha dicho eso?

—Él, él mismo me lo dijo. Comida para perros enlatada, dice que no está mal si le echas suficiente kétchup.

—Alguien debería pegarle un tiro a Anselm —dijo Otto—, con su cháchara chiflada sobre Dios.

—Pero ¿has leído algún poema suyo? —le preguntó Stanley por delante de Max, que caminaba entre ambos con la revista abierta—. Tenía uno muy bonito, era sobre Averroes, el pensador árabe de la Edad Media, y si debemos entender para creer o si debemos creer para entender…

—Mirad esto —dijo Max, sosteniendo en alto la *Gaceta del coleccionista* abierta por una foto de una escultura de Lipchitz, titulada *Madre e hijo II*—. ¿Quién creéis que escribe estas reseñas? Escuchad: «Fue poco después de empezar una serie de estudios de un torso de mujer cuando el escultor reconoció de pronto en ellos un parecido con la cabeza de un toro. Siguió desarrollando la cabeza de toro hasta lograr…».

—Pero hay más —lo interrumpió Stanley—, cuando dice… cuando Anselm dice que Dios se ha convertido en una figura teatral y sentimental en nuestra literatura, que Dios es un recurso melodramático que se utiliza para hacer un lío a los personajes de las novelas…

—Obviamente sentimientos de culpa —murmuró Max, bajando la revista para mirar mientras se acercaban al bordillo. Los otros, cada uno a un lado, caminaban observando atentamente dónde ponían los pies; pero Max, que apenas levantaba la vista de las páginas de vez en cuando, era el único de ellos que sabía adonde iban.

—Pero no es tan simple. ¿No os preguntáis por qué… por qué es todo negativo? —Stanley estiró el cuello para mirar a ambos—. ¿Por qué las mismas cosas que antes eran las aspiraciones de la vida son precisamente las que ahora se cobran un precio? Quiero decir, como… bueno, ¿como tener niños para las mujeres? Antes eran el fruto del amor, lo que más pedía la gente en sus oraciones, y ahora, ahora son el precio de… Todo es anticonceptivo, mires donde mires todo está en contra de la concepción, hasta que al final ya no puedes concebir más. Entonces llega un momento en que necesitas algo que te sirva, algo que llevas rechazando toda la vida, y entonces ya no sirve…

Y la voz de Stanley se apagó tras ellos, mientras cruzaban la calle y él esperaba a que pasara un taxi. Volvió a acercárseles diciendo: «Todo es tan transitorio, todo es tan provisional en América…». Pero Max

estaba diciendo algo a Otto, que en aquel momento se detuvo en la acera de enfrente con los ojos muy abiertos para preguntar:

—¿Ella? Ni siquiera sabía que la conocías. ¿Necesita un médico? Quieres decir un hombre…

—¿Qué crees que quiero decir, un pato? —rio Max—. Al menos eso es lo que he oído —añadió, caminando de nuevo con la revista abierta—. Supongo que nosotros tuvimos suerte.

—¿Suerte? —repitió Otto, deteniéndose, luego corriendo para alcanzar a Max—. ¿Quieres decir que tú… te has acostado con ella?

—Hace años que no —contestó Max; y tras echar una mirada de reojo a Otto siguió hablando con el mismo tono despreocupado, enseñándole una reproducción a doble página de la *Gaceta del coleccionista*—. Mira esto, lo describen como el «álgebra del sufrimiento», este cuadro flamenco. Hugo van der Goes.

Otto murmuró algo y miró la foto, aunque sólo fuera por centrar la atención en algo. Pero la confusión no abandonó su cara, y las arrugas en torno a sus ojos, unidas en una mueca de dolor, quedaron allí fijas mientras miraba fijamente *El descendimiento de la cruz* hasta que Max volvió la página.

—Pero… —murmuró, empezando a levantar una mano, empezando a hablar (pues aunque lo habían visto con aquella revista, que le había costado un dólar, sólo la había abierto una vez, y ésa, por venérea casualidad, por el Velázquez).

—Este Dierick Bouts es notable, ¿no? —siguió diciendo Max de la reproducción de la página siguiente, parafraseando el pie de foto—, la sutileza, el dominio. Hasta en blanco y negro, las líneas rígidas y las actitudes constreñidas, hay una especie de «álgebra del sufrimiento», ¿no?

—Ese Van… el de la página anterior —empezó de nuevo Otto.

—Van der Goes; había en él una incierta pasión abrumadora, ¿no? —comentó Max volviendo una página, no hacia atrás, sino hacia adelante para mostrar un retrato—. Van der Weyden, demasiado azucarado…

—¿Azucarado…? —Stanley apoyó la mano, revelando por primera vez que estaba mirando las fotos por encima del otro hombro.

Max se encogió de hombros.

—Pues zalamero —dijo, apartando la revista de la mano de Stanley para volver otra página—, no hay nada como el perfecto dominio… —añadió Max, y una vez hubo vuelto la página cuyo pie de foto estaba parafraseando, siguió—: Estos primitivos flamencos tenían un gran sentido de la lucencia y la perspectiva múltiple…

—Las conciencias múltiples separadas de las… cosas en estos primitivos flamencos, ésa es realmente la fuerza y la tara de estos cuadros —dijo Otto—, por así decirlo —añadió.

—¿Qué quieres decir?

—Bueno, por así decirlo, la minuciosidad con que se sienten obligados a recrear la atmósfera, y la… estos pintores que no se detienen en sugerencias, sino que acumulan la perfección capa a capa, y el detalle, eso es… viene a ser tanto la fuerza como la tara…

—¿De dónde has sacado eso? —le preguntó Max; y como no recibió una respuesta inmediata, alzó la vista. Otto bajó la suya inmediatamente, pero su expresión no cambió: estaba fija, como el tono apagado y compulsivo con que había sonado su voz cuando interrumpió.

—Como un escritor que no puede evitar dedicar tanta atención a un momento como a una hora… —siguió, ahora un poco más deprisa, con una voz, como la ansiedad que reflejaba su cara con leves crispaciones, tensa por un esfuerzo automático de memoria cuya plenitud no podía alcanzar, sino solo repetir a trompicones—. La perfección… —y se quedó callado, con la vista baja ante sí.

—Al mirar estos cuadros, incluso en reproducciones, tienes una impresión de facultades visuales incrementadas. Son casi perfectos —comentó Max, pasando rápidamente las páginas. Echó una ojeada al perfil desviado de Otto, y se volvió hacia Stanley—. ¿Verdad, Stanley?

—Sí, pero —empezó Stanley, titubeando—, estos hombres, estos pintores que creaban con el corazón en la mano, y todo esto, toda esta armonía que los rodeaba, todas las cosas, todas las cosas espirituales que los rodeaban y los sustentaban, que sabían que estarían allí mañana, y en el Gremio, bueno, lo que importaba en el Gremio era la opinión de tus compañeros artistas, no la competencia ante un montón de gente que lo único que sabía era el precio. El Gremio se encargaba incluso de tu entierro —añadió quejumbrosamente.

Max se echó a reír, con su risa breve, cordial y burlona.

—Yo mismo te enterraré, Stanley. Ahora puedes irte a casa y componer toda la música que quieras.

—Pero no se trata de componer, de inventar la música, es como… recordar, y como, bueno, lo que dice Van Gogh sobre la pintura, cuando elige como tema un dibujo de Delacroix e improvisa con colores, no como si fuera él, dice, sino buscando recuerdos de sus cuadros, la «vaga consonancia de colores», la

memoria que era él, su propia interpretación.

Se detuvieron juntos ante otro bordillo. El altavoz de una tienda vertía sobre ellos la voz vacua de un tenor estirando «Estoy soñando con una blanca Navidad…» con insípida y dolorida esperanza. Y Stanley salió huyendo del bordillo, abandonando a sus compañeros bajo aquella lúgubre agresión, como respondiendo a una llamada de Cherubini: trompetas y el fragor del cobre. Sonó un bocinazo, y se apartó de un salto del inmenso y silencioso automóvil conducido por una frágil dama encaramada tras el volante como una florida tracería gótica, con la barbilla asomando apenas, que giró bruscamente desde Washington Square.

Max recogió del suelo el teclado de prácticas y se lo llevó a la acera de enfrente, donde estaba temblando.

—¿Qué ha pasado? —preguntó—. ¿Esa entrañable música navideña?

—Bueno, no es… no tienen derecho a… —intentó hablar Stanley, sin aliento, cogiendo el teclado de cartón como un instrumento delicado.

—¿Qué quieres en la Sexta Avenida, *El Mesías*?

—No tienen derecho a… degradar…

—Pídeles que pongan «Yes, We Have No Bananas» —dijo Max, sonriendo—. Eso es de *El Mesías,* y está más en su línea.

—¿Qué quieres decir? —Stanley estaba intentando limpiar las marcas de neumáticos de las teclas blancas.

—Quiero decir que «Yes, We Have No Bananas» es un plagio descarado de *El Mesías* de Haendel. Vamos —dijo Max cogiéndole del brazo y mirando a su alrededor en busca de Otto—. ¿Qué os pasa hoy a los dos?

—No tienes por qué… decirme esas cosas —dijo Stanley, soltándose de un tirón.

Un hombre que daba la espalda a un escaparate dijo: «No va a nevar, hace demasiado calor para que nieve». Y Otto, mirando hacia donde miraba aquel hombre, por encima de los edificios hacia el cielo del norte, se dio cuenta de que no estaba tiritando de frío, sino simplemente temblando. Y oyó decir a Max:

—Quieres que todo el mundo sea como tú, ése es tu problema, Stanley.

—Quiero que todo el mundo sea como yo quiero ser —respondió Stanley.

Los ojos de Otto se encontraron con los de Stanley. Y aunque el cielo estaba cubierto, y no había a la vista ningún color así, le parecieron verdes, brillantes, ardiendo en verde durante aquel prolongado momento en que se quedó clavado en el sitio, aparentemente incapaz de subir a la acera entre ambos. Pero sólo fue un momento, el paso de una sombra, y la voz de Max, interponiéndose entre ambos, hizo subir a Otto.

—¿Podrías decir que el hombre que compuso «Yes, We Have No Bananas» iba en busca de recuerdos?, ¿de una vaga consonancia de sonidos…? —empezó Max jovialmente. Luego se quedó mirando a Otto y dijo —: Qué te pasa, pareces hecho cisco.

—No lo sé, pero… sí, hecho cisco —dijo Otto subiendo a la acera, hablando inconexamente mientras se detenía a su lado—. Como… ¿sabéis cómo me siento? Como cuando hacen una reproducción en arcilla de una estatua, y luego cogen la copia y la cortan por detrás de la cabeza con un alambre fino, y por detrás de los brazos y las piernas, y le quitan todo y la vuelven a modelar.

—¿Por qué? ¿Dónde has oído eso?

—Para venderla como parte de una serie, una serie del original, una serie que nunca existió, lo… lo leí en un libro que tenía un amigo mió, un amigo de hace mucho tiempo, él… escuchad… —tanteó Otto.

Como espoleado por su titubeante confusión, le interrumpió Max:

—Sabía que tenía que decirte algo. Ese cuento que mandaste a Edna, para una revista que tiene ese editor para quien trabaja, los que van a sacar mi libro, ya sabes.

—Qué pasa con ese cuento, se lo mandé en nombre de un tipo que conocí en tu fiesta.

—Ella cree que lo escribiste tú —le dijo Max—. Que lo escribiste tú y lo mandaste bajo otro nombre.

—¿Cree que lo escribí *yo*? Pero ¿por qué iba a haberlo escrito yo? Ni siquiera lo leí, lo… ¿por qué iba a hacer una cosa así?

—Supongo que cree que para curarte en salud.

—Pero ella… pero maldita sea… —Otto blandió el cabestrillo.

—Dice que cuando estabas en la universidad tenías ingenio escribiendo, pero que te has echado a perder —siguió afablemente Max—. Dice que la razón de tu ingenio era que no sabías ser honrado.

—Bueno, la única razón de que ella sea honrada es que es demasiado estúpida para ser ingeniosa, quiero decir si fuera honrada, pero esa… ¿por qué demonios va por ahí diciendo una cosa así de mí, sin motivo?

—¿Sin motivo? —repitió Max, y puso una mano en el hombro de Otto—. Nadie te guarda tanto rencor

como quien te ha querido.

Otto se volvió para apartarse de él, pero lo hizo con aire inseguro, como tratando de retener la mano en su hombro pero volviendo la cara para ocultar el labio tembloroso.

—¿Por qué me…?, ¿por qué tiene que ser la gente tan… tan…? —musitó inconexamente, mientras fragmentos detallados de expresiones afloraban uno tras otro a su cara, hasta que se llevó la mano a los ojos y se la pasó con fuerza por la cara, como para borrar de la superficie aquellas bruscas pinceladas que parodiaban la clara imagen de su cólera subyacente. Luego sacó un cigarrillo, y apretó los labios a su alrededor.

—Olvídalo —dijo Max, y dándole una palmadita en el hombro antes de retirar la mano, siguió con el mismo tono cordial—: Oye, quería volver a decirte lo mucho que me gustó tu obra, Otto. —Otto musitó algo sin levantar la vista—. Porque cuando otros me dijeron que no les había gustado, les dije…

—¡Les dijiste qué! —exclamó Otto. Al levantar la vista, vio a Max sonriéndole.

—No seas tan susceptible —le dijo Max.

—Es que… todo este… maldito… —Otto volvió a encorvarse, con la mirada clavada en el suelo—. Y cuando la gente dice que la he robado, que la he plagiado…

—Alguien, no recuerdo quién —Max parecía compasivamente pensativo—, dijo que creía que habías sacado partes de *El ruido y la furia.*

—¿El qué?

—La novela de Faulkner, *El ruido y la furia,* que habías plagiado…

—Ni siquiera la he leído, nunca he leído *El ruido y la furia,* maldita sea, así que cómo diablos… —Otto echó una ojeada a Stanley, que parecía turbado y a punto de hablar—. Quiero decir, maldita sea…

—¿Qué más da? —rio Max—. Yo reconocí un par de cosillas que habías cogido, pero qué más da.

—¿Qué quieres decir, qué cosillas?

—Cosidas, frases aquí y allá. Esa frase de Ben Shahn, «No se puede inventar la forma de una piedra», por ejemplo.

—Pero… ¿quién demonios es Ben Shahn? Esa frase la decía un amigo mío, hace mucho tiempo, alguien a quien traté hace tiempo…

—Qué más da —sonrió Max—. Como dice Stevenson, todos nos ganamos la vida vendiendo algo. —Volvió a poner la mano en el hombro de Otto—. Qué más da. ¿El dinero? Tienes un auténtico complejo con el dinero, ¿no, Otto? Un auténtico complejo de castración sin él.

—Sí, el dinero —murmuró Otto—, pero, maldita sea…

—No tiene por qué ser el dinero, sólo el dinero —terció Stanley—, si él… si es su obra, si es algo suyo, y quiere…

—¡Algo suyo! —repitió Max, y esta vez su risa fue más cortante, menos amable, afilada con desprecio—. Mira —dijo a Otto—, esa revista mía que llevas ahí, ábrela. —Max no hizo el menor gesto de soltar la *Gaceta del coleccionista,* ni de coger la otra—. Ábrela por… aquí, aquí está, esta cosa sobre Sherlock Holmes, «la primera historia autorizada de Sherlock Holmes que aparece» desde que murió Arthur Conan Doyle. ¿Entiendes? Autorizada. Fue «escrita tras un estudio exhaustivo de los métodos literarios de sir Arthur…» —leyó, mientras Otto sostenía la revista ante ambos—. ¿Entiendes?, estos dos hombres que la escribieron «estudiaron minucias tales como los ritmos sintácticos de Doyle, su utilización de la coma, el número de palabras por término medio de las frases de Holmes… Los autores no han sentido ninguna tentación de alterar el modelo que seguía habitualmente Doyle… Se han esforzado especialmente por reproducir ciertas peculiaridades estilísticas doyleanas…».

—Pero ¿qué quieres decir? —le preguntó Otto.

—¿Qué más da? —le preguntó Max a su vez, levantando la *Gaceta del coleccionista*—. ¿Cuadros autorizados de Dierick Bouts?, ¿de Van der Goes? ¿Quién los autoriza? Alguien dice: Aunó le gustaría que hubiera más historias de Conan Doyle, a otro le gustaría que hubiera más cuadros de Hugo van der Goes. Así que, tras un cuidadoso estudio de la técnica pictórica de este primitivo flamenco… minucias tales como los ritmos de sus pinceladas, su utilización de la perspectiva, el número de figuras por término medio en los lienzos de Van der Goes… ¿Qué más da? Falsificas un Durero cogiendo una caray dándole la vuelta, poniéndole la barba de otro, el sombrero de otro, y ya tienes un Durero, ¿no?

—Pero sólo en la superficie —dijo Stanley.

—¡En la superficie! ¿Es que la gente profundiza más?, ¿la gente que los compra?

—Pero esto, esto no es una… falsificación —dijo Otto mostrando el semanario ilustrado—. No hay ningún secreto, te lo dicen aquí mismo…

—Eso es justo lo que quiero decir —dijo Max con impaciencia—. ¿Qué más da ahora? ¿En nuestra

época? —Volvió a reír y, doblando la *Gaceta del coleccionista,* se la puso bajo el brazo—. Mientras esté «autorizado». ¿No es cierto, Stanley?

—No —contestó al momento Stanley.

—¿No? —Estudió con interés y sorpresa burlones la cara de Stanley—. ¿Es que hay algo diabólico en devolver a la vida a Sherlock Holmes?

—El diablo es el padre del falso arte —dijo serenamente Stanley.

Iba andando con cuidado por el borde de la acera, con una expresión ensimismada en la cara que la de Otto reflejaba, aunque vagamente, mientras andaba mirando al suelo, sin escucharlos.

—Stanley cree en el pecado, ¿verdad, Stanley? —insistió Max.

—¿Si creemos que el amor es una debilidad? —exclamó Stanley—, y por eso le molesta a la gente, porque cree que es una confesión de debilidad, y se aparta de él… y por eso matas aquello que amas, porque es tu debilidad personiñcada. Si lo matas, matas tu debilidad antes de que te mate.

—He dicho el pecado —le engatusó Max.

—Pero ¿existía el amor antes de que el pecado, el sentido del pecado, lo hiciera posible? —dijo Stanley en el mismo tono bajo, sin levantar la vista—. ¿Antes de que existiera el pecado, para sufrirlo y perdonarlo?

—¡Amor! ¿Estás enamorado? —rió Max.

—El arte es obra del amor.

—El arte es obra de la necesidad —dijo Max.

—¿Era una buena historia? —preguntó finalmente Otto.

—¿La de Sherlock Holmes? Era una porquería.

—No, quiero decir la que yo… el cuento que le mandé… a ella.

—También era una porquería —contestó Max.

—Pero ¿no hay un momento… —siguió Stanley—, un momento en el que el amor y la necesidad llegan a ser lo mismo?

Llegaron a una plaza despejada en la que el cielo estaba casi negro mirando al norte, como hacía la mayoría de la gente. Las tiendas tenían las luces encendidas, y las ventanas iluminadas de los edificios se recortaban contra el cielo, rechazándolo, y aferrándose a la tierra.

—¿Dónde vamos, a todo esto? —preguntó Otto.

—Yo voy ahí mismo —dijo Max, señalando con la cabeza hacia adelante. Luego, notando de nuevo el cuidado con que andaba Stanley, dijo—: Si pisas sobre una raya, romperás a tu madre la espalda… —Y Stanley se detuvo—. Vamos —rio Max, y cuando Stanley echó a andar de nuevo, ahora esquivando obviamente las rayas de la acera, le dijo—: No puedo creer que creas realmente en eso, Stanley. Qué alma tan inmaculada para ofrecérsela al diablo. ¿Qué crees que me daría si te vendiera a él?

—No podrías —dijo Stanley.

—Muy bien, venderemos a Otto. No te importaría, ¿verdad, Otto?

—Cristo, no, en este momento no.

—No podrías —dijo otra vez Stanley.

—Bueno, Fausto lo hizo, maldita sea —exclamó hoscamente Otto—. Fausto vendió su alma al diablo.

—No. Eso es una falacia —dijo Stanley, mirándolo con toda seriedad—. Que el mal pueda tomar entera posesión del alma de ese modo. El mal tiene sus propios límites.

—Maldita sea, era su alma —dijo Otto de modo desafiante—, y se la vendió al diablo.

—No. No podía deshacerse de ella. Pertenecemos a nuestras almas, no nuestras almas a nosotros.

—Dialéctica ontológica —dijo Max mientras se acercaban a una boca de metro.

Otto se quedó parado con aire inseguro, como flotando, apartado de ellos, mientras Max daba a Stanley una palmada jovial en el hombro y decía:

—Stanley arde con una chispa divina. —Las palabras parecían venir de la gran distancia de los sonidos sobre el agua antes de una tormenta. Se volvió hacia Otto sin abandonar su sonrisa—. Pero tú y yo…

Otto se quedó parado con el brazo temblando en el cabestrillo, y el viento levantándole el pelo por detrás.

—Sí —dijo arqueando las cejas—, a veces es difícil… —frunció levemente el labio para frenar su tendencia a temblar—, es difícil desprenderse de nuestra naturaleza humana. —Luego se volvió rápidamente y se alejó hasta el bordillo, donde, dándoles la espalda, empezó a restregarse el borde del zapato. Oyó reír a Max, y gritarle: «Siempre se queda pegado un poco…». Y cuando se volvió, Max desaparecía por la boca del metro. Sólo quedaba Stanley, frágil contra el cielo oscuro.

—¿Qué pasa? —le preguntó Stanley mientras se acercaba lentamente.

—Había algo… —dijo Otto, mirándolo de nuevo a la cara, a los ojos, apagados como el cielo a su

espalda—. Algo…

—¿Qué…? —Stanley lo miraba ansiosamente.

—No lo sé, antes, en ese momento… —dijo Otto, con una expresión más confusa—. Por un momento, la sensación de que tú… de que tú y yo… Era como si fueras alguien que lleva… —Titubeó, se interrumpió y alzó la vista, recuperándose—. Maldita sea. ¿Max se ha ido?

—Sí, se ha ido, por ahí —señaló Stanley.

—Y esta maldita cosa, me ha dejado esto y se ha llevado la *Gaceta del coleccionista,* que cuesta un dólar.

—¿Quieres que te la devuelva? —empezó Stanley servicialmente—. Si lo veo…

—Ese cuadro —murmuró Otto, volviendo a bajar la vista. Se pasó la mano libre por la cara—. El Cristo de ese cuadro, quería verlo, quería volver a verlo, había algo… familiar… —siguió musitando distraídamente—, y la Virgen…

Tras hacer una pausa, Stanley dijo:

—Pero no es extraño, Cristo…

—No era eso, no era eso. —Otto lo apartó con un gesto, y se agarró las sienes con la mano abierta. Luego la dejó caer y sacudió la cabeza—. Da igual —dijo. Mirando a Stanley, esbozó una sonrisa forzada—. La chispa divina… —murmuró a la ansiosa cara que basculaba hacia él, vencida por el bigote desigual—. ¿Y qué vas a hacer con ella, a todo eso? —exclamó con súbita irrisión.

—Pero eso —dijo Stanley, dando un paso hacia él—, eso es lo que nos pierde a todos.

Se quedó quieto ante Otto, mirándolo a los ojos, esperando; pero los vio estrecharse.

—Lo odio —dijo Otto, cambiando de tono con la misma brusquedad que antes.

—¿A quién?

—A él. A Max.

—Pero ¿por qué?

—Sí… porque él sobrevivirá.

Cada vez que cruzaba una calle aparecía a su derecha el cielo negro, como si aquellas calles fueran túneles que desembocaran en el «frío infierno» de la «Elegía de los mil niños» del poeta, como si fueran a dar al Bóreas, y más allá del viento norte. Por eso, cada vez que bajaba de un bordillo, yendo hacia el oeste, ella intentaba no mirar; pero siempre miraba antes de subir al bordillo de enfrente.

A medida que se acercaba al río, el asfalto y las aceras estaban mojados por la nieve ligera que había empezado a caer cuando salió. Pasó junto a un cochecito de niño vacío, y un paso más allá se detuvo, para mirar hacia atrás y comprobar que estaba vacío. Luego alzó la vista y sonrió a la mujer que había estado sacudiendo una fregona desde la ventana de encima, y la mujer se la quedó mirando hasta que siguió su camino; y aun entonces levantó la vista, y un minuto después dejó de sacudir la fregona al verla detenerse al fondo de la manzana y arrodillarse en el suelo mojado para ayudar a un niño que tenía enredado el cordón de una manopla, y a juzgar por los ojos estrechos de la mujer de la ventana, estuvo arrodillada allí un momento más de lo necesario.

Al fondo de la calle, sobre un puente de caballetes, una locomotora embistió un enganche cerrado con un ruido estremecedor que inmediatamente cesó, dejando suspendida en el aire, sobre las partículas de sedimento, una sirena del río cercano, que se extinguió lentamente a medida que las escamas de nieve desprendidas de la piel del cielo las arrastraban hacia tierra.

En la última manzana de Horatio Street, donde había un cajón roto en la acera, se detuvo ante un portal. Buscó el timbre sin nombre, pero antes de que su dedo lo encontrara, al apoyarse en ella, la puerta de la calle se abrió, y su puerta estaba nada más entrar. Delante había una papelera llena de botellas, tubos y bombillas, y la puerta no estaba cerrada del todo.

—¿Dormido? —susurró al entrar. Y cerró la puerta a su espalda sin hacer ruido, con una mano en el picaporte y la espalda apoyada, lentamente, mientras miraba a su alrededor. Luego tosió, y se tapó la boca rápidamente, pues la habitación estaba llena de una acre mezcolanza de olores procedente del revoltijo que ardía sin llama en la chimenea. De hecho algunos restos que se habían quemado en el hogar humeaban ahora desparramados por el suelo, y ella se acercó corriendo y empujó con el pie hacia los ladrillos los fragmentos encendidos, viendo mientras lo hacía los bordes ennegrecidos de unas fotografías, detalles de pinceladas muy ampliados.

Esparcidos entre las brillantes gotas de pintura que cubrían el suelo se veían trozos de papel, jirones de lienzo y astillas de madera, unos cuantos libros, algunas cáscaras de huevo y un cepillito de pelo de ardilla. Junto a la cama baja, a la que se acercó y en cuyo borde se sentó, había un vaso roto, una caja de puros

holandeses sin abrir, un coco y un estuche de cuero lleno de gemelos, botones de camisa, sujetapapeles, dos cortaplumas, una navaja sin hoja, otra sin mango, botones, plumines, tachones, unas cuantas llaves, algunos tirafondos de latón, un pendiente de perla sin pareja y, destacando por encima de todo, dos grandes aros de oro arcaicamente tachonados. Se inclinó y se enjugó las mejillas húmedas con la punta de una manta que colgaba del revoltijo de ropa de la cama. Luego se enderezó, sobre el borde mismo del colchón, y se volvió alargando lentamente una mano.

—Tú… —susurró.

Se quedó así sentada un minuto más, aparentemente sin respirar, y luego volvió a susurrar:

—Tú… —pero con más aspereza—, si tienes los ojos cerrados, entonces ¿dónde estás ahora sin mí?

La bombilla desnuda la deslumbró al levantarse, y dijo «Hace mucho calor aquí», dando dos, tres y cuatro pasos mientras se quitaba el abrigo. Lo dejó sobre un taburete alto y volvió a mirar a su alrededor, solitariamente erguida bajo la bombilla desnuda y sin arrojar sombra alguna hasta que se volvió y se dirigió hacia el único lienzo entero que había en la habitación, vuelto de cara a la pared, sobre el que cayó su sombra y se extendió en un solo plano por su reverso desigual y sucio. Agarró el marco y lo apartó de la pared.

—¿Tienes algo que reprocharme? —dijo, después de mirarlo durante un rato, aunque sus ojos no se encontraron, y luego extendió la mano y siguió sus rasgos. Luego susurró algo y volvió bruscamente la espalda.

Frank, obispo de Zanzíbar yacía en el suelo a sus pies, y apartó el libro de una patada. Luego se dirigió hacia donde estaban los espejos de bisagra, apoyados contra otra pared, los abrió y volvió a cerrarlos rápidamente.

—Tú… —dijo otra vez mirando hacia atrás, hacia la cama, pues se había vuelto rápidamente.

En el suelo a sus pies había un dibujo, un minucioso autorretrato, y dio un paso antes de verlo, es decir, antes de ver que no era una ampliación de pinceladas, y se agachó para cogerlo.

—Tú —dijo—, completamente boca abajo. —Luego lo enderezó y repitió—: Completamente boca abajo.

Se quedó allí parada, mirando hacia algún punto entre la cama y el dibujo, como si tuviera una mano encima; y luego se volvió y tiró otra vez de los espejos. Entreabrió una hoja con la punta del pie derecho, sosteniendo en alto el dibujo con esfuerzo, como si pesara mucho, y se quedó mirando las súbitas apariciones, clavando los ojos en la imagen plana, la misma que sostenía entre las manos; luego levantó los ojos hacia la segunda imagen de su propia cara, y dejó que la hoja se cerrara de golpe, con lo que parte de ella se resquebrajó y cayó al suelo, haciéndose añicos nada más sonar, añicos que reflejaron en formas de rotura la luz deslumbrante de la bombilla del techo, enviándola de vuelta al techo.

La habitación estaba llena del olor de la destrucción: como si pudiera elevarse una diferencia sobre el humo, cuando se quema un almacén de productos químicos: aquí, en la chimenea baja, había productos químicos, algunos de ellos inorgánicos, y las transmutaciones orgánicas experimentaban la oxidación con la inmediatez de una reacción en cadena en la página de un texto de química; pero ¿dónde se cumplía, en aquella consumación, la ley de la conservación de la energía? Entonces, ¿podían las pinceladas determinar la diferencia? Ciencia en magnitud, biología y química tan triunfalmente articuladas como siempre lo están los subordinados, no ofrecen más elección que abjurar de ella en un frenético esfuerzo por perfeccionar un sistema sin alternativas, el propio hecho de su ciencia basada en la medición; y la medición, designada para predicar finalidades, rechazando la verdad que se refugia en la posibilidad: en el peso del olor del humo había algo más que la muerte del cuerpo, la construcción celular absorbente, hambrienta de tejidos inconscientes de cualquier fin salvo una idéntica reproducción. Pero si los actos de creación alimentaban las llamas, actos en los que toda posibilidad inmediata había sido explorada para la finalidad que es la perfección, desgarrada en el intento de liberarla en la delimitación de ese recinto desconcertado de su propio medio, aquí había pinceladas cuyo futuro había sido dictado por el frustrante recinto del pasado, un pasado cuyo futuro moría fulminado con cada instante de delimitación de su vida eterna.

—Tú… —susurró, sentada de nuevo en el borde de la cama, y luego dio una patada—. Vete, huevo… —con voz burlona, mientras el coco se alejaba rodando de su pie. Volvió a alzar los ojos hacia el fondo de la habitación, hacia el cuadro que había apartado de la pared; y los aros bizantinos aparecieron borrosos bajo una sola capa fina de pintura—. Pero…

—… con tus ojos cerrados —susurró, volviéndose de nuevo hacia la cama—. Yo sueño y despierto. El amor que recibo de otros no es amor por mí, sino donde ellos intentan encontrarse a sí mismos, amándome. Sueño y despierto, y en ese momento estás en alguna parte siendo real para otra gente; y ellos son parte de tu realidad, y yo no… Pero tú eres la única persona con la que soy real…

Tenía la mirada clavada en el suelo.

—Si eres la única persona con la que soy real…

Desvió los ojos, y de repente cogió el estuche de cuero, tirándolo todo menos los arcaicos aros de oro, que sostuvo con una mano mientras se levantaba, elevando y dejando caer su sombra durante un instante por la habitación, mientras la cruzaba y entraba en el cuarto de baño.

Cuando salió, llevando puestos los pendientes bizantinos, había sangre en ellos y en sus hombros, sangre que corría por sus pechos desnudos en líneas singulares y disparejas, que se separaban donde los pechos se apartaban de ella, que remedaban su esbeltez asaltándola, que respetaban su plenitud bifurcándose por encima de las dos manchas hinchadas cuyo color ridiculizaban al pasar, hacia abajo, para delinear la lisa prominencia inferior siguiendo las líneas bruscamente quebradas que su rápida marcha provocaba a cada paso, hasta dividirse y desaparecer donde esa prominencia se sumía en la blanca depresión de sus muslos.

—Entonces con tus ojos cerrados —susurró, echándose por encima una manta del revoltijo de mantas.

El fuego se había extinguido bajo la firme censura de la luz eléctrica, y sus emanaciones lucharon encarnizadamente hasta que, una a una, su violencia venenosa fue agotada por tan severa emergencia, y dejaron sola a la lavanda para que se elevara y extendiera en una difusión que penetraba sin filo, que cortaba sin acritud, impetuosa sin precipitación, llenando sin dilatar como un color intensifica su saturación y exalta su brillo ala vez.

—Oh sí… —susurró ferozmente—. Oh sí, oh sí, oh sí…

Cuando el fuego se extinguió hasta la lavanda se volvió indistinta, y se mezcló con el olor de la trementina de Venecia, el aceite fijo, las fotografías quemadas, el lienzo quemado y el gesso torturado hasta que, cuando despertó, no había triunfo ni disensión en el aire que respiraba, levantándose, mirando a su alrededor, bruscamente atrás hacia la cama, y de nuevo a su alrededor.

Se puso el abrigo, y se sentó en el taburete de donde lo había cogido. Se quedó un rato allí sentada, casi bajo la luz, de modo que su sombra caía fija y exigua sobre una mancha irregular de cardenillo que había en el suelo, confinando su júbilo entre los límites claros y fortuitos de su retraimiento.

—¿Por qué no me has escrito? —dijo, sin moverse aún, sin mirar siquiera hacia la cama.

Luego, el verde que había aislado saltó bajo la luz cuando se levantó y empezó a buscar por todas partes, apartando con el pie *Kinder-und Hausmärchen,* recogiendo un trozo de papel, dando una patada al Thoreau y a un billete arrugado de veinte dólares, pisando una cáscara de huevo, inclinándose otra vez con un gesto distraído para recoger un tubo de añil sin abrir, dando otra patada a *Frank, obispo de Zanzíbar* y al vaso roto, encontrando más papel, resbalando y casi cayendo en un charco de aceite fijo, recogiendo con el mismo gesto distraído un tubo de rosa de granza sin abrir, y otro trozo de papel que tiró porque por un lado estaba manchado de pintura azul, y por el otro tenía escrito «semper aliquid haeret» en grandes letras, y siguiendo así hasta que tuvo en la mano varios trozos de papel, que dejó en un tablero de dibujo y sobre los que empezó a escribir con un portaplumas roto y un plumín que cogió del estuche de cuero.

—Aquí está la carta —dijo, inclinándose sobre ella, y volviéndose a mirar hacia el fondo de la habitación—. Porque no debes cerrar los ojos ahora porque no puedes —dijo—. Porque ahora no estás solo —dijo. Mirando todavía hacia allí, dejó el portaplumas roto, cogió el tubo de rosa de granza y clavó la uña del pulgar para abrirlo—. Porque no puedes —dijo, mientras el rosa de granza se derramaba por su mano, y se lo quedó mirando, y se estremeció bajo el abrigo abierto.

Luego empezó a escribir. Estuvo allí escribiendo durante un rato; y cada vez que paraba, entre palabras o a mitad de palabra, casi nunca entre frases o párrafos, se quedaba mirando hacia el fondo de la habitación, extendiendo mientras tanto sobre sus labios el áspero rosa de granza, y alrededor de sus ojos el añil. Estuvo escribiendo durante un rato, y antes de que acabara el tubo de rosa de granza estaba ya medio vacío, y el añil se había apelmazado húmedamente alrededor de sus ojos.

Cuando terminó la carta, la dejó en mitad del suelo, y al mirar a su alrededor en busca de algo para sujetarla, encontró el coco y lo puso encima. Luego, mientras se acercaba a la puerta, se abrochó dos veces el abrigo, cada vez tras inclinarse y enderezarse desde el suelo, y salió. El billete arrugado de veinte dólares, que se le había pegado al zapato con el aceite fijo que había pisado, se desprendió antes de que saliera a la calle.

Esta es la carta que escribió y dejó allí.

Tú:

Las exigencias de la pintura tienen unas consecuencias de lo más pasmoso. En este momento en mi vida tú eres una de ellas.

La perspectiva, desde que De Chirico la manipuló plásticamente y la resolvió en sus paradigmas pictóricos, existe ahora en la mente; una nostalgia; un aislamiento correlativo;

un plenario; una *playa,* donde para ver el agua uno debe ir nada más llover, y para ver la ancha tierra rasa debe visitarla antes. La pintura es exquisita como el castigo para el pensador: negó los pensamientos de sus sepultureros, su propia cara de muerto y su curiosidad final, una visión de sus huesos, el esqueleto: del que siempre era consciente, aflorando por momentos a esa estática liberación que él, el pensador, no puede aceptar alegremente, algo separado, agitando sus huesos. Quizá un corazón petrificado, o un cerebro, un ojo, un niño nonato, girarían deliciosamente en su interior, para vibrar allí, como vibra un cadáver en el mar sin encontrar una solución para negar todo esto, una solvencia, no un solvente, para hacer desaparecer esos huesos, hacer improbable la alegría del otro, no para negar la inapreciable partida hacia la muerte.

Dado que los cuadros están al servicio de mis deseos, no puedo desdeñar ningún ardid para realizarlos.

Pintar para intensificar, para recordar, pero ¿qué podría recordar aquí, en este lugar, donde nunca he estado en realidad?, ¿una calle de accidentes todos designados para que me ocurran?

Los cronistas, al sustituir el instinto, nos hacen perder cada vez más nuestra sensibilidad, pero ¿cómo puedo rechazar ese nombre calumnioso si debo pintar, y luego insistir en ello?

Sin duda sería más amable no insistir, o investigar de modo menos directo, más discreto: pregunta a mi madre, no a mi cerebro, «¿Qué clase de niña era yo?», y al amante «En qué mujer me he convertido» para definir el extraño sentido de la confesión de estos episodios de la pintura, como la circunstancia divorciada de la motivación.

Aunque esto lo situaría, en suma, en otro nivel de existencia, cada engaño de mi vigoroso cerebro compromete solo a sí mismo, entonces, en esta empresa, esta demostración de sí mismo.

La mera coincidencia de los materiales a disposición de uno no puede hacer un cuadro, ni siquiera un viaje donde nada se ha escogido, ni perdido viajando, un viaje, en verdad, que podría muy bien no haberse emprendido nunca.

Pintar sin medios, deseo ni justificación: una costumbre equívoca, un hábito desviado de la razón o, en un momento indeciso, «¿No fue bueno que lloviera?», o «¿Quién sería el que vino a verme a las tres de la tarde?».

Un legislador incapaz de formular leyes puede ser pintor, o una tierra donde las leyes, cuando se infringen, no castigan al transgresor, sino al legislador, puede producir pintores. En cualquier otro lugar, un pintor debe luchar para ser lo que es.

Resulta difícil encontrar leyes básicas arraigadas en nuestro interior, felizmente olvidadas, como una cita indeseable concertada bajo presiones embarazosas. Hablando sin lengua, el pintor está completa y absurdamente loco en su intento por hacerlo, y aun así está irremisiblemente abocado a ello.

Reconocer, no *establecer* sino *intervenir.* ¿Una notable ilusión?

La pintura, un signo cuya realidad es efectivamente el yo, que nunca debe abandonarse, un cuadro *es* yo misma, siempre atento a mí, parodiando lo que nunca he cambiado, modificado o comprometido. Si yo, yo misma, soy un objeto o una imagen, ambos son a la vez reales o imaginados, ambos son concretos o abstractos, ambos guardan una proporción exacta con este yo desproporcionado, siendo adrede o sin querer ni lo uno ni lo otro, para ser, sin embargo, capaces de crearlo, unidos en uno, quizá ni siquiera sino efectivamente uno desde el principio, soy ambos y también lo que debo ser sin cambiar, modificar o comprometer.

El pintor preocupado por su seguridad mortal, indiferente porque teme escudriñar, sacrifica paradójicamente esa misma seguridad, porque no se le permitirá rehuir la pintura.

Hará cuadros o ellos se sublevarán y le harán desgraciado entre sus garras. Por eso debe vivirlos compulsivamente fríos como son, estáticos, perversamente con calor y movimiento que no puede conocer sino sentir dolorosamente, un pájaro con huevos rotos dentro.

Por otra parte un no-pintor, por ingenioso que sea, no puede pintar. No puede decir, bueno, «No conseguí el trabajo pero de todas formas diré que lo conseguí»: con esta distorsión de hecho no se engaña a sí mismo, sino a otras personas, hasta que llega el momento de recibir el reembolso. Sin nada de valor que enseñar el hecho desaparecerá. No hay hecho sino valor.

El pintor sabe, con harta tristeza, que la sola experiencia no basta, no tiene proporción, dimensión, perspectiva, devora melancólicamente su vida pero no se le permite digerirla, pues esto queda reservado para otros, sin saber aunque debe saber de algún modo, haciendo cualquier sacrificio para saber, y luego castigado por la visión de ese conocimiento, impulsándolo en su viaje de cerebro a cerebro.

No parece irrazonable que inventemos colores, líneas, formas capaces de ser, representativas de la existencia, por tanto no es irrazonable que ellos, a su vez, nos inventen luego a nosotros, que inventen con gran audacia nuestras ideas, direcciones, motivaciones, dado que los tenemos colgados en nuestras paredes. Qué huéspedes más groseros resultan ser en realidad: aunque los cuadros difieren de la vida por la energía, un pintor nunca puede ser un sustituto de sus cuadros, pues son tan completos e independientes como la realidad. Imagina el placer que esto les depara.

Convirtiéndose en una idea de la persona, instantáneamente la destruyen. Un gesto trágico que efectivamente conduce a la tragedia pero diabólicamente sólo existe en una ausencia de tragedia, por mucho que la generen son sin embargo irrazonablemente exiguos, insuficientes, porque no están hechos de ideas, están hechos de pintura, y todo lo demás es en realidad nosotros.

Los cuadros son metáforas de la realidad, pero en vez de ser una ayuda para la comprensión oscurecen la realidad, que es mucho más profunda. La única forma de eludir la pintura es la muerte *absoluta.*

«Cierre los ojos durante los próximos sesenta segundos e intente caminar por la habitación…».

El hombre tras la barra alargó la mano y apagó la radio.

—Tengo un amigo que tiene un ojo de cristal con la bandera americana pintada —dijo el hombre al otro lado de la barra.

El hombre tras la barra sirvió whisky hasta que le corrió por los dedos.

—Esto te pondrá mina en el lápiz. —Lo empujó hacia el otro lado de la barra, dejando un rastro húmedo —. Ahora, si tienes alguien a quien escribir, estás más que listo.

—Aquí viene Rose.

Al fondo de la barra, Otto se apartó para dejar paso a la mujer regordeta que entró por la puerta. Tenía la nariz roja, y también los ojos.

—¿Qué hay, Rose? ¿Demasiado frío para ti?

Otto añadió a la moneda fría de la barra otra caliente que se sacó del bolsillo, hizo un gesto con su vaso de cerveza vacío y lo volvió a dejar junto al periódico, doblado sobre la barra por una de las chicas de la crónica de sucesos, cuyas gafas oscuras había estado mirando.

A su izquierda, el espejo y la ventana se juntaban en un ángulo tal que los coches de la calle parecían embestirse de frente entre sí. Un autobús se metió telescópicamente en sí mismo y desapareció. Apartó los ojos inyectados en sangre y los clavó directamente ante sí; pero no vio su cara, pues el letrero SALCHICHAS CON CHUCRUT 20 ¢ estaba pegado al espejo justo por encima del cuello de su camisa. Debajo, donde sus manos se cerraban susceptiblemente sobre el vaso de cerveza vacío, un poco retorcidas, con las puntas de los dedos tocándose, las salchichas de Fráncfort giraban ensartadas en pinchos calientes, retrocediendo y avanzando lentamente, adelantándose unas a otras con sordos empujones, como gruesos dedos sin nudillos meditando. Retiró la mano izquierda y volvió a meterla en el cabestrillo flojo.

—Toma, gatito gatito gatito —dijo la mujer regordeta.

—Tenemos tres.

—Yo perdí el mío —dijo la mujer regordeta—. Lo crié desde que era así de grande. Tenía sangre en el hígado.

—También los seres humanos han de abandonarnos.

—Así perdí dos maridos. Por la noche.

Otto hizo una seña con su vaso vacío. Entonces una rubia alta, con capa de pieles y gafas oscuras, avanzó hasta reunirse consigo misma en el espejo. Otto se volvió y miró por la ventana. No la vio. Miró en el espejo de la columna que tenía a la espalda, y vio desaparecer la manga de su abrigo. Miró ante sí, y la vio fundirse consigo misma. Volvió a mirar por la ventana, y vio a un hombre con un traje de Santa Claus.

—¿Me puede poner una cerveza? —dijo. Esperó. Luego dejó el vaso vacío y se dirigió hacia el fondo del bar, sacando su cartera.

Un momento después estaba sentado en la cabina telefónica con el auricular pegado a la oreja, escuchando el tictac de un reloj en las oficinas de Sun Style Films. Finalmente le llegó una voz.

—¿Diga? —dijo Otto, y nombró al hombre y a sí mismo como saludo de presentación—. Siento haber tardado tanto en llamarle, pero he… Sí, pero… ¿Qué? No, sobre Centroamérica. Recuerda, yo… ¿Cuándo podemos vernos para un…? No, era Perú y el norte de Bolivia, ¿recuerda…? Sí, yo… ¿Qué…? Pero yo… usted… Bueno, qué cabrón —repitió entre dientes, apoyándose contra la pared de la cabina—. «No tenemos nada que discutir». Bueno, qué cabrón. Qué cabrón. —Y entonces cedió el cabestrillo.

Salió con la muñeca apretada contra la cartera. Tenía cuarenta y un dólares. «¿Y por qué daría ayer un billete de cinco dólares a ese negro de Harlem, para que estuviese al tanto por si aparecía esa maldita cartera? Maldita sea. También ese negro cabrón».

La mujer regordeta estaba bebiendo un manhattan.

—Siento cómo me baja hasta las puntas de los pies. —Las medias le formaban pliegues sobre los tacones rotos de los zapatos.

—¿Para quién guardas la guinda, Rose?

El hombre tras la barra volvió a encender la radio, y la dejó calentarse a los compases de Mozart. El vaso de Otto seguía vacío, pero él estaba allí parado, como si no pudiera levantar la voz para pedir que se lo llenaran, mirando fijamente la corbata a rayas del hombre, el emblema de otro club final al que no le habían invitado a unirse.

—¿Qué pasa, Rose? ¿Te ruborizas?

Otto esperó un momento más. Mozart siguió elevándose y recogiéndose en intervalos exquisitos, y cada una de estas aberturas la llenaba atentamente un saxofón. Otto cogió las dos monedas frías y dejó el periódico sobre la barra. Mozart acompasó una retirada sutil, y una voz procedente del mundo del saxofón

anunció:

«Y ahora un clásico, amigos: Rudy Vallee cantando “El amor me hizo gitano”».

—Eh, amigo, ¿quiere su periódico? —gritó a espaldas de Otto el hombre tras la barra.

—Da igual —contestó Otto por encima del hombro—. Es de ayer.

La brisa tropical agitaba el traje de lino de Otto al embarcarse en aquel buque platanero, y luego erguido en cubierta, mirando al Caribe, con un whisky con soda en la mano izquierda, la piel caldeada por el recuerdo del sol: así se erguía, sereno e inaccesible, en el recuerdo de la figura inestable que apareció ahora (con una nueva bufanda verde que resaltaba la amarillez de su piel), un viejo amigo al que sólo ahora apreciaba Otto cabalmente, y al que le habría gustado volver a ver. Pasó junto a las ventanas empañadas guardándose un pañuelo, donde dos anillos negros daban fe de las indómitas barreras que son los fin os pelos de las ventanas de la nariz, y abriendo la puerta del Viareggio interrumpió esto con su entrada:

—¿Filoginia? Creía que habías dicho filogenia.

—He dicho que la misoginia recapitula la filoginia.

—¿Misogamia…?

—Da igual.

—¿Cómo se titula el libro que estás escribiendo?

—*El Baedeker de Babel*.

Advirtiendo sólo la corbata a rayas del más alto de aquellos dos, Otto volvió a llevarse el pañuelo a la nariz y pasó junto a ellos.

—¿Y dices que te has vuelto misólogo?

—Whisky con soda —pidió Otto en la barra, cargando la voz con una rudeza despreocupada como imaginaba que se hacía para mandar.

—¿Dónde está el retrete en este sitio? —Alguien le dio un empujón—. Por esa puerta de ahí, aquí se llama

Tiffany’s

.

—Pero he pedido un whisky con soda.

—Ha dicho un whisky solo. Sesenta y cinco centavos.

Max le daba la espalda desde una mesa cercana, donde un maltrecho ejemplar de la *Gaceta del coleccionista* estaba abierto por *Madre e hijo II,* bajo el codo de un hombre encorvado con una camisa verde de lana que estaba diciendo a Max: «Así que tienes un trabajo en la New School; bueno, mira. ¿Tendría que prepararme las conferencias, o bastaría con soltar unas cuantas gilipolleces?». Otto dio un paso hacia la mesa. Le cerró el paso una cara ojerosamente alerta, que hablaba con alguien a su espalda: «Ésa se habría ahogado ya si hubiera podido encontrar algo en lo que ahogarse». Y la respuesta por encima del hombro de Otto: «Lleva colgada mucho tiempo, tío. No se puede tontear con el caballo sin engancharse».

—Esa revista —dijo Otto a una chica que estaba de pie tras la mesa—, ¿sabes qué le ha pasado… dónde se…?

—La mordió un oso.

—¿Qué? Me refiero a ésa…

—Oh, creía que te referías a este Vogue. —Levantó un maltrecho ejemplar de Vogue—. Lo mordió un oso en el parque de Yellowstone, un oso de lo más chiflado… —Volvió la espalda y prosiguió su conversación—: Oh, muy muy muy muy muy grande…

—Hola. ¿Me invitas a una cerveza?

—Hola, Hannah, claro, con mucho gusto. —Otto la pidió, le pasó el vaso goteante y dijo—: La verdad, he tenido un día de lo más demencial…

—Gracias —dijo Hannah, y volvió hacia el chico alto de color con el que había estado hablando, y compartió con él su vaso en el rincón.

Al lado de Otto, un chico rubio vestido con un mono dijo: «Te digo que me sentí exactamente igual que Arquímedes en su ridícula bañera… Pero ¿cómo pude? Te digo que me quedé *pegado*». Y en la mesa cercana, un codo de lana verde derribó un vaso de cerveza sobre *Madre e hijo II*.

Otto hizo una mueca de dolor, vio a Stanley sentado con la mirada clavada en una taza de café, empezó a acercarse, vio que era Anselm quien estaba sentado con él mirando al vacío, y se detuvo. El chico ojeroso se acercó a la mesa y se dejó caer en una silla sin recibir ni invitación ni saludos.

—¿Sabes cómo me la tiré la primera vez que me la tiré? —siguió Anselm—. Le conté un sueño erótico

que había tenido, uno que había tenido con ella, me escuchó como si hubiera pasado de verdad, y antes de que se diera cuenta ya la tenía dentro otra vez.

Se echó a reír, pero su risa sonó cansada, como si no estuviera realmente interesado en lo que estaba contando, y se puso a tamborilear sobre la mesa con las puntas romas de unos dedos de uñas mordidas.

—Probablemente estaría colocada —comentó sombríamente el chico ojeroso.

—No deberías… —empezó Stanley.

—¿Por qué finges ahora que estás preocupado por ella? Cristo, no lo ha hecho, ¿verdad?

—Nunca podría hacer algo de verdad, tío. El gas estaba encendido, muy bien, pero entraba aire por todas partes.

—Da igual —arguyo Stanley—, si su intención…

—¡Su intención!, ¿y a ti qué te importa? Cristo, ¿serás acaso un criador de pecadoras? Debería ir a esconder el culo en un convento.

Stanley no dijo nada. Bajó los ojos, dio un sorbo a su café y abrió un periódico.

—¿Qué dice san Jerónimo de la mujer? —insistió Anselm—. Es la puerta del Infierno. «Un enemigo de la amistad, un castigo ineludible, un mal necesario», dice Crisóstomo… —Y dejó de hablar, viendo acercarse a Otto sin un gesto de reconocimiento.

Otto rodeó a los dos jóvenes a los que había interrumpido con su entrada. «Estoy haciendo por la literatura lo que Bruckner hizo por la música», dijo uno de ellos. «¿Y qué hizo Bruckner por la música?». «Bueno, lo diré de otro modo, estoy haciendo *en* la literatura…».

—¡Freud…! —se oyó que decía una chica alta con un agradable acento bostoniano—. Jajaja… me paso a Freud por el culo.

—Sabes cuál es el problema, como dice Pascal, todos los *malheurs* de este mundo vienen de la incapacidad del hombre para estarse sentado a solas en un cuartito —dijo el más alto de los dos—. ¿Puedo invitarte a una copa? —Llevaba una corbata conmemorativa de la primera travesía del Queen Elizabeth.

—Pero ¿por qué…? ¿Por qué? —repitió Stanley, quejumbroso e incrédulo—. ¿Por qué diría Max una cosa así? Debería saber que no es verdad, que Hannah y yo no estábamos… durmiendo juntos…

Alzó la vista e incluyó a Otto en su súplica. Anselm reía. Se encogió de hombros.

—Vengo a decirle, señor mío, que Stanley y un palíndromo están haciendo la bestia con dos cabezas —dijo, y cogió el periódico de Stanley.

—Pero ¿por qué… tiene la gente que… decir esas cosas?

—¿La gente? Cualquiera que te oiga pensaría que es la primera vez en la historia que se tiran a alguien —dijo Anselm con un tono pensativo y distraído—. *Das Unbeschreibliche, hier getan wird's* … —No apartó la vista del periódico, cuyas páginas volvía sin hacer en apariencia ninguna pausa para leer —. *Das Ewig-Weibliche,* por el amor de Dios —musitó.

Otto se quedó allí parado sin poder alejarse, atado por la dolorida acusación de los ojos de Stanley, que volvieron a clavarse en la mesa con aire de duda.

—La última vez que la vi —dijo el chico ojeroso— tenía que llevar alguien al lado todo el tiempo para poder preguntar si había hecho realmente algo o ido a algún sitio. Parecía que estaba a punto de salir volando.

Anselm rasgó un trozo del periódico y lo empujó hacia el otro lado de la mesa.

—Esto debería alegrarte, Stanley —dijo—. El campanario de San Marcos también está a punto de salir volando.

—Una vez me dijo que la razón de que sus ojos fueran tan saltones es que un médico le dio beleño, ¿sabíais eso? Dijo que puede incluso ver las estrellas de día. Si hubiera querido hacerlo de verdad se hubiera abierto las muñecas como Charles…

—¡Por el amor de Dios!, ¿quieres… dejar de hablar de eso? —espetó bruscamente Anselm al chico ojeroso, y luego miró a Stanley, que tenía los ojos clavados en el titular con aire alelado—. Será mejor que te pases por allí antes de que se derrumbe del todo —le dijo Anselm.

—¿Hannah… —interrumpió Otto— ha intentado suicidarse? Si acabo de verla.

—¡Hannah! —Anselm levantó la vista y se rio de él.

—Fue Esme —dijo Stanley en voz baja—. Anoche.

—Pero ¿qué pasó?

—Estás derramando tu copa. Y a todo esto, ¿por qué estás bebiendo whisky solo? —preguntó Anselm.

—Se le cruzaron los cables, tío. Chaby la encontró con el gas encendido. —Entonces el chico ojeroso se volvió de nuevo hacia Anselm—. ¿Sabes lo de Charles? Su vieja ha venido de Grand Rapids para llevárselo

allí, es de la Ciencia Cristiana.

Otto dejó su vaso en la mesa. Al mirar atrás, los minutos pasados le parecieron horas, y las horas días desde que la había visto por última vez: él la había impulsado a hacerlo. Su pecho se dilató mientras recuperaba el aliento y se volvía para marcharse.

—Vino llena de luz y dulzura, ya sabes, tío. Creía que podría camelarle con su Mary Baker Eddy, pero no piensa volver a darle un centavo si no se vuelve a casa con ella. No me extraña que esté tan pirado.

Anselm alargó la mano hacia el vaso de Otto mientras Otto salía corriendo hacia la puerta, pasando precipitadamente entre los dos jóvenes, interrumpiendo.

—¿Escotológico?

—Escatológico, la doctrina de las últimas cosas…

—Dios santo, Willie, estás borracho. O eso o estás escribiendo para un público muy reducido.

—¿Y qué?, ¿cuánta gente había en la República de Platón?

Otto recorría las calles a toda prisa, pero avanzaba casi mecánicamente, un pie tras otro y la carga del cabestrillo golpeándolo, de modo que su excitación no se puso de manifiesto hasta que terminó de subir las escaleras y se detuvo sin aliento ante su puerta. Durante todo el camino había ido moviendo los labios, de los que brotaban débiles sonidos aislados, gorjeos de perdón que estaba intentando trabar.

Chaby abrió la puerta. Iba arremangado, con el cuello subido por detrás y la camisa desabrochada hasta la cintura, mostrando una línea de tatuaje azul que parecía venir del hombro. Otto se quedó mirando la medalla milagrosa que oscilaba desde su garganta, y luego alzó la vista hacia los pequeños dientes blancos de Chaby.

—Está…

Chaby asintió con la cabeza por encima del hombro y se volvió, dejando la puerta entreabierta. Otto la abrió de un empujón.

Ella salió a recibirlo desde el fondo de la habitación doble. Llevaba un vestido limpio de algodón rojo, y encima un abrigo azul de motas. Lo saludó esbozando una sonrisa; su cara tranquila pareció que iba a sonreír, y luego no.

—Pero tú… ¿estás bien? —preguntó acercándose a ella.

—No. Ella debe ir al médico —le dijo. Llevaba en la mano el libro que había estado leyendo, con un dedo aún metido entre las páginas cerradas. Era *La cabaña del tío Tom.*

Sólo al acercarse se dio cuenta Otto de lo muy maquillada que iba. Desde la puerta su cara tenía casi un tono azulado, pero resultó ser un reflejo del cuidadoso maquillaje de sus ojos, que parecía extenderse sobre su cara por la palidez de su piel. Llevaba los labios pintados con el mismo cuidado, con un rojo levemente suavizado pero aún brillante. En la pared de donde acababa de venir había un espejo, o más bien un trozo irregular de espejo que por un lado acababa en una punta afilada.

—Escucha —dijo Otto, tendiendo una mano abierta que dejó caer lentamente—. Siento lo de… puedo… —Ella esperó, con la misma sonrisa malograda—. ¿Estás bien…? —repitió, centrando la atención por primera vez en los grandes aros de sus pendientes. Hasta aquel momento sólo habían servido para completar su figura.

—Ella debe salir a dar un largo paseo, pues hoy no ha comido nada —dijo a Otto—, y el médico le ha metido sulfato de bario en el estómago para poder hacerle rayos x y averiguar si tiene estómago. Qué tontería, ¿verdad? —añadió tras una pausa.

—Sí, pero tú… quiero decir que he oído que tú… que anoche te pasó algo…

—Anoche —repitió ella, apartando la vista de él—, anoche ella hizo una tontería muy grande, encender el gas… —De repente giró en redondo hacia él y siguió hablando con un tono risueñamente burlón y los ojos brillantes muy abiertos: él paseó la mirada de uno a otro y vio en ambos su propio reflejo dilatado—. ¡Encender el gas, cuando la cuenta era ya tan alta…! —Y lo dejó seguir mirando un momento la imagen de la superficie de sus ojos, antes de volverse para decir—: Pero entonces llegó Chaby y todo se arregló.

Otto se pasó la mano por la cara y murmuró algo sin volverse hacia Chaby (hacia donde ella miraba ahora por encima de su hombro), que estaba sentado fumando un cigarrillo en la habitación que tenía a la espalda.

—Oh, sí… —dijo, y se apartó un paso de ella, dejando caer la mano, bajando la vista hacia donde la alfombra pintada en el suelo terminaba entre ambos.

Ella se acercó a un cajón buscando algo, un pañuelo, y le dejó allí parado mirando a su alrededor, pero evitando dirigir los ojos hacia la habitación que tenía a la espalda.

—Veo que al fin has conseguido un espejo —dijo con un tono bastante desagradable, mirándose en él para ver su cara cortada por la mandíbula. Como ella no dijo nada, anadió—: Sin duda lo necesitas para ponerte toda esa pintura en la cara.

—Oh, no, la pintura no es por el espejo —dijo mirándolo, vuelta a medias desde el cajón y agarrada a él —. Pero ahora vive ahí un fantasma que no es feliz. Y cuando viene ella se esconde delante del espejo donde no puede encontrarla.

—Oh… —murmuró Otto; luego echó una ojeada hacia la otra habitación y sacó un cigarrillo. Lo encendió y dio un golpecito con el pie en el suelo, buscando un sitio para tirar la cerilla—. ¿Qué es esto? —dijo de pronto, cerca de la estantería, volviendo con la punta del pie un dibujo que había encontrado en el suelo—. ¿Por qué… quién es éste? —preguntó, y se inclinó para recogerlo y mirarlo de cerca.

—Alguien —dijo ella.

—Pero dónde lo… ¿cómo es que le conoces?

—Sólo es alguien —dijo.

—Pero es raro… ¿qué le pasa a esto?

Se quedó mirando la cara, que le devolvió la mirada, exactamente igual pero exactamente distinta de como la recordaba, fielmente precisa pero cada línea veraz traducida a su mentira perfecta, como una cara vista por detrás.

—Es un chiste muy gracioso —dijo ella de pronto, elevando la voz, y se echó a reír, pero cuando la miró a la cara la risa había cesado ya.

—No, no es gracioso —dijo él, mirando de nuevo el dibujo. Hizo ademán de ponerlo ante el espejo por curiosidad, y luego lo tiró bruscamente y se volvió hacia ella—. ¿Puedes salir a dar un paseo?

—Ella debe ir a dar un largo paseo con la sustancia química en el estómago —dijo. Se estaba poniendo unos guantes.

Cuando salían se detuvo en la puerta.

—¿Estarás aquí? —preguntó a Chaby. Chaby asintió con la cabeza.

—¡Pero *estarás*…! —dijo dando un paso desesperado hacia él.

—Claro. Estaré aquí —dijo Chaby desde el sillón, y le guiñó un ojo y sonrió, alzando apenas las puntas de su fino bigotillo.

Entonces ella perdió su rigidez, y se apoyó contra el marco de la puerta, sonriéndole.

Otto esperaba en el descansillo. Cuando salían se echó por encima del hombro un extremo de la bufanda verde y dijo con el tono más despreocupado que pudo:

—A todo esto, ¿de dónde has sacado esos pendientes?

—Siempre los ha tenido.

—Nunca te los he visto puestos. Ni siquiera sabía que tuvieras las orejas perforadas. —Ella no dijo nada —. ¿No te duelen? Quiero decir, como son tan grandes.

—Sí —respondió ella volviendo la cara—, le duelen.

Otto pensó en cogerla del brazo, pero no lo hizo todavía. Además, iba caminando a su derecha, y no podía evitar darle de vez en cuando con el codo en cabestrillo. Iba pensando en el dibujo que había encontrado, y dejado, en el suelo de su casa; en realidad sentía una intensa curiosidad por él, pero la aplazó, como estaba aplazando el cogerla del brazo hasta que estuvieran bien lejos de su puerta (como si una vez en territorio ajeno a ella fuera a estar a merced de su protección); todo esto en mente, con el autorretrato plantado ante los ojos, cuando le dijo:

—He quedado con mi padre dentro de un rato, una hora o así. —Como ella no hizo ningún comentario, añadió—: Por primera vez.

—Eso está muy bien —dijo.

—No sé lo bien que estará —dijo él—. Imagínate, a mi edad, reunirme con el viejo por primera vez. —Dejó de hablar mientras doblaban la esquina y sorteaban a los extraños que pasaban por ahí—. Despréndete del hombre viejo, dice la Biblia, ármate de…

De repente ella lo cogió del brazo, aferrando todo el brazo en cabestrillo entre los suyos.

—¿Sabes…? —dijo.

—¿Qué…? —Intentó sacar la mano del cabestrillo y coger la suya enguantada, pero no la encontró.

—He descubierto que no *hay* nadie —dijo con un tono íntimamente confidencial.

—¿Nadie?

—Anoche llamaron a la puerta. Fui a abrir la puerta, y no había nadie. No había nadie allí ante mi puerta. Nadie había llamado.

Otto musitó algo y la miró rápidamente, a las cuencas azules de sus ojos a la luz de la calle.

—Y… ¿no entró nadie? —logró decir, alargando la mano derecha en busca de las suyas.

—No —dijo, y lo soltó con la misma brusquedad con que lo había agarrado.

—Bueno, mira, sabes… no debes ponerte… no debes preocuparte demasiado, sabes, quiero decir después de lo que ha pasado…

—¿Tú también sabes lo que ha pasado? —preguntó, alzando la vista hacia él con aire muy sorprendido.

Otto la miró con excitación. Es verdad, estaba confuso; pero ella estaba con él, estaban juntos después de lo que parecía muchísimo tiempo, y…

—Todo esto… —dijo—. Todo esto…

—Hizo el amor con ella, y luego ella se fue.

—¿Qué has dicho…?

—Amor que olía como los lirios de la Madon-na —siguió, elevando neutramente la voz a un plano de maravilla y distancia—. Sí —dijo con aire absorto; luego bajó el tono—. Como el pus de san Juan de la Cruz.

Otto había empezado a rodearla para poder abrazarla, pero lo detuvo con una mirada de infinito reproche.

—Olía a lirios de la Madon-na —dijo con aquel tono bajo, un tono de pesar infinito.

—Bueno, mira… ¿de *quién* hablas…?

Otto la rodeó bruscamente, quiso cogerle la mano y se dio cuenta de que todavía llevaba en ella *La cabaña del tío Tom.* Su mente revolvió una vasta colección de cosas irrelevantes, reflejos de las caras que pasaban junto a ellos y se volvían aquí y allá con embotada curiosidad hacia ese chiste incunable que decía que *La cabaña del tío Tom* no fue escrita por azar porque fue escrita por Harriet Beecher Stowe…

—Del que está en el
es-pejo
, ese quién —dijo ella con su tono burlón.

—Bueno, mira, esa fotografía, y su… mira, ¿qué pasa…? ¿Has estado posando…? ¿Para él?

—A veces lo ha hecho.

—Pero dónde está… ¿pero dónde están los cuadros?

—Él no se los enseñó. —Su voz sonó brusca por la decepción. Estaban pasando ante un bar cuya puerta se abrió en aquel momento y vertió fuera un pesado torrente inconexo de música alemana que cesó en cuanto dieron un paso, dejando su cara iluminada por las luces rojas y azules de un anuncio de cerveza, expuesta con la expresión de temor que recordaba haber visto por primera vez aquella tarde cuando se echó encima de ella en el sillón y algo, en alguna parte, se rompió: pero bajo esta conspiración instantánea de luces y maquillaje aquel temor inmaculado se convirtió en terror, un terror hastiado mantenido más allá de los años y la resistencia humanos, y aquella cara de bruja lo hizo estremecerse antes de darse cuenta.

—Cuando vengan los testigos —le dijo ella, sin cogerlo del brazo pero tocándoselo con la punta de los dedos—, ¿la identificarán?, o se apartarán de ella hacia los cuadros de ella que no son de ella en absoluto, y se estremecerán como tú te estremeces y miras hacia otra parte.

Había mirado hacia otra parte al pasar ante el escaparate de un bazar, un brillante revoltijo de novedades, de colores y caretas, lapiceros, rompecabezas, un asiento de retrete para niños, tarjetas navideñas, ceniceros, un equipo de pintura, sortijas con piedras falsas, un crucifijo fosforescente, «dulce Na-a-avidad» brotó por la claraboya que lo coronaba.

—Somos los gitanos —le dijo mientras se volvía rápidamente hacia ella, hablando con aquel tono bajo de antes, de profundo pesar—, los Egipcios Perdidos, y hacemos penitencia por no haberles dado asilo a Ellos, cuando Ellos huyeron a Egipto. Qué leyes tan duras hacen contra nosotros —siguió, con voz cada vez más apagada—. No nos permiten hablar nuestra lengua —dijo alzando de nuevo la vista hacia él—, pues creen que podemos convertir un niño blanco en negro, ¡y venderlo como esclavo!

De pronto se echó a reír, alzando la vista hacia él; pero la mano con que la agarró firmemente por la muñeca cortó su risa y la dejó sorprendida, mirándolo a los ojos. Se habían detenido, y echó a andar de nuevo, aunque él parecía querer retenerla.

—Bueno, mira… —dijo—. Mira…

—Una vez dijo incluso que los santos eran falsificaciones de Cristo, y que Cristo era una falsificación de Dios.

—Bueno, mira, ¿dónde está? Quiero decir que si tiene aún aquel estudio, ese sitio en Horatio Street.

—Quizá sí, quizá no. Ella ya no lo ve.

—Yo quiero verlo, yo… pero tú, mira ¿puedo verte luego?, ¿en tu casa?

—Si quieres.

—¿Estará él allí?

—Ella ya no lo ve.

—Me refiero a Chaby, ¿estará en tu casa?

—Si quiere estar.

—Pero él… quiero decir maldita sea siempre está allí… ¿qué está haciendo allí a todo esto?

—Ahora se está haciendo cosas malas con la aguja.

—Mira, ¿cuándo estarás en casa?

Tras una larga pausa, cuando llegaron a una esquina y se detuvo allí, bajo una farola, dijo:

—Ella no lo sabe, debe dar un largo paseo con la sustancia química en el estómago que no está ahí, y luego debe ir al médico.

—Pero… He quedado con mi padre dentro de un rato, pero mira, quiero verte. Quiero decir que tengo que hablarte, parece que han pasado meses desde la última vez que te vi, y tú… y todavía te quiero, aunque…

Se calló y dio a su muñeca, que aún tenía cogida, un tirón tan brusco que el libro cayó al suelo. Lo recogió rápidamente, y se enderezó diciendo:

—Porque yo no creía en nada, o pensaba que no creía en nada y quizá estaba fingiendo que no creía en nada, pero sólo intentaba utilizar la cabeza y resolver las cosas y… porque parece que así tiene que ser todo el mundo ahora, porque no puedes confiar… y tú… y ahora… y luego, cuando te encontré, descubrí que tú realmente no, que realmente no creías en nada y tienes que hacerlo, tienes que hacerlo… —terminó sin aliento y alargó la mano de nuevo hacia su muñeca, pero ella la retiró y se quedó con la mano libre temblando en el aire entre ambos. Luego cobró aliento pausadamente, en profundidad, y lo expulsó por completo diciendo—: ¿Me quieres?

—Si hubiera tiempo —le respondió mirándolo de lleno a la cara.

—O… o… —empezó a titubear otra vez, llevándose la mano al corte de afeitado que tenía en la mejilla, y apretando los dedos contra él cuando lo encontró—. Es como… —empezó otra vez, bajando la voz y la mano, y esta vez le cogió la muñeca—. Es como si cuando pierdes a alguien… cuando pierdes a alguien que quieres, perdieses contacto con todo, con todos los demás, y nadie… y nada es real ya…

Ella se lo quedó mirando, paciente ahora con su mano, que aflojó ligeramente su presión mientras su voz se apagaba; aunque encontró la suficiente aún para repetir:

—O las cosas no funcionan. —Luego cobró aliento de nuevo y se la quedó mirando bajo la farola. Se había relajado bajo su mano; hasta se había arrimado medio paso a él, que contempló su cara a la luz que caía desde arriba, mientras una leve ansiedad expectante y receptiva parecía extenderse sobre ella; mientras la suya se distendía por los pómulos, y la excitación abandonaba sus ojos a medida que dominaba sus sentidos. Soltó su muñeca, y bajó la mano, y se quedó parado ante ella como se había quedado parado en el muelle ante el resplandor de aquel blanco buque frutero; y del mismo modo que entonces había contado sus monedas para darle una al mendigo en cuya cara no vio ninguna belleza, al encontrársela tan de repente, ahora hizo un cómputo de sus emociones, calculando cuántas podía gastar y cuántas guardarse—. Puedes confiar en mí —le dijo.

Ella se retiró; y allí, como moneditas colándosele entre los dedos, empezó a perder lo que había contrapesado y justificado con tal experto cuidado, cuando dio la moneda de dos centavos y medio que parecía una de diez. Susurró roncamente su nombre, y levantó una mano para abrazarla.

—No.

—Pero yo…

—Déjala en paz.

El imperdible se soltó, el cabestrillo cayó mientras la rodeaba con ambos brazos, y su mano se abrió, derramándolo todo. Pero ella no hizo ningún movimiento, ningún esfuerzo por moverse; se quedó parada y esperó con la cabeza lo más inclinada que podía. Entonces él cerró las manos, mirando por encima de ella, recogiendo rápidamente todo lo que había estado a punto de perder.

—¿Estarás bien sola? —le dijo.

—Ahora lo estará.

Otto se inclinó y recogió el cabestrillo.

—Te veré luego —dijo.

Media manzana más allá se volvió a mirar, para verla alejarse de él.

Globos, un reloj, un cojín pedorrero, pinturas y plantillas textiles, una polvera acabada en oro con borla de

seda y relojera, Su retrato al óleo (una auténtica pintura al óleo original) copiado de su foto favorita, lienzo de
4 ½ x 5 ½
pulgadas, de regalo caballete y paleta de madera de adorno; una polvorienta mancha de tinta de imitación; un polvoriento perrito de muelles de imitación; una muñeca parlante; una Santa Madre, un Niño de Praga y un san José, chapados en oro de 24 ct, con un estuche de bolsillo con chapa de identificación, 25 ¢; una Venus de Milo con un reloj en el vientre; una figurilla de gatito con madeja (parece porcelana fina de calidad); una tarjeta navideña con una auténtica Biblia de 180 páginas tamaño sello pegada; un muñeco de ventrílocuo; una careta, montada sobre otra careta; todo esto, junto con otras muchas cosas duraderas, bonitas, útiles e inspiradoras, aparecía expuesto ante la mirada de Otto donde se detuvo a ponerse el cabestrillo. El imperdible había desaparecido. Se lo ató con aire inseguro, utilizando a hurtadillas ambas manos, y palpó su cartera antes de meter la mano en el bolsillo del pantalón, pues le temblaba. La gente pasaba en ambas direcciones. Alguien lo embistió por debajo y gritó:

—Yaa, yaaaa…

El brazo en cabestrillo saltó con horror mientras se quedaba mirando a su triunfal asaltante, una persona de menos de tres pies de estatura que le miraba desde abajo con ojos como platos, una inmensa nariz roja y un bigotazo de cepillo sujetos por unas gafas de alambre sin cristales. Dando unos pasos entró en el bar, donde la *jukebox* tocaba «Eine kleine Taverne im Golf von Napoli», y pidió una cerveza. De repente tenía mucho frío. Sacó la mano con una moneda apretada en ella y empezó a dar golpecitos en la barra, mirando fijamente al frente, a los ojos de su imagen reflejada en una vitrina con espejo sobre las filas de botellas tras la barra. Estaba solo en el bar, aparte del camarero, y encendió su último cigarrillo.

La puerta volvió a abrirse, y entró un hombre con un maltrecho traje de Santa Claus, sin barba ni gorro, pero con una barbilla bien poblada. Miró jovialmente a Otto, al fondo de la barra, y luego dijo:

—Ponnos algo con una sonrisa dentro, Jimmy. Mi especial. Un lingotazo dulce, Jimmy… —Guiñó el ojo a Otto—. Cuanto más lingotazo más dulce.

Sin devolver el guiño, Otto volvió la espalda y apoyó la frente en la palma, con ese codo en la barra y la moneda en la mano en cabestrillo, esperando. Cerró los ojos un momento.

El camarero llegó con las manos vacías, abrió la vitrina con espejo para sacar una botella de bourbon Old Heaven Hill y volvió hacia el hombre del maltrecho traje de Santa Claus.

Otto olfateó y abrió los ojos. Detrás de la barra, en un estante difícil de alcanzar, había una hucha de donativos para una Sociedad del Sagrado Corazón. Encima había una estampa de Cristo mostrando el Sagrado Corazón, con aspecto, a los ojos entreabiertos de Otto, de un agente del C.I.D. enseñando su insignia. Otto se la quedó mirando y murmuró algo entre dientes. Volvió a olfatear. Era su pelo, quemándose con el cigarrillo que tenía entre los dedos. «Maldita sea —dijo, y luego—: maldición». Dejó el cigarrillo en un cenicero al alcance de la mano y alzó la vista en busca del camarero, que en aquel preciso instante se acercaba con su cerveza.

—Quince —dijo el camarero. Esperó mientras Otto registraba torpemente sus bolsillos y, finalmente, añadía una moneda fría sacada de su chaqueta a la caliente que tenía en la mano en cabestrillo—. Aquí sólo aceptamos dinero americano, amigo.

El camarero le devolvió desdeñosamente la fría y brillante moneda de dos céntimos y medio y se quedó esperando, mirando con aire ausente el cigarrillo de Otto humeando en el cenicero, hasta que Otto encontró una moneda de diez centavos. Entonces recogió las monedas, cogió el cigarrillo y volvió hacia el fondo de la barra.

—Pero… —Otto contuvo la palabra antes de que brotara. Cerró la mano sobre el vaso y se quedó mirando fijamente al frente. Y tardó al menos medio minuto en darse cuenta de que ni la barbilla poblada, ni la nariz chata, ni las orejas de soplillo, ni los ojos amarillos que miraba eran los suyos.

Se volvió y se dirigió resueltamente hacia la cabina telefónica. Una vez allí marcó SP
7-3100
. «¿Oiga?», dijo ante el micrófono. «Quiero denunciar un caso de drogadicción. Heroína. Si van inmediatamente a esta dirección… ¿Qué? No, preferiría no dar mi nombre».

La puerta de cristal se cerró lentamente sobre él, y desde fuera se le vio mirando a través de la configuración Que te joban garabateada en el cristal, una dedicatoria que, en otras circunstancias, habría podido recordar la taimada insinuación de sir Walter Raleigh a la reina Isabel, cuando garrapateó con un diamante en el cristal de una ventana «Subiría con gusto, pero temo caer».

La *jukebox* tocaba «Fliege mit mir in die Heimat». El camarero apagó el cigarrillo a medio fumar, como si fuera suyo. El hombre del maltrecho traje de Santa Claus estaba de espaldas a la barra, con los codos

apoyados en ella. «Bonito mural», dijo contemplando la pintura de la pared, donde aparecía un alce con la mirada perdida sobre un lago. Pero el reloj, aunque colocado en lo alto del cielo, donde habría podido estar el sol a mediodía en el tiempo otoñal del paisaje del alce, giraba en dirección contraria a la habitual, para comodidad de los parroquianos del bar, que podían verlo correctamente en el espejo.

—Una vez conocí a un tipo que tenía un mural —dijo el hombre del maltrecho traje de Santa Claus—. Sólo que aquél estaba en el techo —añadió reflexivamente—. Y era una tía.

V

«La confianza de nuestro pueblo en Dios debería declararse en nuestras monedas nacionales. Se encargará usted de preparar un emblema, sin ningún retraso injustificado, con un lema que exprese con las menos y más concisas palabras posibles este reconocimiento nacional».

El secretario del Tesoro de Abraham Lincoln
al director de la Casa de la Moneda

—No puedo vivir contigo y ser cristiana —gritó la mujer agarrándose al borde del sucio fregadero, respondiendo a los gemidos que salían de la habitación contigua, una mujer cuyos antepasados se habían reunido al pie del Janiculo en la antigua Roma, y habían vendido lo que fuera que vendieran en el interior apestoso a ajo de la Taverna Meritoria, aquella miserable fonducha a orillas del Tiber.

—Tú no eres cristiana, nunca lo has sido. —Y volvieron a empezar los gemidos.

—Cuándo vas a dejar de hacer ese ruido espantoso —preguntó ella, cuyos antepasados disputaban entre sí, preguntándose: «¿Cómo puede este hombre darnos a comer su cuerpo?».

—Cállate. Es la única razón por la que te casaste conmigo. Querías casarte con un cristiano, querías casarte con un buen católico. Bueno, los leopardos no pueden cambiar sus manchas.

—¡Cierra el pico! —Giró hacia abajo el control de volumen de su audífono.

Entonces se hizo el silencio. Duró un minuto entero, hasta que traspasó ambas habitaciones un grito tan horrible como para parar el corazón y el aliento y la sangre novatos en el pleno instante eterno de su duración; un ruido que, como dice el libro, una vez oído jamás se olvida. La mujer ante el fregadero (a cuyos antepasados los raptaron de niños para educarlos en la Fe, A.M.D.G.) se agarró a su borde rebosante. Tenía caídas las arrugas de la cara, no de terror, sino de cansancio. Demasiado tarde, giró aún más hacia abajo el control de volumen de su audífono.

—¿Qué tal ha sonado eso? —preguntó su marido a su espalda, triunfante en el umbral—. Eso era un epiléptico. Estoy ensayando.

—Oh Jesús y María, esta vez solo llevas tres semanas en casa y ya has vuelto a empezar.

—¿Qué hay de malo en ello? San Pablo era epiléptico.

—¿No puedes hacer cualquier otra cosa? ¿Eres demasiado viejo para hacer otra cosa?

Era cierto. El señor Sinisterra estaba envejecido. Aunque se le había oído decir que no lamentaba sus años de cárcel más de lo que había lamentado san Agustín su retiro del mundo cuando vivía cerca de Tagaste; aunque ciertamente, haciendo suyas las palabras de san Gregorio («La Vida Contemplativa es superior en mérito y más elevada que la activa»), había pasado largas temporadas en reclusión solitaria (en «el hoyo», como lo llamaban, un lugar que, aunque más limpio y más seco, equivalía al *in pace* del convento, donde de vez en cuando, por su propio bien, se emparedaba de por vida a las religiosas medievales); a pesar de todo esto y de su loable forma de afrontarlo, los años de cárcel no lo habían ablandado, ni habían prolongado su juventud. La vida en Atlanta distaba mucho de ser, como le habían dicho alguna vez a su hijo, «unas largas vacaciones para papá», no más de lo que el retiro de san Gil en el desierto se parecía a una gira de folleto de viajes. Ahora el retiro había acabado una vez más, y con la humildad del profeta Jeremías, que anhelaba la vida contemplativa pero fue arrancado de ella para «ir a gritar a los oídos de Jerusalén», el señor Sinisterra había vuelto de nuevo para cargar con las penalidades de este mundo.

—Voy a salir un rato —dijo desde el umbral, mirando recelosamente hacia la mano que su mujer apartaba del control del audífono, que llevaba prendido en el pecho. Ella se le quedó mirando.

—Deberías aprender a dominarte, como esos yoguis —dijo.

—Debería aprender a dominarme. ¡Yo! ¡A dominarme!

—Es una religión maravillosa esa que tienen, ese vuduísmo.

—Es inútil —dijo él, volviendo a la otra habitación—. Iba a traerte un libro, pero no creo que pudieras leerlo aunque lo hiciera.

Se sentó ante un espejo, iluminado como un espejo de camerino de teatro. Esparcidos ante él había numerosos tarros, tubos, lápices de colores y pelo en mechones y extensiones que habría envidiado cualquier estrella. Colgados de la pared había un crucifijo, una foto de la Cavalieri como Tosca, varias

corbatas con los colores de los mejores colegios nacionales y extranjeros y un recordatorio de una bula papal de Pío IX, el Pío Nono de tantos recuerdos felices, en este caso la *Bolla di Composizione* de 1866, que concedía el perdón al criminal que dedicara el tres por ciento (3%) de su botín a usos devotos, permitiéndole «conservar y poseer el resto de buena fe, como su propiedad privada justamente ganada y adquirida».

En la mesa que tenía al lado, entre botellas de agua regia, alcohol, benceno, ácido nítrico, algo conocido en el oficio como «sangre de dragón», unas tijeras de podar, un poco de cera de abejas, un poco de resina, un poco de masilla, un poco de ámbar, unas cuantas planchas de acero y un poco de aceite de lavanda cuya fragancia primaveral impregnaba la habitación, había dos exóticos pasaportes y un ejemplar de la *Theologia Moralis* de Alfonso Liguori, encima de la edición de 1839 del *Detector de falsificaciones* de Bicknall. Había abierto un botellón con una solución de permanganato potásico, y ahora, después de echarse por encima del hombro la medalla de plata que colgaba sobre su garganta, se embadurnaba cuidadosamente la cara y el cuello con aquel púrpura brillante.

—Gracias a Dios que ya ha recogido su colada —la oyó murmurar.

—¿Qué quieres decir con eso de mi colada? ¿Qué colada?

—Esos billetes de veinte dólares que tenías colgados por toda la casa para que se secaran.

—¡Como hayas manchado alguno! —Volvió amenazadoramente hacia la puerta una cara que florecía por momentos con el rubor de la juventud—. Así pescaron al mayor artista de todos los tiempos —siguió, volviéndose hacia el espejo—. Jim el Pendolista hacía todos los billetes a mano; durante veinte años tuvo éxito. ¿Y qué pasó? Un estúpido dependiente de ultramarinos manchó uno de ellos con una mano mojada. ¿Sabes cuál fue su defensa cuando lo juzgaron? Era un artista. Cualquier trabajo suyo valía más como obra de arte que los que el gobierno sacaba a espuertas. Un artista, un auténtico artista.

—No te preocupes, no he manchado ninguno de tus papeles sin valor. Sin valor, papeles sin ningún valor —murmuró ante el fregadero.

—¡Sin *valor!* —exclamó—. ¿Sabes cuánto he trabajado en eso? ¿Sabes de dónde saqué el papel para imprimirlos? ¿Qué crees que eran, periódicos viejos? Pues no lo eran, había papel por valor de doscientos cincuenta dólares ahí colgado. ¿Crees que iba a hacer un trabajo barato después de lo que me costó hacer esas planchas? ¿Es que alguna vez he hecho un trabajo barato? ¡Papeles sin valor! Eran doscientos cincuenta billetes de un dólar, blanqueados para imprimir encima los de veinte. Tardé casi ocho años en hacer esas planchas —añadió.

—Bonita forma de pasar el tiempo en la cárcel, Dios lo sabe.

—Así es, son planchas de acero grabadas a mano, de las que ya no se ven. Nada de ese fotograbado barato. —Empezó a hacer un paquete con papel marrón, pero pareció incapaz de resistir la tentación de sacar un billete, al que dio la vuelta en la mano murmurando—: Ya no se ven trabajos como éste —mientras miraba la cara desafiante del séptimo Presidente. Bajo el paquete estaba el *Detector Nacional de Falsificaciones* del mes en curso, una publicación donde hacía muchos años que no aparecía ninguna reseña de su trabajo: en este trabajo, el anonimato aumentaba con el valor, como lo hacía en las viñetas del propio papel moneda. Al Padre de Su Patria lo arrugaban, doblaban y ofrecían millones de veces al día en un tráfico de lo más pedestre y meretricio, infinitamente mejor conocido y peor tratado que McKinley y Cleveland, requerido con mucha más presteza que el cinco mil veces remoto Madison, en modo alguno pariente del diez mil veces distante Salmon P. Chase, aunque más que semejante a él en su codicia del cargo supremo, un reconocimiento nunca concedido a aquel secretario del Tesoro de Abraham Lincoln, que hizo los cinco traspasos de poder sin cortarse siquiera el pelo.

—Ya no se ven trabajos como éste —repitió—. Todo es barato, todo el mundo hace las cosas del modo más rápido y barato. Este es uno de los pocos oficios artesanales que quedan. Mira los ojos, no tienen ese tono apagado que se ve en un trabajo barato. Mira los labios delicados —murmuró metiendo el billete con el resto—. Yo no pierdo el tiempo como mucha gente que conozco.

—No me hables de perder el tiempo —le replicó—. Si tuvieras los dolores que tengo yo. Pilla un cáncer tú también, y ya verás lo listo que eres entonces.

—¡Un cáncer! Una indigestión, eso es lo que tienes tú.

—Y hay otra cosa de la que quiero hablarte antes de que termines de disfrazarte como un payaso de circo. ¿Adónde vas, a todo esto? —preguntó apareciendo en el umbral, mientras él abría una botella de eserina y sacaba un cuentagotas.

—Voy a una cita —contestó secamente.

—A una cita. Qué bonito.

Llenó el cuentagotas y se volvió hacia ella con exagerada paciencia.

—Voy a encontrarme con un pasador para entregarle este material. Todo está acordado y pagado.

—Bonitos amigos tienes. Tendría que conocerlos en sociedad.

—¡Tendrías que conocerlos! Ni siquiera yo lo conozco, no quiero conocerlo, no quiero que me conozca. Son los primeros a los que cogen. Si no me conoce no sabe de dónde ha sacado el material, no puede hablar. Siempre son problemas con los intermediarios y los pasadores los que hacen que te pesquen. Ni siquiera tengo intermediario. No hay más que intermediarios. Mires donde mires no hay más que trabajo barato e intermediarios. Son los que le sacan provecho a la cosa. Treinta dólares por cada cien, mientras yo me llevo ocho. ¡Después de lo que he trabajado! Mira esas tres planchas, están grabadas a mano en acero, nunca se desgastarán como esas planchas de cinc de un trabajo barato de fotograbado. —Echó la cabeza hacia atrás y levantó el cuentagotas—. Ese tipo con el que he quedado no va a poder identificarme, porque iré casi ciego con las gafas… —Ella observó cómo le caía una gota de eserina en el ojo izquierdo, mientras seguía—: ¿Crees que puedo correr riesgos? ¿Cuántos hombres crees que hay en este país que puedan coger los trastos de grabar y hacer lo que yo sé hacer? Apenas media docena, y apenas se me acercan. Y aun esos, o trabajan para el gobierno o están en la cárcel. ¿Y crees que nadie sabe quién soy? En cuanto encuentren una muestra de este material la ponen bajo un microscopio. Tienen trabajos míos que cogieron hace treinta años, y pueden compararlos. No son estúpidos con un microscopio en la mano, los del Servicio Secreto, pueden descubrir el menor parecido, incluso treinta años después pueden notar ahí mi mano, siempre está ahí, siempre queda algo, haga lo que haga.

Ella estaba apoyada en el quicio de la puerta, y lo miraba con aire cansado; olfateó, y alzó los ojos como oteando a distancia el paisaje del reino de su marido, el paisaje intensamente perfumado del Sheol. Finalmente dijo:

—Pues quédate con tus amigos, pero déjame decirte una cosa: cuando el médico me da morfina para mis dolores, ¿qué pasa con ella? Desaparece inmediatamente de la casa. ¿Quién la roba? Tu hijo, ese es quien la roba. Y encima a su madre.

—No es mío, es tuyo. Yo no lo reconozco. ¿Va alguna vez a la iglesia? No. No tiene ninguna moral, no tiene ningún talento.

—¿Y quién lo echó a perder? ¿Quién se inclinaba sobre él cuando era un bebé y decía: «Vaya, no es maravilloso, sus dos dedos medios son de la misma longitud, así que podría birlar carteras», intentando enseñarle a poner los dedos como tijeras para robar carteras? ¿Quién se inclinaba sobre él y decía: «Vaya, con unas yemas de los dedos tan sensibles como ésas podría sentir ceder los seguros de cualquier caja fuerte del mundo»? ¿Y quién fue quien le regaló el anillo de sello de papá, como si fuera un príncipe de no sé dónde, sólo que ese anillo de sello tiene debajo una cuchilla para rasgar bolsillos?

Su marido se volvió a mirarla. Tenía un extraño aspecto, pues una de sus pupilas se había contraído hasta el tamaño casi de una punta de alfiler, bañada en eserina que ahora se enjugó.

—Ésos eran cursos elementales, como los que recibe cualquier crío en la escuela preparatoria. ¿Crees que quería que fuese un holgazán? Por eso le enseñé algunas cosas básicas, cómo utilizar las manos. ¿Aprendió algo alguna vez? ¿Lo intentó alguna vez? No. No ha trabajado un solo día de su vida, a diferencia de su padre. Tú tenías que haber educado su lado moral. Eso es tarea de una madre; lo tuviste aquí para educar su lado moral durante todos esos años que estuve fuera. Y mira cómo ha salido.

—¿Y quién se queja? De nada sirve hablar de ello, lo único que quiero es que deje de robar la morfina de su madre. Hasta le registro los bolsillos buscándola, y qué encuentro, encuentro pastillas para el mareo y chicles.

—¿Crees que está mareado? ¿Sabes para qué las utiliza? Va al canódromo y droga a los perros con pastillas Mothersill para el mareo. Los chicles se los pone en las patas para frenarlos. ¿Crees que eso se lo he enseñado yo?

—Cualquier cosa mala que sepa se la has debido enseñar tú.

Seguía allí parada, mirando fijamente cómo se echaba eserina en el ojo derecho.

—Pero qué payaso —dijo melancólicamente—. De todas formas nunca ha estado en la cárcel, como el bueno de su padre que acaba de salir otra vez.

—¿Crees que no he pensado en eso? —dijo, apartando la vista del espejo para mirarla con dos pupilas como puntas de alfiler—. Estábamos en guerra, y las cosas van mal cuando hay una guerra. Es difícil conseguir metal para las planchas, es difícil conseguir las tintas adecuadas, a todos con los que puedes contar los reclutan, o encuentran trabajo en una fábrica de aviones. Las cosas se ponen muy feas, como con la prosperidad. Ahora no es tan fácil.

Pero ella se lo quedó mirando sin más.

—Frank, ¿es que nunca va a terminar esto? Cada vez que entras en este cuarto no sé quién va a salir.

Pasan dos meses, y todo se llena de tiza de tus manos cuando limpias tus planchas. Todo huele durante todo el tiempo. Creía que la lavanda era una flor, pero ahora la huelo en algún sitio y sólo me acuerdo de ti haciendo esta… esta…

—Estoy ocupado —dijo él, y se volvió hacia la mesa—. Me estás alterando los nervios.

—¡Los nervios! —gimió ella, volviendo al fregadero—. ¿Es que yo no tengo nervios? Cada vez que estás fuera pienso que quizá cambien las cosas cuando vuelvas, y luego, cuando llevas aquí un mes, casi deseo que vuelvas a marcharte. Seguirías allí encerrado por el lío en que te metiste con ese sello, si no fuera porque cometieron un error.

—¡Un error! Si alguna vez me ha protegido la mano de la Virgen ha sido ésa. Impugnaron la condena porque uno de los miembros del jurado era judío. Prestó juramento sobre un Nuevo Testamento. Y llamas a eso un error. Fue la Virgen María, tomándose el desquite por un error que cometieron los judíos hace dos mil años, ése fue el error. —Esperó a que respondiera, sospechando que había apagado el audífono. Luego siguió hablando con voz nostálgica, mirándose en el espejo—. Ese sello era hermoso, ese sello de Antigua de un centavo.[6] Tardé cuatro meses en hacer esa plancha. ¿Y crees que el color fue fácil? ¿Crees que cualquiera puede conseguir ese color castaño rojizo? Por eso ese chico no sirve para nada. ¿Estaría dispuesto a trabajar de firme en algo como eso? ¿Me oyes?

Esperó recelosamente para ver si había apagado el audífono, algo en lo que todavía no había conseguido sorprenderla.

—Te oigo —dijo ella cansadamente, ante el fregadero, y apagó el audífono.

—Bueno, entonces deja de hablarme como si fuera un vulgar pistolero. ¿Me has visto alguna vez con una pistola? Nunca he hecho daño a nadie, salvo una vez, y aquello fue un error, todo el mundo lo sabe, y no se pueden contar las misas que he mandado decir por ella. —Se santiguó apresuradamente y escogió su pelo para la noche, una saludable mata negra—. No como ese chico, ése no mandaría decir una misa ni por su propia madre. Es un descuidado y un inútil. Cada vez que estaba en casa intentaba enseñarle, para que sacara provecho de mi estudio y mi experiencia. Le enseñé a hacer saltar una cerradura Yale con una tira de celuloide. Le enseñé a abrir una cerradura con un hilo mojado y una astilla. Le enseñé a fingir que tenía la columna desviada, o un pie deforme. Nadie me enseñó a mí todo eso. Lo aprendí por mi cuenta. Me costó mucho trabajo, y él me tenía aquí mismo para enseñarle, aquí mismo, su propio padre. ¿Y qué ha aprendido? Nada. No ha trabajado un solo día de su vida. ¿Crees que voy a reconocer como hijo a un holgazán como ése? Es como todos ahora, no estudian su trabajo, no estudian sus materiales. Enséñame alguien que pueda conseguir un verde tan perfecto como éste —dijo mirando el reverso de un billete de veinte dólares—. No es un oficio para holgazanes, es un oficio para artistas, para artesanos.

El señor Sinisterra se detuvo para colocarse el pelo negro encima del suyo, una textura menguante de prematuro gris. Luego siguió hablando en voz más baja:

—No tiene ambición como su padre. He intentado enseñarle a hacer planchas de cobre, planchas de cinc, planchas de vidrio. Estuvo a punto de estropearme la única plancha de platino que he hecho en mi vida. Sólo una vez lo intentó por su cuenta, intentó hacer unos sellos fiscales. Lo ayudé todo el tiempo, como un viejo maestro, limpiando la plancha de cobre con benceno, aplicando la base de cera, ablandándola con un poco de aceite de lavanda. Le salió una porquería. Tuve que tirarlo todo antes de que nos metiera a todos en un lío. Ni siquiera el color, ¿crees que sabe distinguir la diferencia entre un verde y otro? Ni siquiera puede distinguirlo del rojo. Su padre es un artesano, un artista, él no es más que un holgazán.

El señor Sinisterra sacudió el polvo al pelo negro. Se oían ruidos en la cocina, pero ninguna palabra de respuesta; sólo el entrechocar de las cacerolas.

—No es como en los viejos tiempos —dijo mirándose en el espejo—. No es como cuando podías pasar una moneda sobredorada de veinticinco centavos por una de oro de diez dólares. No es como en los tiempos de Pete McCartney y Fred Biebusch, y de Gran Bill el Rarito, los tiempos en que Brockway pasaba cien mil como quien no quiere la cosa. No es como en los tiempos en que Johnnie el Caballero fundió la Copa de Ascot.

Se acercó al perchero para escoger una corbata. Apartó rápidamente Eton y Harrow, cogió el suave azul oscuro con rayas rojas desiguales de la Honorable Compañía de Artillería, lo examinó un momento, y luego volvió a dejarlo junto al brazo postizo colgado del perchero.

—No es un oficio para holgazanes, es un oficio para artistas. ¿Sabes cuánto miden los espacios entre rayas que aparecen detrás de Hamilton en los billetes de diez? Menos de una centésima de pulgada. ¿Crees que es un oficio para holgazanes? Ese chico ni siquiera lo intentó cuando hizo aquellos sellos fiscales. El ácido se metió por debajo de la cera y lo estropeó todo. ¿Crees que le importó? Ni siquiera notó la

diferencia. Tener un hijo como ése duele más que la picadura de una serpiente, ¿me oyes? No has leído un libro en tu vida. Bueno, da igual. Es una gran decepción para un padre que su hijo no se interese por el trabajo de su padre y lo continúe.

El cerdo, impreso en las monedas de Eleusis cuando la ciudad acuñó su primer dinero autónomo en el siglo IV a. C., el cerdo de la purificación, adornaba la corbata que escogió finalmente el señor Sinisterra, que luego se volvió hacia el espejo para anudársela al cuello con gran estilo de vieja escuela.

—Es una gran decepción que no sepa apreciar nuestra tradición —dijo—. Nuestra familia no era una familia cualquiera en Salerno, todos los secretos que tenemos han pasado de padres a hijos durante generaciones. ¿Crees que le importa? Mi padre estaba orgulloso de mí.

Se volvió para ponerse la chaqueta, y tras sacudirse las solapas, se la abrochó ante el espejo. Se le hinchó el pecho mientras se miraba.

Tenía a la espalda los *Protocolos de los sabios de Sión,* y el magnánimo otorgamiento de Constantino, aunque este emperador llevaba unos cinco siglos muerto cuando el espíritu de su generosidad se impuso en Roma por medio de los falsificadores, para legar al papado toda Europa occidental. Tenía a la espalda decretos, concesiones de tierras y testamentos, cuyo arte de composición llegó a ser una rama regular de la industria monástica, ocupados como estaban aquellos monjes de la Edad Media en mantener encendida la luz del conocimiento que habían ayudado a apagar en el resto del mundo. Tenía a la espalda a Polícrates, que acuñó monedas de plomo bañadas en oro en su propio reino de Samos; y a Solón, que decretó la muerte para semejante originalidad en el suyo. Canuto cortaba las manos culpables; y en Inglaterra, que escapó a su imperio y sucumbió a los normandos no mucho después, no solo se cortaban las manos sino que se sacaban los ojos, un lirio de castigo dorado con castración que no solucionó nada, pues aun en el reinado de Eduardo III resultó necesario arrastrar y descuartizar a cierto número de eclesiásticos de talento.

Los historiadores, ansiosos por rescatar alguna apariencia de sistema del caos del pasado, señalan que desde los albores de la civilización el centro de la civilización se ha desplazado hacia el oeste: desde la isla asiática de Polícrates y la Atenas de Solón al Imperio Romano de Constantino nueve siglos después, siguiendo hasta el laberinto franco de Carlomagno, avanzando sin detenerse hasta Canuto el Danés al filo del milenio, cruzando el Canal hasta llegar a la Inglaterra de Eduardo III en el siglo XIV, donde recuperó el aliento (mientras detrás alentaba en Italia la nueva del Renacimiento) durante tres siglos, preparándose para dar el salto a través del mar hasta las costas de un Nuevo Mundo, donde los primeros colonizadores (tras sacudirse aquel yugo de ignorancia tiránica y persecución religiosa) promovieron una cultura basada en la razón pura, e introdujeron entre los indios su arte civilizado, falsificando abalorios de porcelana y hueso. Prosperaron. El trabajo duro era la única expresión de gratitud que exigía su deidad, y cabía esperar que el dinero se acumulase como testimonio; y aunque Pensilvania decretó la picota, con las orejas clavadas en ella y cortadas, y un complemento de treinta y nueve latigazos y una multa, estos seres abnegados no se amedrentaron. Pero, como tantos otros artificios místicos ideados por sacerdotes, que se les resbalan, escapan y perecen en manos laicas, también esto se convirtió en una industria familiar: tenderos, barberos y taberneros emitían dinero, emulando lo mejor que podían a los mil bancos diferentes que hacían lo mismo. Antes de la guerra que se libró para mantener la Unión, un tercio del papel moneda en circulación era falso, y otro tercio había sido emitido por bancos generosamente denominados «irresponsables». Mientras tanto, los inspectores iban de un banco a otro, siguiendo la reserva de oro en barras que se trasladaba cortésmente del banco que acababan de inspeccionar al que visitaban a continuación; y cuando el público inoportuno exigía la misma garantía, se lo satisfacía agitando cajas llenas de vidrios rotos. Los comerciantes tenían «detectores de falsificaciones» bajo el mostrador, y confrontaban todo billete que se les ofrecía en pago con aquella lista de todas las falsificaciones en circulación, y de los billetes que habían perdido su valor por la desaparición de los efímeros bancos que los habían emitido.

El señor Sinisterra conservaba su ejemplar del *Detector de falsificaciones* de Bicknall para 1839 como una curiosidad profesional, de modo muy parecido al cirujano célebre que tiene a la vista un ejemplar de la *Anatomía* de Galeno. Y al igual que el célebre cirujano del corazón puede admirar el descubrimiento de Galeno de que las arterias contienen sangre (y no aire, como había enseñado la escuela alejandrina durante cuatro siglos), pero sonríe condescendientemente ante su teoría de que el *septum* del corazón estaba atravesado por forámenes imperceptibles (que permitían el paso de la sangre del ventrículo derecho al izquierdo), también el señor Sinisterra meditaba sobre los ingeniosos recursos del siglo anterior a él reseñados por Bicknall, que daba una lista de 20 emisiones de dinero a cargo de bancos ficticios, 43 bancos cuyos billetes carecían de valor, 54 bancos en bancarrota, 254 bancos cuyos billetes estaban falsificados, y 1395 variedades de billetes falsificados en circulación. Por ende estaba apropiadamente orgulloso de su tradición, que había venido a ejercer a la tierra de las oportunidades a comienzos de siglo, cuando la

proporción de italianos respecto a inmigrantes de tierras menos imaginativas era aproximadamente de cinco a uno: un hombre cuya dedicación había contribuido a ganar para Nueva York su reputación actual como mayor centro moderno de falsificación de divisas de todo el mundo.

Se santiguó ante el espejo, se bajó el cuello de la camisa y dejó descansar la mirada en la *Guía de Bangkok* de los Ferrocarriles Nacionales Siameses, tomando nota mientras lo hacía de que debía conseguir un ejemplar del Baedeker de España. Se permitió soñar un momento, se vio viajando (pues la Ciudad Eterna, en un Año Santo, se extendía ante él) como aquellos primeros peregrinos que iban a Tierra Santa, a pasar la Cuaresma en Roma, la Semana Santa en Compostela, mientras sus familias se morían de hambre en casa, adonde finalmente volvían cubiertos de conchas de berberechos para contar sus aventuras y recibir el aplauso y las felicitaciones reverentes de sus vecinos inferiores, que se habían quedado cobardemente en casa trabajando para ganarse la vida.

Se metió en el bolsillo la *Theologia Moralis*; luego, pensándolo bien, un bigotito rabio con goma adhesiva. Cogió el paquete de billetes, y se detuvo a mirar un momento los ojos intrépidos de Andrew Jackson antes de cerrar el envoltorio sobre ellos, y asegurarlo con dos gomas elásticas. ¿Cómo habría podido saber Jackson, cuando a la edad de trece años combatió en la batalla de Hanging Rock, que ciento setenta y pico años después un hombre trabajaría sobre su retrato con la exquisita atención de amor que el señor Sinisterra dedicaba a aquellos ojos, aquellos labios, aquel mechón de pelo?, ¿que más de un siglo después su enconada batalla con la riqueza, y con el Banco de los Estados Unidos, sería reanudada, aunque por razones ligeramente diferentes, por alguien tan ansioso de anonimato como aquel hombre que ahora se metía en el bolsillo doscientas cincuenta viñetas del séptimo Presidente?

Su mujer no se volvió cuando entró a su espalda, murmurando:

—¡Setenta y dos coma ochenta y ocho milésimas de pulgada de separación! No es un trabajo para un holgazán. —Se detuvo y dijo con un ronco susurro—: ¿Me oyes? —Ella no se volvió. Repitió la pregunta elevando la voz. Luego avanzó hacia ella con aire amenazador. Ella saltó y dio un grito, agarrándose al fregadero con una mano, llevándose la otra, temblorosamente, al pecho—. Esta vez no has oído nada de lo que he dicho. Lo has apagado, ¿no? ¿No? —Y diciendo esto, le arrancó el audífono del vestido y lo tiró al suelo—. ¡Toma! —dijo, y lo pisoteó—. Ahora ya no tienes que escucharme.

Ella se lo quedó mirando sin más, a los ojos como puntas de alfiler que fingían la ceguera tras unas gafas polvorientas. Meneó la cabeza, mirando su ligero abrigo reversible.

—Hace frío fuera, Frank.

—Ya lo sé —dijo él—. No tardaré mucho.

—Hace frío fuera, Frank. Toma, échate esto al cuello. —Se acercó a una silla y cogió una bufanda verde que su hijo había dejado tirada—. Probablemente no es suya, de todas formas.

El señor Sinisterra se quedó inmóvil mientras le rodeaba el cuello con la bufanda.

—Lo siento —dijo—, pero cuando no me prestas atención… La estupidez, no puedo soportar la estupidez…

Ella meneó la cabeza, y él la dejó allí, agachándose para recoger la maraña de cable y la caja de plástico rota a sus pies. Con ello en la mano, cerró la puerta de su habitación que había dejado abierta, murmurando «El olor… el olor se mete por todas partes», aunque nadie la oía, y ni siquiera ella estaba segura de oír el eco de su murmullo sobre el Sheol.

Hola.

El señor Pivner contemplaba un anuncio a toda página en su periódico… Puede decir «hola» al cruzarse con un hombre por la calle. Pero no puede venderle cualquier cosa.

Las lecturas del señor Pivner se atenían a cosas tangibles. No había ido a la universidad (sino a algo que se hacía llamar escuela de negocios: había estudiado «contabilidad»). Es verdad que, aunque hubiera ido, podía no haber leído jamás a Democrito, el padre del materialismo (juzgado loco por sus vecinos, es verdad, aquellos extraños abderitas que hicieron llamar a Hipócrates para curarlo). En cualquier caso, la atención del señor Pivner rara vez recaía en las cosas directamente. Prefería esas exposiciones momificadas llamadas *digests,* que confirmaban sus opiniones antes de que supiera cuáles eran. Si hubiera leído a Demócrito habría podido descubrir, entre portentos de ateísmo y la visión de su propia alma compuesta de átomos redondos, lisos y especialmente móviles, que lo que ocurre es siempre lo inesperado.

Sin embargo, dado que la propia vida intentaba con ahínco enseñarle esto, era el conocimiento al que se resistía con más éxito. En sus lecturas (una ocupación seria, ya fueran anuncios o el Antiguo Testamento) no elegía el inquietante camino de la serenidad, sino el sendero serenamente estrecho que llevaba a la

enajenación final y total. ¿El nirvana?, ¿qué sentido podía hallar en una vida gastada en esforzarse por alcanzar una meta donde no había nada?, ¿qué satisfacción en el budismo, aun cuando hubiera alcanzado su forma tangible (idólatra), sentado en un templo con cúpulas como jarrones haciendo girar una rueda de plegarias ante una estatua dorada, murmurando «La vida es sufrimiento»?

¿Qué sentido en los budistas? Los que afirman.

¿Qué sentido en los jainas? Los que dicen «Quizá».

Tan alejado del príncipe de Kapilavastu (que trajo la esperanza de que la cadena de veinticuatro *lakhs* por nacimiento en la transmigración del alma podía romperse) como del Nazareno (que, coincidiendo con Buda en que la vida era algo doloroso y la virilidad aun peor, amenazó con la resurrección), el señor Pivner estaba sentado mirando con gafas sin aros el rostro benévolo de la solapa de un libro que le devolvía su amorfa mirada. Se estaba preparando para conocer a su hijo, para ganárselo como amigo e influirle como persona.

Al igual que Odiseo tuvo a Mentor, Jesús a Juan Bautista, César Borgia a Maquiavelo, Fausto a Mefistófeles, Descartes al padre Dinet, el perro de Schopenhauer a Schopenhauer y Schiller su cajón lleno de manzanas podridas, el señor Pivner tenía a Dale Carnegie: es decir, él y cuatro millones de individuos más, ninguno de los cuales osaba sospechar que («quizá») tuviera razón la madre de Salomé.

¿Intentó Damón vender un seguro a Pitias?

Es verdad, el señor Pivner, sentado bajo su lámpara de lectura de tres intensidades (graduada en su máximo brillo), no planeaba vender un seguro, ni siquiera medio millón de yardas de tela para tapizar (por un valor total de
1 600 000
dólares) al joven con quien planeaba reunirse aquella noche, ni tampoco sacarle un Packard a cambio de aplicar los «principios de apreciación» como hacía el abogado de Connecticut en la página 101. Había cogido aquel libro de la estantería, el más usado de los que tenía, porque le inspiraba lo que creía que era confianza. En aquel momento estaba leyendo un pasaje subrayado; «Permítame repetir: los principios que enseña este libro sólo serán útiles si salen del corazón. No estoy recomendando un montón de trucos. Estoy hablando de un nuevo modo de vida». Eso era lo maravilloso de aquel libro («Considere esto como un manual de trabajo sobre relaciones humanas; y cada vez que se enfrente a algún problema específico…»): aunque a primera vista parecía cargado de astucia, subterfugios, duplicidad, sofistería e insidiosas artimañas, pronto desaparecía esta sensación, y uno tenía… «Ah, sí, está intentando usted un nuevo modo de vida».

Es verdad, el señor Pivner habría podido leer a Descartes; y, con ayuda, comprender gracias a aquel tipo enérgico, bien educado en las acrobacias jesuíticas *(cogitans, ergo sumando),* que todo lo que no era uno mismo era un ello, y debía ser tratado en consecuencia. Pero Descartes, al retirarse del mundo para dedicarse a demostrar su propia existencia, resultaba tan efímero como cierto Roger Bacon dedicándose a construir pruebas geométricas de la existencia de Dios: para el señor Pivner, un comprador en potencia (en la página 95) que era director de los Animadores de Hotel Americanos (¡y además presidente de los Animadores Internacionales!), era mucho más real.

Es verdad, habría podido leer el Nuevo Testamento, y elaborar una síntesis similar de conducta cristiana y método cartesiano con fines maquiavélicos; pero cuánto más directo era aquel libro que tenía en su estrecho regazo: pues no era un libro de pensamiento, o pensamientos, o ideas, sino un libro de *acción.* No dejaba ninguna duda de que cabía esperar que el dinero se acumulara como testimonio de las únicas amistades que valía la pena tener y, a la postre, las únicas posibles.

«Hablo de una sonrisa auténtica», leyó el señor Pivner, «una sonrisa cordial, una sonrisa que sale de dentro, el tipo de sonrisa que alcanzará un buen precio en el mercado». Un libro de *acción,* y en ello radicaba la admirable cualidad de aquella obra: no decretaba la virtud por la propia virtud (como habían mantenido los hastiados estoicos); ni la cortesía por la cortesía (un atributo de la dignidad humana, como habría mantenido una cultura civilizada); ni el amor por el amor (como había mantenido Cristo); ni una fe que es su propia explicación y su propia justificación (como mantiene cualquier fe); sino todas estas excelencias orientadas al mercado. Aquí no se prometía algo tan absurdo como un vacío donde no había nada, ni tan ilusorio como el quimérico reino de los cielos: reconciliaba, en suma, las virtudes que le habían enseñado de niño con los motivos y prácticas del hombre, el elixir que cambiaba las cosas que vale la pena ser por las que vale la pena tener.

Estaba escrito con tranquilizadora simpleza. No había frases abstrusamente largas, ni palabras embrolladamente largas, ni metáforas desconcertantes ofuscadamente desarrolladas como las que temía encontrar en libros de pensamientos e ideas encuadernados en rústica. No hacía falta ningún diccionario

para entender su mensaje, como no había ninguna razón para saber lo que vio Kapilá cuando miró hacia el cielo, o de qué acusaron los atenienses a Anaxágoras, o el nombre secreto de Yahveh, o quién cortó el nudo gordiano, o el significado de 666. No había, en fin, prácticamente ninguna necesidad de saber nada en absoluto, salvo cómo «tratar con la gente». La universidad, venía a decir el autor, significaba simplemente unos años desperdiciados en verbos latinos y cálculos. Citaba regularmente a Virgilio y a Harvard con una incómoda, aunque displicente, reverencia hacia su innecesaria existencia. («No hace falta estudiar cuatro años en Harvard para descubrir esto», leyó el señor Pivner con un escrúpulo de superioridad, pues tenía entendido que Otto había estudiado precisamente en Harvard). En aquellas páginas le aseguraban que, fuera cual fuera su trabajo, el conocimiento del mismo era infinitamente menos importante que saber cómo «tratar con la gente». Eso era lo que alcanzaba un precio en el mercado, ¿y qué más se podía desear?

Allí estaba Andrew Carnegie, que solo había pasado cuatro años en el colegio pero atesoraba un millón de dólares para cada día del año. Allí estaba Cyrus H.
K. Curtis
, «el chico pobre del Maine… emprendiendo su meteórica carrera en la que estaba destinado a ganar millones…». Allí estaba George Eastman, que dejó un trabajo de empleado de cincuenta centavos al día para juntar cien millones redondos… Así seguía, con numerosos ejemplos menores, pero igualmente entusiastas, cada uno de los cuales parecía saber poco o nada de su trabajo, pero sí conocer a fondo los finísimos conductos de las mentes de sus obreros, todo ello expresado con un tono de intimidad tal que el lector, aunque no podía elevarse (meteóricamente) a sus niveles, podía darse la satisfacción de verlos rebajados al suyo.

Las citas cuidadosamente seleccionadas eran impresionantes, y procedían de tantas fuentes como historias de éxito incluía, entre ellas un fraude ejemplar infligido a un niño que se orinaba en la cama (por su propio bien) y un engaño modélico infligido a un gran cantante de ópera (por su propio bien). Para preparar este manual de relaciones humanas, el autor había leído «todo lo que había podido encontrar sobre la materia, desde Dorothy Dix, los archivos del tribunal de divorcios y *la. Revista de los padres…»* hasta tres psicólogos populares. Incluso había contratado a un hombre para que fuera a las bibliotecas y leyera todo lo que a él se le había pasado por alto. No habían ahorrado «tiempo ni gastos para descubrir cualquier idea práctica que alguien hubiera utilizado a lo largo de los tiempos para ganar amigos e influir en la gente». No era extraño, pensaba el señor Pivner leyendo aquellas verdades a medias pertinentemente malentendidas, que el libro hubiera tenido éxito. Allí estaban Barnum y la Biblia, Charles Schwab, Dutch Schultz y Shakespeare, dos Napoleones, Pola Negri y la Asociación Nacional de Agentes Financieros, Capone, Chrysler, Crowley Dos Pistolas y Jesucristo, cada uno jalonando a su manera el camino hacia el mercado. Hasta Jehová aparecía, aunque sólo fuera en una breve inversión («Daniel Webster, que parecía un dios y hablaba como Jehová, fue uno de los más prósperos…»).

«Se lo debe a sí mismo, a su felicidad, a su futuro y ¡A SUS INGRESOS!». Una referencia al «viejo rey Akhtoi» de Egipto («hace cuatro mil años, el viejo rey Akhtoi dijo una tarde, entre copa y copa…») hizo sentir al señor Pivner que el autor había estado allí mismo, tomando cócteles con aquel bribón encantador, el viejo rey Akhtoi. El método socrático aparecía maravillosamente simplificado («Toda su técnica, llamada ahora el "método socrático", consistía en conseguir como respuesta "sí, sí"»): la esencia misma del acorralamiento, no en busca de la verdad, que no tenía ningún valor en el mercado (y que de hecho le valió la muerte al taimado griego), sino de «un buen precio en el mercado». Cristo y Confucio aparecían, para recitar la Regla Áurea, y se retiraban discretamente, dejando al señor Pivner (y a cuatro millones de individuos más) en posesión del inteligente secreto de la humildad, que utilizado con cuidado llevaba a la presa en la dirección opuesta al engrandecimiento personal, la ilusión del poder: en realidad, el señor Pivner pensaba a veces (cuando estaba cansado) que el secreto más sublime consistía en comportarse como un felpudo, en presentarse al mundo como un alegre inocentón sin ideas propias, un imbécil bonachón que pone la otra mejilla, en personificar la idea de Nietzsche del cristiano, un idiota congénito sin nada que ganar (mientras, no obstante, se embolsa bajo cuerda medio millón de yardas de tela para tapizar).

De hecho, el autor le aseguraba que lo único que le impedía ser un idiota era una pizca de iodina valorada en cinco centavos que tenía en la glándula tiroides (difícilmente un buen precio en el mercado, ni siquiera para la humildad). «Una pizca de iodina que puede comprarse por cinco centavos en la farmacia de la esquina…». Ciertamente, el tono general del libro era de humildad, una humildad quizá algo torpe y complaciente, proporcionada como estaba al camello pasando por el ojo de la aguja.

El señor Pivner ojeaba pausadamente las páginas, deteniéndose entre cabezada y cabezada a releer los títulos familiares de los capítulos: «Técnicas fundamentales para tratar con la gente… Seis formas de agradar a la gente… Doce formas de persuadir a la gente de sus ideas…» y daba una cabezada. Estaba muy

cansado. No escuchaba la radio, que al fondo vertía en sordina la Sinfonía de la Reforma. ¿Por qué tanta atención, tanto tiempo dedicado a aquel libro que tenía en su estrecho regazo? El señor Pivner encontraba seguridad en las grandes cifras; cualquier publicación con una tirada de millones le tranquilizaba, y en una tierra donde las enfermedades mentales afectaban a más gente que todas las demás dolencias juntas, una tirada de cuatro millones resultaba más tranquilizadora que cualquier otra cosa: de cada veinticinco ciudadanos alfabetizados de más de catorce años, uno había comprado aquel libro, sin contar los ejemplares manoseados y subrayados que habían circulado entre los restantes veinticuatro. Sin duda, pues, era algo más que seguro; era parte integral de la vida que le rodeaba, a pesar de los que se burlaban de él (pues también ellos estaban obligados a compartir esta vida, a ser persuadidos e influidos, fueran cuales fueran sus credos y sus aspiraciones, las razones de su cortesía, los fundamentos de su amor, ¿cómo podían pretender distinguir lo que ofrecían de lo que les daban?); y los que lo denunciaban y desacreditaban podían ser condenados sin más como peligrosos, en el mejor de los casos, al menos como amargados y desagradecidos, carentes no de virtud (que no tenía definición ni país), sino de esa conspiración de autoconservación conocida como patriotismo.

El tic que aparecía a la izquierda del labio inferior del señor Pivner cuando estaba cansado apareció ahora, y lo despertó con una expresión de emoción indecisa. No tenía visos de ir a detenerse, sino que tiraba de su labio hacia abajo con rápidos latidos, como si le hubieran hecho bruscamente una pregunta cuya respuesta sabía, y temía dar. De repente miró su reloj. Lo levantó y se lo llevó al oído. Se puso en pie (sosteniendo aún el libro abierto), descolgó el teléfono y marcó 0. «Sólo quería saber qué hora es», dijo. («¿Quiere que le ponga con la oficina horaria?»). «No, sólo quería saber si tiene hora, por favor». («Lo siento, no estamos autorizados a dar esa información…»). Colgó y se quedó mirando la radio, esperando. La Sinfonía de la Reforma lo ponía nervioso, como toda aquella música (llamada «clásica»), como la palabra «Harvard»; pero a veces se sentía afectado por un compás de música «clásica», una serie de acordes como los que ahora vertía la radio, una sensación de soledad y confirmación al mismo tiempo, la sensación de algo perdido, y una sensación de reconocimiento que no comprendía. Debía de ser la hora de tomar su medicina, antes de salir para ir al centro.

La sinfonía continuó mientras la abandonaba y entraba en el cuarto de baño. Prefería aquella música a la que no tenía que prestar atención. Era sólo la voz humana oída por la radio la que lo detenía, la que hacía que levantara la cabeza con expectación, como si estuviera a punto de comunicar algo de gran trascendencia personal para *él.* De hecho, ése era siempre el tono de aquella voz incorpórea; y escuchando aún, expectante, se recostaba en el sillón y esperaba. Se habían reído de él por eso, alguien que le dijo: «Pero no me digas que *escuchas* eso. ¿Por qué dejas que te moleste?»; y de los anuncios de la prensa: «Pero no me digas que *lees* eso. ¿Por qué dejas que te moleste?». ¿Qué anomalía había en él, que seguía diciéndole que había que escuchar la voz humana, leer la letra impresa? ¿Qué era aquella expresión expectante, si no era esperanza, aquella fatiga atenta, si no era fe, aquella desconcertada incapacidad para maldecir, si no era caridad?

El timbre estridente de un teléfono llenó la habitación. Hizo temblar las velas metálicas del buque de guerra, esparció un indisciplinado tintineo de cristales rotos, y una frenética sombra de movimiento de efectos paralizadores: todo se detuvo al oírse la ronca inicial aspirada de un saludo, esperando, escuchando:

«¡Hola! Soy Meribeth Watzon, y les hablo en nombre de la Compañía Telefónica de Nueva York…», confió la radio sin cambiar la expresión de sus rasgos, rejilla y botones y una sonrisa iluminada; y las sombras que se movían por la habitación, y las que seguían pegadas a las paredes, incluido el bulto negro del teléfono en el soporte donde lo había dejado al colgarlo, prolongaron su lenta retirada durante casi un minuto.

El señor Pivner estaba temblando. Acababa de romper su último frasco de insulina. Era demasiado tarde para salir y volver.

«Amigos, no se fíen de mí. Se deben a sí mismos el enterarse de nuestra oferta gratis. Y escuchen, amigos, la próxima vez que…».

Es verdad, el conserje del edificio de la oficina del señor Pivner aún no lo tuteaba. Es verdad, el índice de divorcios se había duplicado casi desde la publicación del libro que tenía delante. Es verdad, leía titulares sobre los gobernantes que había contribuido a elegir, hombres que quizá no conocieran su trabajo, pero que desde luego sabían tratar con la gente, hombres que avanzaban con aire resuelto desde la primera plana, vestidos con trajes caros, sonriendo, la mano alzada en un gesto afable, yendo a comparecer ante comités de investigación interesados en sus notables ingresos, apagando las sonrisas que habían alcanzado un buen precio en el mercado.

«… escrito de corrido en un momento de sentimiento sincero…». Mientras se envolvía el cuello con la

bufanda verde, el labio inferior le dio un tirón, y trató de sujetarlo.

«Amigos, se lo deben a su salud, y a la de su familia…».

Y el rey David, ¿qué dijo en su cámara sobre la puerta, después de que Joab despachara a su hijo colgado aún de las ramas del terebinto?

El señor Pivner se puso el abrigo y se metió la aguja y la jeringuilla en el bolsillo. Apagó cortésmente la radio, esperando a que la voz terminara una frase. Dejó el libro de citas selectas en la mesa, junto al álbum de fotos. Es verdad, uno debía seleccionar; era imposible citar todo lo que escribió Shakespeare para demostrar algo que nunca había sostenido; era imposible imprimir las palabras de Rosalinda, cuando dijo: «Pero todo eso son mentiras: los hombres han muerto de vez en cuando, y los gusanos se los han comido, pero no por amor».

El señor Pivner se detuvo un momento en la puerta, paseando la mirada por el pisito antes de entrar en el mundo de pérdida que sobrevenía cuando apagaba la luz. Se acordó de años antes, cuando había comprado aquel libro; y en la entrada, todavía iluminada, lo detuvo un fragmento de oro, oro ahora como el águila doble del siglo XIX, perforado como aquellas palabras le habían atravesado, con el ruido del taladro del falsificador, ahuecando la moneda, y rellenándola de plomo, y sellándola así, una falsificación muy difícil de detectar. Había comprado aquel libro con la esperanza de ganar amigos. Se preguntó si otros lo habrían comprado por la misma razón.

El interruptor hizo un chasquido bajo su mano, el lugar desapareció en la oscuridad y los días de fe terminaron, se desvanecieron en las sombras, quedaron sepultados bajo Fort Knox, y en el cementerio de Hatton Gap, Arkansas, donde, apenas medio siglo antes, Moisés había obtenido seis votos en las elecciones presidenciales, y Juan el Bautista tres.

¿Y el Buda?

¿Y el jaín?

¿Y la mañana?, ¿y la tarde? Mañana, tarde, mediodía, noche: ¿qué forma tenía el alma del señor Pivner?, ¿redonda o rectangular? Y sus átomos, ¿valían tan poco como los átomos de iodina?, ¿valían cinco centavos? ¿O eran de una clase diferente: redondos, lisos y especialmente móviles?

Y un buen precio en el mercado, digamos… ¿treinta monedas de plata?

—¿Queeeécojjjonespassa? —Esta delicada pregunta quedó sin respuesta, pues el hombre que la había hecho estaba solo en la esquina de la calle. Agitó hacia nadie su periódico enrollado, y luego sonrió—. Vaya. ¿No contestáis? ¿Asustaos? —desafió. El semáforo que tenía sobre la cabeza cambió a un lado de rojo a verde, al otro de verde a rojo. Se acercó un autobús. Paró, de modo que montó en él. Metió en la caja el importe del billete y se detuvo en mitad del pasillo—: ¡FELIZ NAVIDAD!

Nadie respondió.

—Pero qué puñetasss —dijo—. Me he montao en un coche fúnebre. Es un funeral sin muerto, no hay muerto que enterrar. Feliz Navidad en un cementerio. —Se sentó y abrió su periódico. Tras mirar pacientemente durante unos minutos las palabras que tenía delante, preguntó al hombre sentado frente a él —: ¿Adónde va este autobús?

—No lo sé —dijo el otro.

—Qué bien, no lo sabe. Le felicito. Es usted el primer hombre que encuentro en Nueva York que admite no saber algo. Felicidades. —Extendió una mano que quedó oscilando vanamente en el aire entre ambos. El autobús se detuvo, y mientras el hombre se bajaba le gritó—: Tenga cuidao, no se rompa una pierna o tendremos que pegarle un tiro…

Se reclinó en el asiento y se quedó mirando el periódico. En la parte superior de la página venían impresos unos capítulos del Génesis, que estaban publicando por entregas, como servicio público, con ocasión de las fiestas.

—Que me asspen, es la Biblia —dijo en voz alta—. Ahora sacan la Biblia en el periódico —dijo dirigiéndose al hombre que se había sentado frente a él, junto a una señora con un bebé en brazos—. ¿Qué le parece? ¿Y sabe por qué? —Paseó la mirada por el autobús—. Porque toda esta buena gente se sentiría imbécil leyendo la Biblia en público, les daría *vergüenza.* Pero si sólo leen el periódico, entonces está bien. ¡Feliz Navidad! No hace falta pasar cuatro años en la universidad para saber eso. ¿Tengo razón? ¿Tengo razón? —preguntó perentoriamente a aquel hombre sentado frente a él.

—Sí —dijo el señor Pivner, apartando los ojos del anuncio situado sobre la cabeza de aquel hombre, y alzándolos de nuevo para leer: UN REALISMO INCREÍBLE COMPRUÉBELO USTED MISMO 8.00 DÓLARES POR QUILATE.

—¡Feliz Navidad! —amenazó el hombre.

—Feliz Navidad —le contestó el señor Pivner. Estaba muy cansado. Se había parado en una farmacia a comprar su medicina, pero no le había dado tiempo a ponerse la inyección, temiendo llegar tarde a su cita, planeando ponerse la inyección en los servicios del hotel cuando llegara allí. Sin embargo, su entrenamiento no le falló en aquel instante crítico. Recordó el capítulo nueve («¿No le gustaría tener una frase mágica para parar cualquier discusión, eliminar los malos sentimientos, crear buena voluntad…? Muy bien. Aquí está…»)—. No le culpo por sentirse como se siente —dijo el señor Pivner, recordando las palabras de John B. Gough, citadas en la página siguiente («… cuando vio a un vagabundo borracho tambaleándose por la calle: "Ahí, salvo por la gracia de Dios, voy yo"»). Entonces tuvo una extraña sensación en una pierna. La retiró y miró, mientras la mujer apartaba al bebé de la gran mancha que tenía en los pantalones. «No echará la culpa al crío, ¿verdad?», dijo la mujer. El señor Pivner se levantó con la mirada clavada en sus pantalones. El tic le tiraba del labio hacia ahajo con rápidos latidos, y no dijo nada.

—Siéntese. Feliz Navidad —dijo el hombre sentado junto al único asiento vacío del autobús. El señor Pivner se sentó. Estaba muy cansado, y nervioso. Se separó de la pierna la zona mojada del pantalón, y miró por la ventanilla. Estaba a unas quince manzanas de distancia de su destino.

—Le felicito. Es usted el primer hombre que encuentro —dijo su compañero—. ¿Quiere leer la Biblia? La tengo aquí mismo. —Desapareció un momento bajo un remolino de papel de periódico.

El autobús seguía avanzando lentamente, manzana tras manzana. Capítulo seis, «Cómo caer bien a la gente instantáneamente»: («Así que me dije: "Voy a intentar caerle bien a este hombre… ¿Qué hay en él que pueda admirar sinceramente?"… Al instante vi algo que me causó una admiración sin límites»).

—Qué magnífica mata de pelo tiene usted —dijo el señor Pivner.

El hombre que llevaba al lado echó una ojeada al pelo ralo del señor Pivner, y luego se agarró un puñado del suyo.

—Le gusta a mucha gente —dijo. Luego se echó hacia atrás y miró atentamente al señor Pivner—. Oiga, ¿qué pasa?, ¿es usted marica o qué?

Los ojos del señor Pivner se dilataron.

—Yo… yo…

—¿Adónde va?

—Me bajo aquí —dijo el señor Pivner, y se apeó del autobús cuando se detuvo, a seis manzanas de su destino. Hacía una noche fría y soplaba el viento, concentrándose en el punto húmedo de sus pantalones. ¿Cómo iba a explicar eso a su hijo? Echó a andar contra el viento, sufriendo, más cansado, confiando ahora en que el viento secara aquel lugar antes de llegar al hotel.

Se detuvo ante sus puertas para sacarse del abrigo la bufanda verde. El viento le ayudó bruscamente a mostrarla a plena vista.

—Buuuuennno, aquí estamos —dijo una voz familiar a su lado—. ¡Amigo mío! ¡Feliz Navidad!

—Ahora no —dijo el señor Pivner, agitando una mano temblorosa en el aire. Dio unos pasos hacia el hotel.

—Muy buena idea. Una copa por la Navidad —dijo su compañero, acompañándole—. ¡Feliz Navidad! Sabe, yo también tengo una religión, amigo mío.

El señor Pivner se detuvo ante la puerta giratoria.

—Váyase —dijo.

—Vamos a tomar una copa navideña, amigo. Vamos a ser amigos. Como Damón y Pissiass, ja, jajajajaja…

La puerta giratoria giró, descargando al señor Pivner en el vestíbulo, donde quedó oscilando por la impresión del aire caliente, guiñando los ojos, mirando. La puerta giratoria siguió su ronda:

—¡Guay, feliz Navidad!

El señor Pivner retrocedió tambaleándose. Cayó sobre el botones alto, que lo sostuvo por los hombros. Trató de hablar, pero sólo gorgoteó. Apenas estaba consciente. Lo sacaron del vestíbulo.

—Uoooufff… yo también tengo una religión, caballeros…

—Sácalos de aquí, por la puerta lateral.

—Feliz Navidad, caballeros… ¿qué es esto, el baile de la policía?

—Causa mala impresión para el hotel, sacarlos por la puerta principal.

—Había visto al pequeño ahí fuera, tonteando con su ropa —dijo el botones alto cuando se restableció la calma.

—Esas cosas no son buenas para el hotel. Demasiado pronto aún —dijo el recepcionista—. Aun así, debes ser caritativo con ellos.

—Se me ha desmayao en los brazos, como mi viejo. A algunos no hay forma de apartarlos de la botella,

como a mi viejo, puedes vendarle los ojos y atarlo a la cama, pero siempre la encuentra.

Ambos se apartaron para dejar pasar a un joven jadeante. Llevaba un brazo oculto bajo el abrigo. Se detuvo a sacarse la bufanda, mirando a su alrededor. Luego dejó el abrigo en el guardarropa y entró en el bar con la bufanda todavía al cuello.

—No me diga que ese chaval no lleva también una de más —dijo el botones alto.

—Así es la Navidad —dijo el recepcionista.

El espejo de detrás de la barra estaba tintado, y tenía una convexidad tan leve que los que aparecían dentro de sus confines mostraban cutis saludables, figuras no deformadas pero caras ligeramente más delgadas, y él aparecía más serio, ella asumía delicadeza, perdía peso y los años se acumulaban conspirando bajo su barbilla. Los pálidos labios de Otto, tirantes de tensión, aparecían como finas líneas oscuras de determinación, y los pelos dispersos sobre su labio superior como un bigote tímidamente distintivo. Enarcó una ceja. Se humedeció los labios y frunció el superior. Con la ceja izquierda arqueada, los párpados ligeramente caídos, los labios humedecidos, separados, caídos en las comisuras, la mano temblorosa anclada al vaso, se volvió a mirar a la mujer que tenía al lado. Ella siguió mirando directamente al frente. Otto se volvió hacia el espejo, donde los acechantes ojos de la mujer le atraparon: se sintió engañado, burlado en su maniobra, y volvió rápidamente los ojos hacia su propio reflejo. Desde altavoces ocultos, a los que nadie atendía, sonaron timbales en alguna persecución semiclásica, retumbando en crescendos que manifestaban captura, apagándose luego gradualmente cuando la presa escapaba.

La rubia tosió. No fue la tos delicada e innecesaria de una dama, añagaza para llamar la atención que luego retiene en la trampa de sus ojos, sino un ruido visceral de sumisión a la realidad. Sin embargo, al mirarla sólo vio sus ojos mientras se volvía y bajaba del taburete. Se retiró en dos direcciones a la vez, y Otto eligió la imagen del espejo para seguir sus cortos pasos contoneantes y la desbordada insinuación de sus muslos. Entre imágenes de mesas y cortinas se salió del espejo tintado, pero le dejó erigido en cazador y respiró profundamente, como si el aire fuera fresco.

Volvió a verse en el espejo como se había visto a dos mil millas de distancia. «Qué moreno estás», dijo Esther. «Y todo vestido de blanco…». Todavía quedaba tiempo.

De niño, Otto había tenido una fantasía que, con toda la buena fe infantil que diseña tales convicciones, hizo pasar por hecho ante sí y ante sus amigos. Por la época en que se enteró de que tenía un padre, o de que debía tenerlo, Alberto, rey de los belgas, se mató escalando. No fue difícil relacionar a ambos: dijo que su padre se había matado escalando, y así se echó encima el manto distintivo de un príncipe.

Ahora, paseando rápidamente la mirada por el local, y por la barra, lo invadió la súbita aprensión de la realeza, el real temor a verse expulsado a empujones de la sala del trono a la antecocina, el lugar que corresponde al pretendiente. Pues las meteduras de pata de los miembros de la realeza relucen siempre con extraordinaria temeridad, que los hace reales, los distingue de los súbditos corrientes que sólo cometen errores. ¿Y qué metedura de pata más absurda que la del que se destrona a sí mismo? Así ha ocurrido; un príncipe o un rey pueden hacerlo (¡pero encuentra una princesa que no quiera ser reina a toda costa!, una mujer que confiese sin razón alguna, que salga de las sombras para hacerlo), afrontar esa realidad que es el tejido de la condenación, como te dirán los hombres que, sin razón alguna, se han arruinado a sí mismos.

Al fondo de la barra, un hombre de edad algo más que mediana atrajo la atención de Otto. Llevaba un traje de franela, demasiado ligero para la estación, pero que llevaba la impronta de otras estaciones en otras tierras, como si ahora fuese primavera en Londres y se hubiera detenido en la calle Saint James a tomar una copa; y al salir fuera a cruzar el Mall, y a entrar en el parque de Saint James, caminando por el césped hasta pararse un momento a mirar los cisnes y el resto del follaje primaveral. (Londres y la realeza estaban muy cerca en la mente de Otto). El hombre hizo una seña al camarero, levantando una mano que encandiló a Otto con el destello dorado de un anillo de sello, una confirmación, una llamada que le puso tirantes los músculos de las piernas, dispuesto a cumplir con su deber, a rendir homenaje, a recibir de aquella mano el apretón del reconocimiento, a jurar lealtad, a heredar el anillo y el reino que su sello perpetuaba. Sin amilanarse por la mirada de aquel hombre, que se volvió hacia él, le echó un vistazo y pasó de largo sin curiosidad ni sorpresa (como el rostro de un monarca, que no se digna esperar respuesta vulgar), Otto miró y encontró un parecido. ¿Era en los ojos?, ¿en el puente de la nariz? Una correspondencia más clara que el recurso que le colgaba a él del cuello, proclamación en lana de parentesco plebeyo, verde señal de la multitud, su verdosa excrecencia sin discernimiento.

Se bebió de un trago el whisky que le quedaba en el vaso, levando el ancla que lo mantenía inmóvil. Junto a su mano había unos guantes negros y una pitillera de oro, al lado del cóctel medio consumido en su

copa de pie alto, manchada de rojo en el borde. Grabada en el oro con generosa letra a mano aparecía la palabra Jean. Todavía quedaba tiempo.

Encendió un cigarrillo. Su mano estaba lastrada de nuevo con un vaso lleno, y se relajó ligeramente, bajando la vista hacia sus dedos sin anillos. Cogió el cigarrillo con la mano izquierda y apoyó en la barra el codo en cabestrillo. Le estorbaba la bufanda. Todavía quedaba tiempo para destruirla. Si telefoneaba a Esther podría encontrar a su marido; si lo llamaba a él, a Esther. Volvió a pasear rápidamente la mirada por el local. Todavía quedaba tiempo para destruir la bufanda antes de que apareciera Procusto para encadenarlo, con apenas un sobresalto de reconocimiento, al lecho de la realidad, para estirarlo o cortarlo hasta que encajara, para liberarlo luego, y publicarlo en el extranjero. Se bebió de un trago la mitad de su copa y se metió la bufanda verde bajo el cuello de la chaqueta. Mientras se acercaba (deprisa, según creía) a la cabina telefónica, hurgando con los dedos entre las monedas de su bolsillo en busca de la adecuada, volvió a ensayar su conversación. «¿Esther? Escucha… Sí, soy yo, te dije que volvería…».

Se apoyó contra la pared de la cabina y cerró los ojos un momento. Luego los abrió, descolgó el auricular y dejó caer la moneda. Antes de que pudiera marcar oyó.

(—Así que le dije: nunca puedes adivinar lo que va a hacer *ella,* es tan psicológica…).

(—Nadie me preguntó *a mí,* pero *yo* podría haberte dicho…).

—Diga —dijo Otto—. ¿Diga?

(—Diga —dijo otra voz, la de una joven—, querida, ¿eres tú?).

—¿Diga? ¿Diga?

(—Creo que tenemos un cruce; ¿les importaría colgar a los otros? Y entonces me dijo… ¿Por dónde iba…?).

Otto colgó el auricular en el soporte, y él también se colgó de él. Se abrió la puerta, y se apagó la luz. Luego, mientras se dirigía a la otra cabina, se apretó la muñeca contra el bolsillo interior de la chaqueta, para comprobar los papeles de identidad, el dinero, la virilidad allí implícita. Su muñeca se apretó contra su pecho. No había ningún bulto. No había ningún peso de aquella presencia más familiar que sus propios huesos, lo único que palpaba ahora con la muñeca. La mano izquierda saltó del cabestrillo mientras se abría de golpe la chaqueta con la otra, y la muñeca vendada hurgó frenéticamente en el bolsillo vacío, donde sus uñas recogieron pelusas de mugre. Luego el brazo izquierdo cayó sin fuerza en el cabestrillo.

Al sentir el bolsillo vacío había dicho no, con la rotunda claridad tonal de un no, de una absoluta negación racional. Lo repitió de nuevo, pero esta vez no fue él ruido sordo de la negación sino un *no* que tenía forma, elevándose en el medio, una convexidad de queja e incredulidad. Le temblaba el labio superior, y levantando la mano derecha puso el índice encima a lo largo para detenerlo. Luego entró rápidamente en la otra cabina, marcó y se quedó inclinado con rigidez sobre el micrófono. «¿Diga?», dijo. Agarró con fuerza el auricular y escuchó. Oyó el tictac de un reloj. «¿Diga?, ¿diga?». Entonces oyó un ruido que le heló la mano sobre el auricular, y quedó paralizado con él apretado contra la oreja: era el ruido de alguien salivando, abriendo y cerrando los labios, dejando resbalar la saliva por la lengua desde el paladar.

Dejó el auricular balanceándose al extremo del cable y se volvió en busca de apoyo, como había hecho en el metro mientras avanzaba trabajosamente por el piso oscilante, donde un hombre en mangas de camisa, que se balanceaba de barra a barra colgado de unos brazos tatuados, le gritaba: «Eh, colega, ¿me puedes decir cómo se llama este barco en el que estamos…?», y una ristra de luces anunció su próximo punto de atraque. Desembarcó con la mente ocupada por la pregunta de aquel hombre: allí seguía sin contestar ni disminuir, estática e insistente como un mueble feo con un sitio fijo, que sólo podría desalojar otro más repelente, mientras caminaba a buen paso por el muelle, «Feliz Navidad, eh, ¿quién te ha vomitado en la corbata…?», y subía al malecón, «Tú también tienes buena pinta. ¿Quién es tu embalsamador?».

—Vas a ser la mujer más rica del cementerio —dijo el camarero sonriendo—. ¿Cuánto hace que has vuelto?

—Dos días —contestó ella volviendo la cabeza, alisándose el pelo rubio sobre las pieles de visón sueltas que le colgaban de los hombros. La parte superior de su cara estaba atractivamente modelada, con rasgos simples y acusados en la frente y la nariz. La boca y la carne bajo la boca colgaban pesadamente, y la mandíbula era gruesa, no una enérgica prominencia.

Otto la miraba con los labios separados, la ceja izquierda arqueada, pero los mismos ojos se extraviaban en una absorta locura graduada por la lujuria: oyó su propia voz como quien oye una voz lejana en una playa durante una pausa del oleaje. Los altavoces ocultos amenazaron con vida, y ambos bebieron. «¿El brazo?», murmuró. «Nada, un arañazo…» y al bajar el vaso se pasó el brazo por el pecho para sentir sólo las ondulaciones de sus costillas. Ofreció un cigarrillo con fría torpeza, blandiendo el cabestrillo. «Sí… allá

abajo son un verdadero gaje del oficio, ya sabe».

El camarero le puso delante la cuenta boca abajo, y él le echó una ojeada como si fuera un madero arrojado a la orilla, y alzó los ojos hacia el horizonte tintado, donde flotaba el perfil indefinido de la mujer, mientras su voz brotaba desde el fondo de la playa donde retrocedía el borde del mar, para reunir fuerzas de la masa y reanudar sus embates.

—En realidad, acabo de terminar de escribir una obra de teatro —siguió diciendo, y desvió los ojos de la imagen de la mujer en el espejo hacia la figura que estaba a su lado, cuya familiaridad reconoció sin prisa: más bien la abordó con cuidado, con el entusiasmo controlado de un pintor al acercarse a un retrato sin terminar, dejado de lado durante meses a lo largo de los cuales lo ha estudiado y concluido en su mente. Leve alteración de una ceja, un toque en los labios, embellecido con una leve dilatación de las ventanas de la nariz, y se volvió y presentó aquel retrato a la mujer.

La voz de ella llegaba a rachas, acercándolos.

—No creo que sea bueno leer una obra de teatro, te la estropea cuando la ves… Pero de algún modo, cuando tengo un libro, es casi como si lo hubiera leído… En el Museo Moderno de Arte, se suponía que era el retrato de una mujer y él me dijo que era muy valioso, pero hasta mis rodillas son mejores que las que tenía ella… —La música no había parado; de hecho había seguido avanzando todo el rato estrepitosamente por Aldo, y ahora llegaba a la «Danza de los esclavos moros»—. ¿No es hermosa la misma palabra «poema…»?

Mirando el amplio escote de su vestido, Otto se acarició el bigote con la yema de un dedo y acercó su taburete, para oír: «No podría vivir sin la Navidad…», mientras su rodilla se apretaba contra la suya y quedaba allí inmóvil con cálida confianza, como la cruz de oro cuya espadilla saltaba entre sus pechos.

—Sí, me hice católica cuando me casé… —Al echar los hombros hacia atrás, la cruz subió entre los orondos malecones—. Pero luego me divorcié y no sé si sigo siéndolo o no. Me regaló esto… —La pitillera se abrió y cerró con metálica rumiación—. Es lo único que me regaló, se supone que es de oro pero tengo que llevarla a dorar cada dos o tres meses, la conservo porque es una especie de recuerdo sagrado, pues es la única vez que he estado casada y eso.

—Sé lo que quieres decir. —Le apretó la rodilla con la mano en afable confirmación. Sus ojos se posaron en la cuenta, y buscando algo más agradable se elevaron al espejo tintado, que le mostró su pelo despeinado, la bufanda verde torcida: pero ninguna mano osó abandonar su deber con la víctima y presa eventual—. Vuelvo a Centroamérica —oyó el eco de su voz minutos después—, a Sudamérica, en realidad. Ború y el norte de Polivia… —Y se quedó mirando en el espejo a la persona que había hecho esta afirmación. Esperó, como se espera en una conversación educada, a que se la corrigiesen. Pero la figura que vio en el espejo no hizo tal esfuerzo; se quedó sentada sin más, como afrontando al fin el destino en igualdad de condiciones.

—Sí, me llamo Jean —repitió ella—. ¿Y tú?

—¿Cómo me llamo? —dijo—. ¿Cómo me llamo? —La lengua se le quedó pegada al paladar de su boca seca. Separó los labios y se pasó por ellos la punta de la lengua. Hizo ademán de levantar el brazo izquierdo para mirar su reloj, y el embarazoso cabestrillo lo sorprendió como si se hubiera despertado atado. Entonces no miró su reloj, pero creyó oír su tictac. Oyó los ruidos de su boca recuperando la fluidez, oyó su nombre pero no pudo repetirlo en ese momento, igual que el rey que abdica no vuelve a repetir el nombre que adoptó cuando le coronaron—. Mira… —murmuró. Ella tenía una habitación en el hotel. La de al lado estaba libre. La cuenta de sus copas había alcanzado una cifra bastante alta: si reservaba la habitación libre podría firmarla. Echó una rápida ojeada hacia el fondo de la barra, donde estaba sentado el hombre del traje ligero de franela gris hurgándose pensativamente en la nariz con el pulgar—. ¿Qué hora es?

Ella se inclinó hacia adelante.

—Tu reloj señala las ocho menos veinte.

—Bueno, entonces está parado, debe de haberse parado… —Se quitó la bufanda verde y empezó a meterse un extremo en el bolsillo—. Voy a ver lo de la habitación.

Pero se quedó sentado un momento más, observando al hombre del traje ligero de franela gris, para ver si se había fijado en él durante todo este tiempo. Aquel hombre no llevaba puesta ninguna bufanda verde; y cuando Otto se quitó la suya desapareció un contrato de necesidad: el bandido Damastes cogió su lecho y desapareció, muerto por Teseo, aquel héroe que se identificó ante su padre con la espada que su padre, Egeo, rey de Atenas, había dejado enterrada al macharse.

El hombre del traje ligero de franela gris hizo una seña al camarero. El anillo de sello lanzó un destello, connotativo de monarquía; y el príncipe, volviéndose, se relajó en cierta medida, mientras la imagen proteica de su padre, tras dos décadas de transformaciones, se preparaba de nuevo para cambiar en cuanto

la agarrasen, igual que Proteo, saliendo del mar a mediodía para dormir a la sombra de una roca, al verse atrapado por algún curioso adoptaba todas las formas y figuras posibles para evitar hacer una profecía.

Otto se dejó caer lentamente del taburete, absorto en aparentar dignidad, en actitud de peligro; y luego se quedó allí colgado, mirando cómo giraba la puerta giratoria en el vestíbulo. Entró Santa Claus, impulsado por un golpe en la espalda, y quedó tambaleándose un momento. Luego vio lo que iba buscando, y en el preciso instante en que echaba a andar hacia el bar el botones alto le agarró y lo metió de nuevo en uno de los compartimientos de la puerta giratoria, y cuando el otro volvió a entrar volvió a meterlo de un empujón, y finalmente se metió con él y lo ayudó a salir por el otro lado, y envió al santo vestido de rojo hacia otros hogares. El comedor oscilaba desgarbadamente, y cuando Otto puso los pies en el suelo pareció retemblar como la cubierta de un barco cuando el casco embiste un mar picado. Se estabilizó un momento, y luego se palpó el bolsillo interior de la chaqueta con toda la mano, como si la cartera hubiera estado allí todo el tiempo, como si su ausencia hubiera sido ilusoria, causada por brujería; y echó una rápida ojeada a la rubia, como habrían podido echarla aquellos inquisidores medievales, mientras pasaban las páginas del *Malleus Maleficarum,* a las brujas que parecían privar a los hombres de sus miembros viriles, cuando descubrían que «tales miembros nunca se separan realmente del cuerpo, sino que sólo quedan ocultos por un hechizo de los sentidos de la vista y el tacto».

Pero su mano se apretó contra el hueso. Entonces se apartó de la imagen de sí mismo que se había apeado del espejo detrás de la barra, para separarse de ella y observar cómo cruzaba el comedor hacia el vestíbulo, preparado para aplaudir a aquel vacuo ser si las cosas iban bien, o para abandonarlo tintado y sin un centavo si las cosas conspiraban contra él. Aun estando íntegro, desconfiaba de los hechizos; aun así, no reparó en la bufanda verde que le colgaba del bolsillo mientras cruzaba la sala.

—¿Una habitación individual para esta noche?

—Solo nos queda una, señor. Con baño. Nueve cincuenta.

—Bien. Bien.

—¿Y su equipaje, señor?

—Me lo traerán más tarde, ya sabe. Me lo van a enviar desde el muelle.

—Me temo que tendré que pedirle que pague por adelantado. Una formalidad…

—Verá, mis cheques de viaje están todos en mi maleta pequeña, ya sabe, me la van a enviar desde el muelle. Acabo de llegar, quiero decir, de volver a este país…

—Me temo que no podemos…

—No tengo tiempo para…

—Podríamos reservarle una habitación hasta las diez, a menos que alguien…

—Sí, bueno, me conformo con eso. Tengo que conformarme, ya sabe. Gracias —terminó Otto, apartándose del mostrador con las partículas de su expresión descompuestas, como si estuviera en el teatro y momentáneamente confuso por el curso de la obra; pero, al igual que el aficionado al teatro tiene la redención escrita en el talón de su entrada, y un estéril fragmento de fe le dice que la salvación está a la vuelta de la esquina mientras se sienta en su butaca a ver el último acto, del mismo modo una calma anticipatoria se extendió ahora por los materiales de la cara de Otto.

Sin embargo, la maquinaria de la fe tiende a crujir bajo el asalto de la multitud; y cuanto más se ejerce la formidable tiranía de su privilegio, y más efectos exige el amor por el espectáculo, más descaradamente se descubre la máquina. Entre las primeras y más jocosas contribuciones de Roma al ocaso de la civilización se cuenta la galante ayuda que prestó a la decadencia del teatro griego, cuando los ojos romanos parpadeaban con sobresaltada satisfacción al ver descender al dios en una máquina para dispensar la salvación en el escenario, habiendo previsto la fe del público (mientras Demócrito, sucumbiendo en cierta medida al prejuicio popular, otorgaba a los habitantes del éter superior el ser «de la misma forma que los hombres, pero mayores, compuestos de átomos muy sutiles, menos susceptibles de disolución…»).

Como decía Jean a Anatole en el bar, aun entonces: «Siempre estoy como *esperando* que ocurra algo bueno. Y entonces ocurre».

El brazo en cabestrillo surgió rígido del pañuelo; el libre cesó en su empeño por embutir la bufanda verde en un bolsillo, y cayó inerte, mientras Otto se balanceaba suavemente como suspendido, como Absalón quizá, colgado del terebinto por el pelo mientras los dardos de Joab encontraban su corazón, y atravesado así cayó al suelo: la puerta giratoria giró, y de ella surgió una aparición impulsada por una ráfaga de aire demasiado débil para hacer algo más que agitar el extremo de la bufanda verde.

Era demasiado tarde para salir por otra puerta. El hombre le había visto. Otto terminó de meterse en el bolsillo su bufanda verde, en negación maquinal de lo que estaba ocurriendo, y se adelantó con la mano tendida.

—Hola —dijo, un sonido que agotó todas sus energías, dejándole incapaz de añadir la palabra «padre».

—Yuju —dijo el otro, mirando rápidamente a su alrededor a través de sus gruesas gafas, metiéndose el bastón bajo el brazo, deteniéndose apenas para estrecharle la mano—. ¿Todo bien? —murmuró, mientras seguía andando camino del bar.

—Bueno, sí, yo…

—Será mejor que me cojas del brazo. Queda mejor.

—Ah, sí. Lo siento. Por supuesto. —Otto le guió al interior, y se detuvieron—. ¿Quieres tomar una copa primero? Quiero decir, ¿una copa en la barra? —logró preguntar Otto, mirando por encima de una hombrera ajada hacia el ajado encanto de Jean en la barra.

—No bebo. De todas formas hay demasiada gente en la barra. Cogeremos una mesa.

Otto lo siguió, mirando por encima de su propia hombrera ajada hacia la barra.

—En realidad no está tan llena —dijo.

Su acompañante se volvió, y por primera vez clavó en él unas pupilas penetrantes que parecieron atravesarle.

—No estarás borracho, ¿verdad?

—¿Borracho? ¿Yo? Bueno, no, yo no…

—Sería un bonito lío.

Apareció un camarero solitario para conducirles hasta una mesa situada en un rincón, felizmente casi oscuro. Otto caminaba con una leve cojera, al compás de la *Marcha del Sardar* que brotaba de los altavoces ocultos. Delante de él el bastón marcaba un compás similar. Al pasar junto a una mesa ocupada, Otto miró con horror al hombre allí sentado: no al hombre, quizá, sino a su corbata: las rayas inquisitoriales todavía le retaban. Todavía se sentía elegible, o se había sentido hasta aquel momento. La ojeada del hombre de la mesa fue superficial, de Otto al individuo grotesco que caminaba a trancos delante de él, la ojeada del residente británico mientras los dos nobles arruinados seguían el lisiado clamor de su música hacia el sur.

Al fin se vieron aprisionados, codo con codo tras una mesa contra la pared.

—No deberías haber saltado de ese modo cuando me viste.

—Oh, ¿lo he hecho?

—Es sólo que no queda bien.

—Lo sé, yo…

—La gente se fija en esas cosas.

—Lo sé. —El camarero dejó caer unas cartas ante ellos y escapó—. Supongo… bueno, quiero decir que igual podríamos empezar directamente con la cena.

—¿Quieres *comer*?

—Bueno, quiero decir que creía que íbamos a… Supongo que en realidad da igual. —Era difícil para Otto examinar la figura que tenía al lado; sin embargo lo intentó, más allá del frondoso pelo y las gruesas gafas. Otto quería verle los dientes—. Es curioso —dijo—. Tienes un pelo tan negro.

—¿Qué es lo que tiene de curioso?

—Bueno, quiero decir, como el mío es tan claro —contestó Otto mientras el bastón caía ruidosamente al suelo.

—¿Está torcido? —preguntó su compañero en voz baja, llevándose la mano a la frente y pasándosela delicadamente por la sien—. Llevo toda la tarde bastante nervioso —dijo—. Desde que salí de casa.

—Vaya, quiero decir, ¿algo va mal en casa?

—«El que tarda en airarse es grande de entendimiento; mas el que es impaciente de espíritu enaltece la necedad». Acabo de hacer algo bastante impaciente, como dice ahí la Biblia. Pero a veces la estupidez me pone enfermo. Simplemente estallo. —Entonces se recostó en el asiento, y pareció relajarse—. Eso es peligroso en cualquier negocio, por no hablar de este.

—Sí —dijo Otto—. Por supuesto.

Sostenía ante sí la gran carta del menú como una pantalla para ocultar su confusión, incrementada ahora por un perfume que le rodeaba sutilmente, un aroma familiar y fugitivo que no podía identificar. No estaba leyendo el menú, sino anticipándolo, como si cualquier medida desesperada de realidad pudiera servir para anclar su codicia; y no se atrevía a mirar hacia la barra en busca de Jean. ¿Almejas, grandes, para empezar?, ¿u *omelette aux truffes?*

—Pero esta noche parece que esas cosas no tienen casi importancia. Estoy de buen humor.

—Coq au vin? Pigeon aux petits pois? Poularde au riz, sauce suprême?

—Siempre me siento así después de un buen trabajo. Y la Navidad por todas partes… —Apareció el camarero solitario, y se calló.

—Foie gras à la gélée de Porto? Poulet… Fonds
d'artichauts
… Salade à la grecque…

—Una hamburguesa —se oyó a su lado; y la música era la *Marcha turca* de Mozart. ¿Dónde había encontrado aquello? Otto se dio cuenta de que estaba mirando la lista de vinos. Mientras doblaba sobre sí misma la enorme carta, la voz dijo—: ¿Lo mismo para ti?

—Sí, yo…

—Dos hamburguesas bien hechas. Y dese prisa.

Alberto, rey de los belgas, cayendo gloriosamente por las grietas de la roca, desapareciendo para no reaparecer nunca e interrumpir las leyendas que se le atribuían, para sufrir la traducción de la ficción de los recuerdos selectivos a la traición de la viva realidad.

Otto se quedó mirando las gruesas gafas, y vio polvo en la superficie de los cristales.

—Me he fijado en tus ojos. ¿Están… quiero decir, muy mal? Quiero decir, tienen realmente un aspecto…

—Eserina.

—Oh. ¿Es contagiosa? Quiero decir, ¿es peligrosa?

—¿Peligrosa? No es peligrosa.

—Pero… ¿duele?

—No. La sientes, pero no duele.

—Oh. —Otto cruzó las manos ante si—. ¿Sabes si es hereditaria? —preguntó, alzando la vista.

—¿Si es qué?

—Quiero decir, ¿cómo la cogiste?

—Me la pasó un amigo.

—Oh —dijo Otto, y se sentó un poco más lejos. Luego dijo cordialmente—: Supongo que te preguntarás qué he estado haciendo.

—Ganándote la vida, digo yo —fue la respuesta, dicha con tono indiferente.

Otto bajó la vista hacia sus manos, y reconsideró la situación.

—¿A qué te has dedicado últimamente?

—Ahora estoy trabajando en un pasaporte. No es tarea para un principiante. Nunca fue trabajo para holgazanes. Lo estropean todo para el auténtico artesano.

—Sí. Quiero decir que supongo que es igual en todo. Pero ¿pasaportes? Quiero decir, ¿qué estás…?

El camarero solitario se acercó con un plato en cada mano.

—Vale ya, cierra el pico.

—¿Qué? Quiero decir, solo he preguntado por los pasaportes, ¿qué estás…?

—Hace una noche muy fría, ¿eh? —Les pusieron los platos delante, y el camarero se fue por donde había venido—. ¿Qué demonios te pasa? ¿No sabes que hay cosas que no se pueden preguntar así? Este es un lugar público.

—Oh. Lo siento —dijo Otto, y observó cómo su compañero se santiguaba y empezaba a comer—. ¿Eres católico? —preguntó.

Los ojos giraron y se clavaron de lleno en él, atravesando el polvo. Osciló un poco, y bajó la vista hacia su plato.

—¡Que si soy católico! ¿Qué te crees que soy?

—Oh. Quiero decir que está muy bien. Sólo que me ha sorprendido un poco.

Había siete rodajas finas de champiñón encima de la carne. Mágico número: Otto la cortó por ellas. El joven y atractivo príncipe debía de estar en algún lugar (sin duda en el exilio), ante una copa de coñac tan bueno que apenas podría tragarse, recordando leyendas del rey. Otto se metió en la boca un trozo de aquella carne seca, y apenas pudo tragarlo. Olió a lavanda a su lado, y se sintió enfermo. Al alzar la vista vio que la rubia Jean se marchaba del bar llevándose el bolso. Echó una ojeada a los dos sin reconocimiento ni interés. Otto levantó la cara, las cejas y el tenedor para hacerle una seña.

—¿La conoces? ¿Conoces a esa mujer?

—No, he… bueno, he hablado un poco con ella mientras esperaba.

—No es momento para liarse con mujeres. No te busques problemas. —Siguió comiendo.

—Sí, bueno… Supongo que ha sido sólo la Navidad, ya sabes, quiero decir el típico sentimiento navideño. —Otto se llevó a la boca otro trocito de carne—. He pensado en ello, ¿sabes? Quiero decir en unirme a la Iglesia.

—Upfmm —fue la respuesta, a través de un bocado de pan.

—Es… es como si diera una razón a las cosas que de otro modo no parecen tener ninguna. Quiero decir,

legitima… bueno, ya sabes… la vida, algo así.

—O naces en su seno o no naces. —A su lado, el tenedor descansaba sobre el mantel—. Hay demasiada gente que se une a ella como si fuera una excursión turística.

—Pero yo…

—Tienes que haber nacido en su seno.

—En cierto sentido así fue —dijo Otto, con una leve risa confiada, esperando confirmación. No la hubo. Dejó el tenedor en la mesa. Estaba mareado. Con el rabillo del ojo vio la figura que tenía al lado inclinada sobre el plato, comiendo deprisa, moviendo la comida sólo unas pulgadas del plato a su boca. Una mosca descendió sobre el pan y se quedó allí, muy atareada. La mano de Otto temblaba cuando la espantó con el tenedor—. Supongo que es una idiotez que esté nervioso ahora, pero supongo que lo estoy.

—Disimúlalo lo mejor que puedas. No pasa nada por estar nervioso, todo el mundo se pone nervioso a veces en un asunto como éste. Pero no hace falta que muestres a todo el mundo que estás nervioso. Pareces bastante joven.

—¿Joven? Bueno, supongo que *parezco* joven. Pero hace ya tres años que salí de la universidad.

—¿Universidad? ¿Has ido a la universidad?

Se enjugó la boca con su servilleta, inclinando la cabeza para hacerlo, y alzó la vista.

—Sí, creí que lo… Estudié en Harvard —dijo Otto, y por primera vez se fijó en la corbata de aquel hombre—. Vaya… llevas puesta una corbata del Porcellian. —Otto se quedó mirando las cabezas de cerdo de seda—. ¿Fuiste del P.C.? Quiero decir, ni siquiera sabía que hubieras ido a Harvard.

—¿Yo en la universidad? ¿Sabes dónde estudié? En Attica y Atlanta.

—Pero… esa corbata, es la corbata del Porcellian, ¿no?

—No te preocupes, chico. Sé lo que me hago.

La mosca se posó en la mano de Otto, y la espantó de un manotazo. Tenía las piernas cruzadas, y empezó a frotarse el tobillo contra lo que creía que era la pata central de la mesa. El hombre de gris estaba saliendo del bar. Al verlo marcharse, la mano de Otto se alzó con lento automatismo hacia su pecho, y su muñeca se apretó contra la vacuidad que sentía allí. ¿Quién podría demostrar algo?, si se levantaba bruscamente, volcando la mesa si era necesario, para volverse en redondo hacia las hombreras acolchadas a su lado y exclamar. «¿Tú te crees esto?». Pero entonces ¿quién pagaría la cena?, ¿y la cuenta del bar? Desde luego no habría ninguna oferta de regalo navideño en metálico, que Otto debía arreglárselas de algún modo para sugerir: un regalo con el que pagar las copas que había tomado con Jean, pues apenas podía esperar más tras haber visto las deshilachadas vueltas de sus pantalones cuando se dirigían a la mesa. De repente imaginó su pelo furiosamente rojo, su piel oscura, o sus ojos inclinados de forma reveladora: aquello lo desmentiría todo. Pero no: en realidad, su nariz era bastante parecida a la que tenía al lado, aunque Otto se negó a reconocerla como tal en absoluto, derivativa. Al fin y al cabo, las narices eran narices, y bastante similares entre caucasianos.

El insulto más grosero podría haber sido simplemente decir: «Confío en que no haya habido algún error, ¿no?». Mejor que eso, levantarse en silencio de la mesa, cruzar rápidamente el local hasta el caballero del traje ligero de franela gris (que también tenía una nariz) y estrecharle la mano. Pero ya era tarde, pues el caballero del traje ligero de franela gris se había marchado.

Durante todo este tiempo, el cabestrillo había estado dando bandazos entre ambos sin despertar ninguna curiosidad. Ahora oyó:

—¿Para qué llevas ese cabestrillo, tienes realmente alguna herida?

—Bueno, en cierto modo, yo…

—Creía que era simulado. Todavía no has aprendido a manejarlo. Te mueves como si llevaras dentro una ardilla viva.

—Pero si es… yo…

La música era el vals *El Danubio azul.* Otto se pasó la yema de un dedo por el bigote y se quedó mirando un espejo lejano, donde vio la estratégica entrada de Santa Claus y su sigilosa aproximación a la puerta del bar, donde lo atraparon.

A su lado, el tenedor repicó contra el plato.

—He acabado.

—Creo que ya he comido bastante —dijo Otto, sin haber terminado ni la mitad de su plato. Encendió un cigarrillo, y mientras se elevaba el olor de la lavanda sintió en los oídos un zumbido procedente de ninguna parte, se humedeció los labios y oyó una salivación forzada. «¿Acaso no podría repetirse todo, pero de modo diferente?», pensó al ver un hombre delgado de estatura media y aire tranquilo sentado ante una mesa en medio del comedor, terminando su cena con un coñac: ¿acaso no podría Otto acercarse y

estrecharle la mano, y luego, sentado frente a él, escuchar sin sorprenderse sus confidencias sobre cantantes de ópera, artistas y productores, ante una pechuga de gallina de Guinea y una copa de vino?

El hombre de la corbata de club se levantó, los miró, abarcando a ambos con su ojeada, y se marchó. Era demasiado tarde. La cama de Procusto estaba hecha: lo único que podía hacer ahora era zafarse de ella de la mejor forma posible, lo que hizo Otto con más fatiga que dolor.

—Es un poco difícil hablar de dinero, pero…

—Lo tengo aquí mismo para ti. ¿Quieres cogerlo ahora? —dijo la voz a través de un bocado de pan. Se estaba limpiando las uñas con un diente de su tenedor de ensalada.

—¿Coger qué?

—Veintes. Cinco de los grandes en perfectos veintes.

—¿Cinco qué?

—Cinco mil. Aquí, es un paquete grueso. —Señaló con el codo su bolsillo lateral.

—¿Cinco mil *dólares*?

—¡Cristo! Baja la voz.

—Pero ¿no es demasiado? Quiero decir, aunque estemos en Navidad…

—Escucha, ¿estás seguro de que no estás borracho?

—Ah, no, no, yo…

—No te entregaría este material si estuvieras borracho. Probablemente lo malgastarías todo por toda la ciudad antes de que acabara la noche. Sácamelo del bolsillo.

—Oh, tendré mucho cuidado con él,
mu-cho cui-dado
con él… —dijo Otto mientras metía la mano en el bolsillo y sacaba el paquete, en tanto que el otro seguía sentado en silencio con aire indiferente, limpiándose las uñas con un diente de su tenedor de ensalada. Otto quería otro vaso de whisky. Abrió el paquete y sacó un billete de veinte dólares.

—¡Cristo! ¡No los enseñes aquí! —dijo el hombre a su lado, y paseó rápidamente la vista por el comedor. Pero no había nadie cerca que pudiera fijarse en ellos, y cuando volvió a bajar la vista pareció incapaz de resistir la tentación de quitarle el billete a Otto y dejarlo en el mantel ante sí—. Hermoso —dijo—. Hermoso, ¿verdad?

—Sí —boqueó Otto.

—Una verdadera obra de arte. —Se quedó mirando la cara del séptimo Presidente—. ¿Sabes que hacen falta seis artistas diferentes para hacer uno de éstos? Eso es lo que lo hace difícil. Seis para uno. Seis contra uno, podría decirse. —Le dio la vuelta y pasó lentamente la punta de un dedo por el pórtico de la Casa Blanca—. Una verdadera obra de arte —dijo—. Eso no se aprende en Harvard.

Otto se lo quedó mirando. Agarró con fuerza el paquete, como si se lo pudieran arrebatar en cualquier instante.

—Sabes, cada día queman unas seis toneladas de este material, de billetes auténticos, en el Departamento de Impresión y Grabado. Billetes gastados. Es un crimen.

—Sí, pero… bueno… esto… —fue todo lo que pudo decir Otto.

La mano a su lado se alzó para cogerse una solapa, mientras el hombre se recostaba en su asiento y miraba hacia arriba, relajado en la nostalgia.

—El otro día murió Johnny el Caballero —dijo—. ¿Lo conocías?

—No, yo…

—Fundió la Copa de Ascot. Fue el primero que sobredoró los seis peniques, y los estuvo pasando por medios soberanos hasta que tuvieron que retirarlos. Sabía tanto sobre la Iglesia que una vez se hizo pasar por obispo de las islas Falkland. Acaba de morir, Johnny. Llevaba encima unos diez dólares.

Otto parecía escuchar, pero no oía más que sílabas discordes.

—Organizó el mejor garito que jamás ha visto Londres. Hasta fue maestro de escuela dominical durante cinco años.

Fue un gran hombre. He pensado muchas veces en él cuando estaba en el hoyo.

El camarero se acercó a una mesa cercana.

—Esconde ese material.

Otto se metió el billete de veinte en el bolsillo, y el paquete entre las rodillas.

—Cuando muere así un gran artista lo echo de menos. No era ningún holgazán. No es un oficio para holgazanes, pero lo están arruinando de día en día. Apenas queda ya un solo maestro antiguo, un verdadero artesano, como Johnny o Jim el Pendolista. Y yo. Llevo catorce años sin aparecer en el *Detector*.

—¿El qué? —preguntó Otto, educada pero firmemente.

—El *Detector Nacional*… escucha. Cierra el pico y escucha eso un momento. Eso es.

—¿Qué?

—*Vissi d'arte, vissi d'amore* —murmuró al compás de la música—, *non feci mai male ad anima viva*… —Y se quedaron callados hasta el violento final de dolorida pasión.

Cuando acabó, Otto dijo:

—Era muy bonito.

—¿Bonito? ¿Es lo único que sabes decir? Pero no eres más que un crío, nunca oíste a la Cavalieri haciendo Tosca.

—No, yo…

—Me voy ya.

Se levantó y cogió su bastón.

—Bueno… pero ¿no quieres un café o algo?

—No. De todas formas no debería haberme quedado tanto tiempo.

Otto cogió la cuenta.

—Yo pago esto —dijo gentilmente.

—De acuerdo, chico. Gracias.

—Gracias a ti, yo… Feliz Navidad.

Otto se quedó solo, con el paquete apretado contra sus partes, oliendo el delicioso aroma de la lavanda, sólo medio consciente de que la mesa tenía cuatro patas. Una mosca se posó en su mano, y se la quedó mirando sin más.

Dos hombres salieron por la puerta giratoria, el segundo una figura con un traje a cuadros, que llevaba algún tiempo esperando en el vestíbulo. Cogió al otro del brazo.

—Eres tú, ¿no?

—¿Qué quiere decir?

—¿Eres Frank? Me dijeron que iba a encontrarme contigo en el vestíbulo. Me retuvieron y he tenido media hora de retraso, pero tú llegas una hora tarde. ¿Tienes el material? ¿Cinco de los grandes en papel?

—Jesús y María.

—Soy el pasador que iban a mandarte, ¿sabes? ¿Tienes el papel?

—Jesús, María y José.

—¿Qué te pasa, por el amor de Dios?

—Ese chico. Ese marica. Se ha quedado con todo. Estaba ahí sentado frotándose el tobillo contra mi pierna…

—¿Adónde ha ido? Entraremos y le cogeremos. ¿Lleva el papel encima?

—Esperaremos aquí. Le cogeremos cuando salga.

—¿Adónde vas ahora?

—Aquí mismo, a este portal. —Se quitó el abrigo, le dio la vuelta, metió la peluca negra en un bolsillo, la bufanda verde y las gafas en el otro, y el bigote rubio apareció pegado a su labio superior—. Hace frío —dijo el señor Sinisterra—. Y deja de llamarlo «el papel».

Otto había pasado fugazmente por la recepción para hacer un depósito de diez dólares en su cuenta. Le llevaron a una habitación. Una vez allí se sentó en el borde de la cama, rasgó el envoltorio del dinero y empezó a contarlo. El cabestrillo le estorbaba. Se lo arrancó de un tirón y lo arrojó al suelo. Luego se puso a hacer montones de diez billetes, y los abrió en abanico alternando anversos y reversos sobre la colcha. Se quedó mirándolos, y luego se volvió hacia el espejo y se pasó la yema del dedo por el bigote. Llamó a recepción, y esperó a que llegara el botones con una cuchilla de afeitar y «cualquier otra cosa que pueda hacer falta», contando entre tanto el dinero en diversas posiciones. Cuando llegó la cuchilla se afeitó rápidamente y se vistió. Se tambaleó un poco mientras se guardaba cuatro billetes de veinte con el cambio (que incluía uno de diez) y metía el resto en un cajón a toda prisa, acordándose de su vecina, pues oía ruidos en la habitación de al lado. Apagó la luz, cerró su puerta y se quedó parado ante la 666, donde llamó, y luego, sin poder resistirse y sorprendido de encontrarla sin cerrojo, la abrió de golpe.

—¿Quién… qué quieres? —gritó Jean, tapándose hasta el cuello con una sábana y destapando a su vecino, cuyo traje ligero de franela gris estaba tirado en el suelo.

—Pero tú… pero…

—Fuera, fuera de aquí, ¿qué pretendes entrando de ese modo en el cuarto de una dama?

La puerta se cerró de golpe.

—Bueno, ¿y quién demonios era ése?

—No te preocupes, cariño, solo es un julai que conocí en el bar.

—¿Un julai?

—Ya sabes, marica. Dijo que era escritor, y todos son maricas hoy día.

—Ahí va —dijo el hombre del traje a cuadros—. Por la puerta lateral. Quita de en medio, estúpido cabrón.

—Esa no es forma de hablar a Santa Claus.

—Bueno, quítate de en medio.

—Feliz Navidad. ¿Tienen diez centavos para el viejo san Nick?

—Vamos a coger el siguiente taxi de la fila para seguirle.

Los dos taxis se alejaron del bordillo con medio minuto de diferencia, y un coche patrulla paró ante el hotel.

—Podría demandarles por detención injustificada —dijo el señor Pivner mientras entraba en el vestíbulo con un policía—, si fuera a servir de algo. ¿Saben lo que han hecho?

A su espalda, el policía se puso a hablar con el botones alto, que dijo: «Bueno, Jesús, *creí* que estaba borracho. El tipo que iba con él lo estaba». El policía dijo: «Lo llevamos a la comisaría y lo encontramos una jeringuilla encima. Creímos que era un yonqui. Está que echa chispas».

—¿Saben lo que han hecho? ¿Lo han visto? Un chico con una bufanda como esta, vino aquí para reunirse conmigo, era mi hijo, mi hijo…

El policía se volvió hacia la puerta giratoria, y el botones alto le dijo:

—Ya que están en ello, llévense también a Santy Claus. Nos está volviendo majaretas.

Para entonces, la controversia en el cielo no daba trazas de ir a resolverse; en realidad no había ninguna promesa de armisticio, aunque acaso prosiguieran las componendas, precipitando lluvia menuda durante períodos de monótona discordia, interrumpidos por impacientes ráfagas de nevisca. El horizonte de la ciudad estaba reducido a dos dimensiones. No tenía profundidad; acostumbrado a la masa, ahora no daba esa sensación, sino la de edificios en inmediato aislamiento, sus alturas arremolinadas en las inclemencias del tiempo, sus luces increíbles en la noche, su hazaña no menoscabada por comparación con la masa que había colgado de sus lados pretendiendo sostenerlos, y que ahora se encogía hasta perderse de vista, para volver a aparecer al día siguiente si hacía bueno, pretendiendo y compartiendo el empinado triunfo de estos gigantes trabados, abandonados esta noche en la prueba de su integridad.

El primer taxi torció por Jones Street; el segundo se quedó esperando en la esquina. «Ha entrado en ese portal donde están todos esos polis. ¿Qué estará haciendo ahí?». «Cómo voy a saber qué está haciendo ahí. Jamás debí fiarme de él». «Yo no me habría hado de un marica». «No es católico. Debería haberlo sabido». Vieron a Otto hablar con uno de los policías y volver a su taxi. «¿Cómo has podido *hacer* una cosa así?». «Ha sido la soberbia, el pecado mortal de la soberbia, estaba tan orgulloso de esos… esos… Oh, María, reza por mí… Si no hubiera estado tan orgulloso me habría andado con cuidado…». «Dejemos que se largue de una vez», dijo el hombre del traje a cuadros mientras el taxi de Otto se apartaba del bordillo. «Que se vaya al infierno».

—¿Dejarlo ir?, ¿con todo eso encima? ¿Crees que ese papel no vale nada? ¿Crees que hice un trabajo barato? Conductor, siga a ese taxi.

La *jukebox* tocaba «Retorno a Sorrento».

Alguien dijo: «¿Habéis leído esto? Es de una mujer que pasó el invierno pasado *entero* en Roma, lo cuenta todo sobre aquello».

Al lado, una muñeca flácida colgaba en el aire. «Yo pasé dos semanas horriblemente lluviosas en Florida, y no me puse muy moreno…». A su alrededor se oyeron carcajadas dispersas.

«Soy un borracho», dijo uno de los dos jóvenes sentados en una mesa con Victoria y Albert Hall. «Nada más que un borracho», repitió con desaliento. «Crees que eso es malo, yo soy un borracho y además soy marica», dijo el otro, «alcohólico *y* homosexual». «¿Y qué?», preguntó el paterfamilias. «Yo soy borracho, homosexual y judío».

Ella los contempló serenamente, y terminó su copa. «Yo soy borracha, homosexual y judía», declaró. «Y estoy tullida». Cuando llegó la siguiente ronda de bebidas brindaron por ella.

—¿Habéis oído el del tipo musculoso llamado Rex?, ¿que tenía unos órganos sexuales minúsculos?

—¿Os sabéis «Il y avait une jeune fille de Dijon»?

—¿«Es gibt ein Arbeiter von Linz»?

—«Toda esta historia absorbente está basada en hechos. Fíjense en la hermosa muchacha que aparece en la ilustración…» —leyó Anselm en voz alta—. ¿Me escuchas? «Reparen en las crueles marcas dejadas en su tierno cuerpo por el látigo de nueve colas manejado por las manos de una despiadada y anticristiana madre superior, en cuyo corazón todo sentimiento humano había sido asesinado por el sistema papal…». —Apartó *El gemido del Tiber* para alzar la vista hacia Stanley—. ¿Todavía estás pensando en eso? —preguntó, al ver el maltrecho recorte de periódico en la mano de Stanley—. Ese periódico es de ayer, todo San Marcos estará ya probablemente hundido bajo el agua. ¿Por qué estás tomando tanto café?

—Tengo que mantenerme despierto cuando llegue a casa, para trabajar —dijo Stanley, y miró ansiosamente su reloj de pulsera.

—¡Para trabajar! —murmuró Anselm—. ¿A qué estás esperando? —Pero no parecía tener ningún interés en lo que Stanley pudiera contestar o no. Se hundió en su asiento, contemplando hoscamente por encima de la mesa las víctimas vespertinas del Viareggio. Los granos de su cara estaban apagados, sus ojos encendidos por un rencor latente que se avivaba de tanto en tanto cuando clavaba la vista en alguien, pero su tono sonó distraído cuando una chica alta de pelo oscuro dijo a alguien mientras cogía su abrigo de pieles: «Bueno, aún me falta por ver a un animal leyendo un libro…» y Anselm musitó—: ¿No te gustaría meterle la mano en el felpudo? —Luego levantó una mano, con los dedos doblados sobre la palma, y empezó a morderse las uñas. Un minuto después estaba de nuevo hundido en su asiento, inmóvil, y empezó a silbar sorda y desabridamente entre dientes.

Stanley alzó la vista.

—¿Qué es eso? ¿Qué estás silbando?

—«Demasiada mostaza».

—Demasiada… ¿qué? No, ¿qué es? Es algo conocido, ¿es Bach?

—Sí, se llama «Puedo darte todo menos amor» —respondió Anselm sin levantar la vista—. Bach lo escribió cuando tenía tres años —añadió—, para el Día de la Madre.

—Anselm —dijo Stanley, inclinándose ligeramente hacia él—, ¿hay algo que, algo va mal?

—¡Algo va mal! —Anselm se volvió hacia él—. Es la cosa más estúpida que… —Pero su voz se extinguió, y apartando los ojos de Stanley, se rascó la cabeza.

—Si hay algo que pueda… hacer, ¿eh?

Anselm se quedó mirando los bordes negros y embotados de sus uñas, y luego extendió la mano.

—Tengo una sicosis, ¿ves? No una psicosis, como todos esos bastardos chiflados. Mera sicosis. Costras. —Y siguió rascándose la cabeza.

Entró el señor Feddle, con un despertador colgando del cuello de un trozo de bramante. En la entrada chocó con el hombre del traje a cuadros, cuyo compañero dijo: «Entra y agárralo». «No puedo sacarlo de ahí así como así», dijo el hombre del traje a cuadros. «No se quedará mucho tiempo, es demasiado nervioso para echar raíces en un antro como éste». «¡Atención, aquí viene…!». «Y una mierda viene. Se ha metido en el lavabo».

Mientras estaba de pie, ocupado, Otto tenía el espejo junto al hombro izquierdo, y se miró en él. Seguía mirándose cuando un minuto después se volvió, abrochándose los pantalones, tambaleándose ligeramente, y permitió que la sonrisa aflorara poco a poco a su cara, como saboreando la reanudación de una vieja amistad, muerta quizá, por lo que se sabía, en la jungla; reencontrada ahora, y reencontrada con un aspecto opulento. Luego la sonrisa abandonó su cara con la misma lentitud, y con la misma calculada serenidad con que había aflorado: con toda la sinceridad de un suplicante ante un icono dijo: «Si fuera un personaje de una obra… ¿sería creíble?». Cuando la puerta se abrió de golpe se estaba mirando la pálida mano izquierda que le salía de la manga, y lamiéndose el labio superior extrañamente desnudo.

—¿Por qué sonríes de ese modo? Pareces muy contento contigo mismo.

—¿Qué? Oh… —Giró en redondo—. Max.

—¿Qué ha pasado? ¿Has vendido tu obra o qué?

—¿Mi obra? Yo… sí, sí, eso es. ¿Cómo lo sabes? Sí…

—Bien —dijo Max por encima del hombro. Sonriendo, añadió—: Oye, espero que no creas que tuve algo que ver con lo que iba diciendo la gente.

—¿La gente? —repitió distraídamente Otto, camino de la puerta.

—Ya sabes, que habías plagiado…

—Oh, oh, eso, sí, no, no se me ha pasado por la cabeza —dijo Otto, y dejó a Max allí parado, ocupado

en acrecentar la torrentera humeante en la tarta helada de la taza. Vio a Stanley sentado en una mesa con Anselm, que pasaba apáticamente las páginas de una revista con la foto de una chica deslizándose por una barandilla y la desafiante pregunta «¿Pueden los monstruos hacer el amor?» en la portada. Anselm rasgó algo y lo empujó por encima de la mesa hacia Stanley, que lo miró y luego apartó rápidamente los ojos, registrando el local en busca de refugio hasta que los bajó al suelo.

—¡Eh, Hannah! Mira a esos dos —dijo un joven alto con la cabeza redonda y un costoso traje—. ¿Has visto alguna vez ese grabado de Kollwitz, *Zwei Gefangene Musik hörend?* Eso es lo que parecen, dos presos escuchando música.

—Stanley es una especie de preso —dijo Hannah medio entre dientes.

—Todo el que siempre está sin blanca lo es. —Le tendió la cerveza que le había pagado.

—¡Ya puedes hablar! —Hannah se volvió hacia él, aceptando el vaso goteante—. Tú trabajas por tu dinero, así que no tienes que preocuparte por gastarlo.

Se la quedó mirando; luego se aclaró la garganta y preguntó:

—Oye, ¿ese que está a mi espalda es realmente Ernest Hemingway?

—Y qué si lo es, ¿qué significa eso para ti?

—Él, yo… me gustaría conocerlo, creo que es un gran escritor.

—¿Y crees que se te pegará algo? Sigues siendo un viajante de comercio. ¿Has leído el poema de Cummings «un viajante de comercio es un ello que apesta para agradar…»? ¿Y tú quieres escribir?

—Lo hago en mis ratos libres, he seguido un curso…

—Vete a apestar para agradar a otra parte.

—Sí, yo… vale, vale… —Le volvió doscientos dólares de *tweed* y dijo—: ¿Señor Hemingway? Me llamo George…

—Encantado de conocerte, George —dijo el Gran Hombre Sin Afeitar—. ¿Qué estamos bebiendo?

Otto pagó su whisky con soda con un billete de veinte dólares, y se quedó mirando a su alrededor con aire inseguro.

—¿Qué murmuras? —preguntó Hannah justo por debajo del nivel de su mirada. Estaba mirando a una chica alta que acababa de decir, con acento de Boston, que París era como una boca llena de dientes cariados.

—¿Hannah? Acabo de vender mi obra —repitió Otto, pero esta vez en voz alta, como hallando confirmación en lo que oía.

—¿Has vendido tu obra? —Le sostuvo su pregunta, pero sólo hasta que dijo—: ¿Me invitas a una cerveza? —Mientras dejaba un vaso vacío en una mesa a su espalda.

Otto se debatió hasta alcanzar la barra, consiguió un vaso para ella y se lo tendió por encima del hombro de alguien, pero cuando lo pagó y se volvió de nuevo había desaparecido, dejando solo su pregunta como un eco de la de Max, sancionando lo que había oído de su propia boca, y que ahora ratificó con un sí murmurado y una sonrisa de descubrimiento. Pero nada más ver a Max, de pie junto a la mesa de Anselm y Stanley, mirando en su dirección y hablando a través de una sonrisa, volvió a sentirse inseguro, acudió en su propia defensa y mientras se acercaba a ellos se llevó la mano al hueco vacío de la chaqueta.

Max tenía siempre el mismo aspecto, siempre la misma edad, siempre el mismo pelo corto, y en la sonrisa la misma simpatía sin humor del que no puede sufrir la amistad ni celebrar la enemistad, una parodia del momento, como su ropa caricaturizaba un pasado en una universidad del Este donde nunca había estado.

—¿Y si sólo podemos conocernos por medio del pecado, y compartir nuestra fragilidad humana? —siguió Stanley, con la mirada hundida en su café—. Y si haciendo eso llegamos a conocernos…

—Cruzar el océano Atlántico para echar un polvo. Ni siquiera puede empalmarse sin una dosis de metiltestosterona —lo interrumpió Anselm, sin alzar la vista mientras se acercaba Otto, y sin dejar de hablar rasgó algo de su revista y se lo tendió a Otto, que leyó: «¿solo? Por 25 ¢ puede conseguir una revista con fotos y descripciones de miembros solitarios y sinceros de todas partes, que buscan amistad, compañía, matrimonio…»—. Qué mejor razón hay para salir de este estúpido país blanco y protestante, por el amor de Cristo. Sí, por el amor de Cristo. Al menos los países católicos aceptan el pecado como parte de la naturaleza humana, no se rasgan las vestiduras al enterarse de que te has acostado con una mujer. Aun tipo como ése le da miedo intentarlo aquí, prefiere irse adonde nadie lo conozca, entre un hatajo de estúpidos extranjeros a los que no tiene que respetar porque no hablan inglés y no tienen dinero, donde nadie lo señale por la calle si lo ven saliendo de una casa de putas. Cristo. Me rompe el corazón. Un tipo así me rompe el corazón. Pero ¿sabéis lo que me rompe el corazón? —Miró de frente a Otto, que dio un respingo, y cuyos ojos, evitando una mueca de dolor, encontraron la indulgente sonrisa de Max—. ¡Que eso sea pecado!

—siseó Anselm, clavando de nuevo la vista en la mesa—. Eso… ¡Cristo!

Ninguno de ellos habló. Stanley se agarró a su café como si estuviera amarrado a él. Otto se tambaleó levemente. Max se quedó de pie, reflejando la huera satisfacción que encontraba en la escena.

—Con todas las… miserables traiciones que nos rodean, y que, que… que un momento de confianza sea pecado —susurró Anselm, sin mirar a ninguno de ellos.

Ninguno de ellos habló hasta que Anselm dijo: «Estás derramando tu maldita copa, ¿qué demonios te pasa?», y Otto, enderezando su vaso y lamiéndose el labio superior, rodeó la mesa hasta la silla vacía junto a la que estaba Max, chocando con una chica que llevaba bajo el brazo *Todo el mundo puede tocar el piano,* e iba diciendo: «Bueno, su forma de abordarme me pareció bastante brusca, que se acercara a mí de buenas a primeras con el chisme envuelto en un billete de un dólar…».

—¿No te vas a sentar aquí? —preguntó Otto a Max, que se apartó con la cortesía que se concede a la debilidad—. ¿Quién se va al extranjero? —preguntó un momento después, ja sentado.

Stanley alzó la vista hacia Anselm, como para darle la oportunidad de contestar, y luego dijo con tono sofocado: «Don Bildow…», como si quisiera decir más pero no encontrara más que decir. Y Otto levantó la vista, por encima de espaldas y hombros, para ver la cara blanca de Don Bildow bailando tras las gafas de montura de plástico; y oyó que alguien cercano a la mesa decía: «Todo es cóncavo o convexo…», alguien que recibió a cambio esta confidencia: «Nada, absolutamente nada puede convencerme de que todos nosotros y todas las cosas no estamos encogiendo a razón de un milímetro por minuto…».

—¿Alguien ha visto a Esme? —preguntó Otto, revelando una brusca tensión en la voz—. Acabo de pasar por su casa —añadió atropelladamente, y se llevó el vaso a los labios.

—¿No había nadie allí? —preguntó Max a su espalda.

—Bueno, no, en realidad no, quiero decir que no.

—¿Ni siquiera Chaby?

—No, él no… estaba allí, no. Quiero decir que no lo he visto, en realidad no he entrado, yo… sólo he pasado por allí —terminó Otto, alzando la vista con aire confuso, hurgándose en el bolsillo con la mano izquierda, cuya libertad nadie había advertido, y al ver el descuidado bigote de Stanley, lamiéndose un labio cuya desnudez nadie había comentado—. ¿Alguien quiere una copa? —preguntó, e hizo una seña a un camarero que no le vio. A su espalda alguien dijo: «Cada año intentan desaparecer en América un millón de personas, un millón de americanos intentan borrarse del mapa, es una estadística y ni siquiera incluye a los criminales, un millón al año, un millón de personas al año…».

La jukebox tocaba «Retorno a Sorrento», y al lado alguien dijo que san Francisco Javier sólo medía cuatro pies y medio de alto.

—«¿Amenaza la Embriaguez Su Felicidad o A Sus Seres Queridos? ¡Nuestro Extraordinario Nuevo Descubrimiento Ayuda Rápida y Fácilmente a Mitigar Todo Deseo de Alcohol…! No Hace Falta Ninguna Fuerza de Voluntad Para Dejar de Beber. ¡Este Es un Método Estrictamente Casero…!» —leyó Anselm, de vuelta a su revista y a su tono apagado.

—Yo sólo quiero un café —dijo Stanley.

—¿Tienes dinero? —preguntó Anselm—. En ese caso, preferiría comer. —Y llamó al camarero.

—Sí, la verdad es que sí, acabo de vender mi obra —les dijo Otto. Pasó rápidamente la mirada del encogimiento de hombros de Anselm al primer signo de placer aprobador en Stanley, pero no pudo detener los ojos, y se volvió hacia Max en busca de confirmación.

—Berenjenas a la parmesana —pidió Anselm a su lado, y Otto cogió al camarero del brazo cuando se marchaba para pedir otro whisky y un café para Stanley, que en aquel momento levantó la vista para preguntar—: ¿No fuiste antes a ver a Esme?

—Bueno, sí, antes, la vi antes… —La confusión de la voz de Otto se reflejaba en sus ojos. Eludiendo la simple pregunta de Stanley, miró al azar a su alrededor en busca de un nuevo tema, y por desgracia lo encontró al momento—. Ahí está Hannah —dijo—. Acabo de ver a Hannah, ella… yo…

Apareció el camarero con lo que habían pedido. Anselm se estaba riendo.

—Pero no entiendo por qué dijo alguien lo que dicen de mí, de Hannah y de mí —exclamó Stanley. Y Otto, huyendo de la súplica que venía de aquel lado y de la risa que venía del otro, miró hacia Max, cuya sonrisa fue la conspiración de un instante, un lazo confirmado por el gesto perspicaz de Stanley, y por la rapidez con que bajó los ojos.

—Stanley, no creerás… no quise decir… —empezaba Otto, las líneas de su cara alzándose hacia la frente en un ruego ansioso, cuando le interrumpió Anselm, gruñendo con la boca llena, y Otto se volvió hacia él en busca de rescate.

Anselm comía rápidamente, embutiéndose en la boca trozos de pan entre tenedores colmados de

berenjena, como si esperase que se lo fueran a arrebatar todo en cualquier momento. Aun así se las arregló para gruñir a Stanley, y de su boca salieron despedidas miguitas de pan que se esparcieron por la mesa.

—La bestia —gorgoteó Anselm, mascando—, la bestia en la jungla. La bestia con dos espaldas —gruñó y rezongó y rio al mismo tiempo—. Agazapada, acechando, preparada para saltar, ése es el número de la bestia que te acecha, la bestia que espera para devorarte, la bestia con dos cabezas, ¡esperando para saltar! —arremetió, escupiendo miguitas de pan.

—Mira Anselm… —empezó Otto con voz temblorosa, que intentaba ser firme.

Pero Anselm parecía haberse calmado ya. Se quedó riendo entre dientes sobre su plato casi vacío, mirando hacia abajo como si alguna satisfacción inminente llenara su mente; mientras, por debajo de la mesa, sin que le vieran, sus manos abrían una latita plana, sacaban un sobre y desenrollaban su contenido.

Mientras tanto, el camarero estaba allí parado con la cuenta, y Otto aprovechó la interrupción para sacarse un rollo de billetes del bolsillo. «Traiga, yo me encargo de esto», dijo, como si hiciera falta adelantarse a ellos, aunque ninguno se movió hasta que Anselm extendió rápidamente un brazo, sin que le vieran, y dejó caer algo en el café de Stanley. Y mientras Otto se recostaba en su asiento, doblando su dinero, Anselm le preguntó cordialmente:

—¿Me puedes prestar algo?

—Bueno, bueno sí, claro —dijo Otto—. ¿Cuánto?

—Lo que puedas.

—Sí —repitió Otto, vacilando, y se volvió hacia Stanley—. ¿Necesitas algo ahora mismo, Stanley? ¿Algo de dinero?, porque me encantaría prestarte algo.

—¿Cinco dólares, quizá? —dijo Stanley—. Puede que los necesite si voy al dentista, tengo una muela…

—Toma, toma esto —dijo Otto, desdoblando otra vez los billetes, y le tendió uno de veinte—. Vamos, puede que lo necesites.

—No, sólo cinco, es lo único que necesito, sólo cinco.

—Dale a él cinco, yo tomaré los veinte —dijo rápidamente Anselm, tendiendo una mano—. Sabes la vida tan miserable que llevo, los necesito… —Pero observó cómo la mano de Otto tendía el limpio billete de veinte dólares a Stanley, dejó oír otro débil gemido de protesta y aceptó uno ajado de cinco, murmurando—: Gracias, yo… gracias. ¿Y tienes un cigarrillo? —Y hasta le resultó difícil sacarlo del paquete con las puntas mordidas y embotadas de sus dedos.

—No sabía que fumaras —le dijo Otto.

—A veces sí —dijo Anselm, sosteniendo el cigarrillo de forma inexperta, y luego dobló una y otra vez el billete de cinco dólares hasta que lo redujo a una bolita casi menos ancha que la torturada uña de su pulgar. Dio una o dos caladas al cigarrillo, y luego lo dejó caer al suelo y lo pisoteó; entonces lo asaltó de golpe toda la hosquedad de poco antes, y se quedó mirando la mesa como si estuviera allí sentado a solas.

Max se había vuelto a hablar con un hombrecillo mayor vestido de negro, con chanclos negros y sombrero negro, que llevaba un paraguas negro. No parecía decir nada, asentía con la cabeza de vez en cuando y aceptó la bebida que le había traído Max, mientras Max hablaba. Max volvió para identificar a la negra figura como el crítico de arte de *Viejas masas*, dijo que tenía un ingenio muy incisivo y que había hecho muy buenas críticas de sus cuadros, «que es lo que de verdad importa», añadió, sonriendo.

—Resulta extraño tener de nuevo el uso de mi brazo izquierdo —dijo finalmente Otto.

—Ah, sí, llevabas un cabestrillo, ¿verdad? —dijo Stanley, alzando rápidamente la vista hacia la mano que yacía inmóvil sobre la mesa—. Está muy blanca —comentó—. ¿Te ha dejado una cicatriz muy grande?

—¿Por qué no le pides que te enseñe la cicatriz? —le preguntó Anselm—. Apuesto a que era un bonito agujero. Te da envidia, por el amor de Cristo.

—No es tanto la herida lo que importa, el recibirla —dijo Stanley, mientras Otto se echaba hacia atrás y bajaba la pálida mano a su regazo—. Sino la cicatriz, la cicatriz es el testimonio de todas las heridas que recibimos… de todas las heridas, toda clase de heridas. Una vez oí hablar de alguien que tenía una cicatriz y se la vendaba de vez en cuando para renovar la herida.

—Cicatrices, lo único que quiere Stanley son cicatrices, para enseñárselas ala gente. ¡Cicatrices! Eh, Stanley, ¿te enteraste de lo del relicario que abrieron pensando que tendría dentro el brazo izquierdo de Ignacio de Loyola? Lo trajeron en un barco, y cuando lo abrieron encontraron un brazo con un corazón tatuado, con un puñal ensangrentado y la palabra «Madre», ja, jaja…

—Eso no es verdad —dijo inmediatamente Stanley—. Y no se trata de querer sufrir, sólo por eso, sólo por sufrir, es algo más… demostrar el derecho a eso, a sufrir.

—Corta el rollo, tío —dijo una cara ojerosa asomando por encima de un reservado—. Nos estás aburriendo.

—Tiene razón, por el amor de Cristo, todo el mundo sufre, el crimen en este mundo es que sufres y no significa maldita la cosa, no encaja en ninguna parte. Se puede soportar cualquier sufrimiento si significa algo —siguió rápidamente Anselm, pero aún como omitiendo algo específico que le ocupaba la mente—. El único sufrimiento insoportable es el que no tiene sentido —terminó con un murmullo.

Al oír esto, Otto arqueó una ceja y se lamió el labio, preparándose para citar las líneas con que Gordon conquistaba a Priscilla hacia el final del segundo acto, la escena a la entrada de la quinta veraniega, que aún ahora rutilaba ante él como si la estuvieran representando, «gordon: El sufrimiento, mi querida Priscilla, es un lujo mezquino de la gente mediocre. Descubrirás que la felicidad es mucho más noble, e infinitamente más refinada…».

—Recordáis lo que decía Montherlant al respecto —los interrumpió Max—. *Le bonheur est un état bien plus noble et bien plus raffiné que la souffrance…* —Su francés era imperfecto y sorprendentemente claro. Otto murmuró impacientemente al verse interrumpido cuando había empezado a hablar, y se volvió para preguntar a Stanley si había leído algo de Vainiger, mientras Max terminaba—: *le petit luxe des personnes de médiocre qualité.*

—Eso es una gilipollez —dijo Anselm sin levantar la vista.

—Cuando dice que la vida debe vivirse a oscuras —insistió Otto—, y que debemos dar por verdaderos unos postulados que si fuesen verdaderos justificarían…

—Eh, Stanley, tengo una canción para ti.

—Déjalo en paz.

—Hannah, siéntate, siéntate en el sitio de Otto, está dando una conferencia sobre *Die Philosophie des Als Ob* —le aconsejó Anselm.

—¿Sobre qué? —preguntó secamente Otto.

—En los botones pone U.S., Así que querrán decir nosotros —cantó Anselm, mientras rasgaba algo de su revista y se lo tendía a Hannah—. Así que deben referirse a mí… y a mi madreee…

«Tome HORMONAS masculinas… La ciencia ha descubierto que las preocupaciones domésticas y profesionales desaparecen a menudo cuando se corrige la deficiencia de hormonas masculinas… Si echa en falta esa actividad de antaño, ese amor intenso y ese ardiente deseo de vivir…».

—Cállate y déjalo en paz —repitió Hannah arrugando el papel, pero no lo tiró.

—¿Que deje en paz a quién? Otto y yo estamos discutiendo sobre Vaihinger, ¿verdad, Otto? Es un experto en *al sob, ich gebe Ihnen mein Wort*, Hannah, un experto, *ich bin ihm nicht gewachsen*, Hannah…

—Cállate —le dijo ella mirándolo a la cara, que daba muestras crecientes de agitación. Los granos se destacaban vivamente en su tez, y tenía el pelo alborotado, como si soplara viento. Levantó la mano y se lo tocó, sacó un sucio peine de bolsillo y empezó a peinarse haciendo un ruido crujiente.

—Costras —dijo—. Soy sicótico. ¿Sabéis a quién envidio? Envidio a Tourette. Pusieron su nombre a una enfermedad, una jodidamente rara.

—¿Estás borracho? Si no lo estás por qué no te callas.

—Cuando tienes la enfermedad de Tourette vas por ahí repitiendo guarradas todo el tiempo. Coprolalia. Todo el mundo tiene coprolalia por debajo de la calle Catorce. —Entonces abrió su revista y se volvió bruscamente hacia Otto—. «Las mujeres son curiosas —leyó—. Con ellas nunca sabes si estás haciendo lo correcto o no. ¡Evítate decepciones y angustias! Ahórrate un montón de tragedias. ¡No seas un *Faux pas!*».

—Anselm —empezó Otto en voz baja—, ¿por qué no te relajas y…?

—Estás borracho. ¿Por qué no pruebas con Dios? Cuatro palabras de tres letras, *¿Por qué no pruebas con Dios?*[7] Es un libro de Mary Pickford. Auténtica coprolalia. Te gustaría. —Entonces cobró aliento y dijo—: ¿Sabéis a quién envidio? Da igual. En los botones pone U. S.…

—¿Qué te pasa esta noche, es por lo de Charles? —lo interrumpió Hannah, y Anselm dejó de cantar de golpe y se la quedó mirando.

—No estoy… cantando para ti —dijo un momento después, titubeando, y bajó la vista al sucio suelo, murmurando algo.

—Bueno, por qué no…

—¡Bueno, por qué no nos dejas en paz…! Tú, maldita seas, tú…

—Quería decirte cómo me alegra lo de tu obra —dijo Stanley a Otto—. Me alegra, en serio.

—Gracias, yo… ya lo sé —dijo Otto, y le puso una mano en el hombro—. Eres bueno de verdad, Stanley.

—Me gustaría serlo. Me gustaría que todo el mundo lo fuese.

—Entonces habría un montón de curas chiflados sin trabajo. ¡Trabajo! Jajaja…

—Anselm, tú…

—Maldita seas, Hannah, maldita seas, ¿a ti qué te importa si me siento así por lo de Charles? Y su madre

que viene aquí a por él para llevárselo a casa, a Grand Rapids, y como él no quiere ir lo deja aquí sin nada, con las muñecas… igual que se las encontró, esa… Me recuerdas a ella, puede que sea por tu maldita sonrisa. Puede que sea por la forma en que intentas echarle el anzuelo a Stanley, por su propio bien, ¡por su propio bien!

—Pero qué…

—Lo que no puedo soportar es la autocomplacencia —estalló Anselm—. No la puedo soportar en nada, pero sobre todo no la puedo soportar en la religión. ¿Has visto a la madre de Charles?, ¿has visto su sonrisa?, esa sonrisa más-santa-que-tú de la Ciencia Cristiana, te encaja la sonrisa como… Son tan complacientes con ese error de la materia que han descubierto, «Es bonito porque es mío», ése es el tipo de expresión que tienen, como si la vieja bruja que les lavó el cerebro hubiera sido la primera en pensar lo del error de la materia, ¿es que nunca han oído hablar del catarismo?, ¿o de los albigenses?, ¿o de los maniqueos?, ¿o incluso del obispo Berkeley? No, dejan de pensar en el momento en que echan mano de esa mierda de *Ciencia y salud,* no vuelven a leer otro libro después de ése; ellos tienen un rincón en la Verdad, todos los demás son gentiles…

—Entonces, ¿por qué montas un escándalo de mil pares de Cojones? —lo acosó Hannah.

—Porque Charles y yo… No culpo a Charles lo más mínimo por que se le haya ido la puta olla. ¡Dios es Amor! A quién no se le iría la olla, oír eso de tu propia madre cuando estás ahí tirado con las muñecas abiertas de un tajo. Pero ¿amor en esta tierra? ¡Cristo…! ¿Piedad?, ¿compasión? Por eso monto un escándalo de mil pares de Cojones, si quieres saberlo, hablando de una especie de amor que flota alrededor de Cristo sabe dónde, pero ¿qué le ha dado? ¿Qué ha hecho cuando no ha querido volver a Grand jodidos Rapids para recibir tratamiento de la Ciencia Cristiana? Le ha encajado una de esas eternamente malditas sonrisas más-santas-que-tú y le ha dejado aquí. Le ha dejado aquí sin un centavo, para que le maten en el Bellevue o para que vuelva a intentarlo él mismo. ¡Dios es amor, por el amor de Cristo! Si Pedro hubiera sonreído como uno de la Ciencia Cristiana Jesucristo le habría incrustado los dientes en la garganta de una patada. —Se quedó un rato susurrando, y luego dijo—: Al menos los católicos tienen cierta idea de la humildad, debo admitirlo.

—Vale, Anselm, nadie…

—Vale, vale, me callo. Pero ¿es que no me entiendes?

Se levantó a medias de la mesa, mirándola con una intensidad demente, y luego, con todo el cuerpo temblándole, volvió a hundirse en su silla, y ella se volvió hacia Stanley.

—¿Cómo está tu madre? —le preguntó.

—Siempre me preguntas eso, Hannah. Gracias por preguntar.

—Pero ¿cómo está?

—Está… esperando. Sigue esperando con mucha paciencia. Van a trasladarla a otro hospital.

—Vete a pillar a mi madre esperando con paciencia —murmuró Anselm.

—Por favor, no hables irrespetuosamente de tu madre, Anselm.

—Está mochales, Stanley —dijo Anselm serenamente, alzando la vista hacia él—. No pasa nada, sólo estoy exponiendo un hecho. Está mochales. Una vieja mochales. Ahora mismo estará probablemente en las Tumbas encajando una Biblia a algún pobre desgraciado que sólo quiere que lo dejen en paz con… en paz. —Estaba sudando, mirando al suelo sucio—. Qué os importa si Él… ¿un santo, besando las llagas del leproso? —susurró a ninguno de ellos, y luego dijo—: Da igual, da igual, vosotros no… no podéis… ¿sabéis a quién envidio?

El despertador del señor Feddle osciló como un péndulo cuando estuvo a punto de caerse, se recuperó y se inclinó hacia el otro lado. El oscilante despertador golpeó el borde de su mesa.

—Ese viejo payaso —murmuró Otto—, sólo que no es gracioso.

—Pero muy triste —dijo Stanley, echándose hacia atrás mientras el despertador oscilaba en un arco peligroso por encima de la mesa, y luego bajaba. Alguien gritó «Ouuuuu» cuando golpeó en un tobillo—. Ahora está feliz porque al fin va a publicar algo. La gente lo felicita, en realidad se ríen de él todo el tiempo porque es una editorial de pago, pero él no lo sabe, no sabe que se están riendo de él. Y su mujer parece preocupada y dice: «Pero publicar es caro, ¿no?»; no sabe que se supone que uno gana dinero cuando le publican algo, cree que cualquier autor tiene que pagar para publicar algo propio. En las fiestas tenía la manía de dedicar los libros de las estanterías, escribía una dedicatoria y firmaba con el nombre del autor.

—Esa es buena —rio Otto, mirando la espalda del señor Feddle, que ahora se erguía impasible como un reloj de caja; sólo oscilaba el péndulo, porque acababa de inclinarse para estrechar una mano—. Podría servir para una comedia.

—No deberías ser cruel ahora, precisamente cuando acabas de vender tu obra, Otto.

—Pero aunque no la hubiera vendido —se volvió Otto hacia Stanley—. Aunque no la hubiera vendido…

—Envidio al doctor Hodgkin. —Anselm se estaba limpiando los dientes concienzudamente con la tapa doblada de una caja de cerillas—. Pusieron su nombre a una enfermedad.

—¿Qué clase de enfermedad?

—La enfermedad de Hodgkin, por el amor de Cristo.

—Un tipo de cáncer —dijo Max a su espalda.

—Y un cuerno cáncer. Es un tipo de leucemia. Si queréis saber lo que es, es una hiperplasia progresiva de las glándulas linfáticas asociada con anemia. Linfadenoma.

—¿Dónde has oído eso?

—Estudié Medicina —dijo Anselm, musitando como solía hacer cuando admitía algo favorable de sí mismo; e inmediatamente, azorado por haber atraído su atención, rasgó de su revista «¡ALMORRANAS! Remedio calmante asombrosamente rápido… ¡Sin manchas ni dedos pegajosos…! ¡Es Mejor, más Rápido, más Fácil de usar…!». Y debajo: «dios Te Necesita… ¿Mala salud? ¿Problemas de dinero…? Una extraordinaria Nueva Forma de Oración que está ayudando a miles a alcanzar gloriosas Alegrías y una Nueva Felicidad…»—. Toma, Stanley, elige. De todas formas todo es lo mismo —dijo, enrollando la portada sobre «¿Pueden los monstruos hacer el amor?».

—Sabéis, vuestro problema es que todos sois hijos maternos —les dijo Max. Stanley dejó de revolver su café y alzó la vista, Anselm se volvió hacia él, Hannah se había alejado—. Tú y Anselm y Charles. —Max sonreía afablemente a Stanley—. ¿Y Otto? —añadió, mirando a Otto, que dijo:

—En realidad, hace un rato estaba cenando con mi padre.

—Otto es parte de una serie de un original que nunca existió —dijo Max, como si no lo hubiera oído.

—Qué quieres decir, tú…

—Eso es lo que me dijiste tú mismo ayer, ¿o no? —lo engatusó Max:

—Pues no. —Otto se pasó la mano por los ojos—. La serie no existió, pero el original existió. El original sí. Tuvo que existir. —Se quedó un momento mirando con ojos vidriosos, y luego se volvió hacia Stanley—. Acabo de cenar con mi padre —dijo, como recordando algo muy remoto, o intentando separar una imagen lejana de otra reciente que la acababa de suplantar—. Por primera vez —añadió.

—¿Te ha caído bien? —preguntó Stanley con aire inseguro.

—Es una sensación curiosa. Ha sido extraño, una especie de… Siento como si hubiera perdido algo, como si… como si no fuera nadie, algo así… —Mirando fijamente hacia adelante, se pasó la mano por la frente, y su muñeca, al descender, se detuvo para apretarse contra sus costillas, donde ninguna identidad interrumpió su contagio consigo mismo—. No sé —musitó, lamiéndose el labio desnudo, y siguió diciendo en voz baja a Stanley—: Mira, si tienes un amigo, alguien al que llevas mucho tiempo sin ver, y… alguien ocupa su lugar, pero él sigue… no sé. Da igual.

—Estás borracho —sugirió Anselm.

—Es curioso —insistió Otto, sin alzar la vista hacia Max—. ¡Decir que el original nunca existió! Mira —siguió diciendo a Stanley—, imagínate que conoces a alguien que fue amigo tuyo en tiempos y que… y descubres que se dedica, bueno, como el señor Feddle, a firmar cosas que no son suyas, quiero decir…

—¿Sabéis a quién envidio? —les interrumpió impacientemente Anselm—. Envidio a Cristo, pusieron su nombre a una enfermedad. Jajaja, ¿eh, Stanley?

Stanley fulgió que no le había oído. Apartó la vista de su café frío y dijo a Otto:

—Pero si el señor Feddle ve un ejemplar de una obra de Ibsen, si le encanta *El pato salvaje* y le gustaría haberlo escrito, si quiere ser Ibsen sólo por un momento y dedicar su obra a alguien que ha sido amable con él, ¿es eso mentir? No es tan malo como la gente que hace un trabajo por el que no siente ningún respeto. Todo el mundo tiene esa sensación cuando mira una obra de arte y está bien, esa súbita familiaridad, una especie de… reconocimiento, como si la estuvieran creando ellos mismos, como si se estuviera creando a través de ellos mientras la miran o la escuchan, ¿y ha de ser pecado el querer haber creado belleza?

—¿Por qué no te vas a casa y lees a san Anselmo antes de ponerte a hablar de ese modo? —dijo Anselm echándose hacia adelante y abriendo los ojos, que había cerrado como si intentara dormir allí—. «Antes de ser creado, el cuadro existe en el propio arte del artífice» —dijo—. «Y una cosa así, que existe en el arte del artífice, no es más que una parte de su propio entendimiento».

—San Anselmo. Me mola —dijo la cara ojerosa asomando por encima del reservado—. ¿Qué intentas demostrar?

—Estoy demostrando la existencia de Dios, maldito seas. San Agustín dice que un hombre que va a hacer una caja la tiene primero en su arte. La caja que hace no es vida, pero la que existe en su arte es vida. «Pues el alma del artífice, en la que están todas estas cosas, vive con anterioridad a su producción».

—¿Dónde está Dios? ¿En la caja?

—Estúpido hijo de puta…

—¿Cuál es tu canción favorita, Anselm?

—*Nola.* Ahora lárgate, ¿quieres?

—Me gustaría haber escrito *El pato salvaje* —dijo Stanley.

—Estoy colocao, tío.

—¿De qué?

—De hierba. Llevamos toda la noche dándole. ¿Tenéis algo? Eh, san Anselmo, ¿tienes algo para meterse? —La cara ojerosa asomaba por encima del reservado como una entidad flotante y separada, que giró los ojos hacia Max para decir—: Se está entrenando. Para ser santo.

—He notado que no come carne, ¿es esa la razón, Anselm? —preguntó Max—. Para que tu cuerpo no se…

—¿Y a ti qué coño te importa?

—Guarda los huesos para Henry Jones… —gorgoteó la cara ojerosa.

—Anselm, predicando las sobras de la triste ruina del judaismo —empezó Max con sentenciosa soltura —, un humanismo aguado…

—Porque Henry no come carne. Eh, Anselm, tengo algo para ti.

—¿Y qué se supone que sabes tú sobre religión? —se volvió Anselm hacia Max.

—Como dice Frazer —explicó Max indulgentemente—, toda la historia de la religión es un continuo esfuerzo por reconciliar la vieja costumbre con la nueva razón, por encontrar una teoría razonable para prácticas absurdas…

—¿Y qué quiere decir san Agustín cuando habla de que el Diablo pervierte la verdad y remeda los sacramentos?

—Este sacramento acabará en el mismo sitio que todos los demás —sonrió Max—. No tardarán mucho en sacrificar Cristo a Dios como el enemigo inmortal de Dios.

—Eh, Anselm, escucha esto, papaíto nuestro, que estás colocao en los cielos, eres un tipo de lo más legal y nos molas cantidad…

—El dios muerto, comido y resucitado es el invento más viejo de la religión —siguió zalameramente Max—. Al final se lo sacrifica en forma de algún animal sagrado que es la encarnación del dios. Al final todo el mundo lo olvida, y el único sentido que pueden encontrar en el sacramento es que deben sacrificar el animal al dios porque el animal en cuestión es el enemigo crucial del dios, el responsable de la muerte del dios…

—¡Crucial…! —escupió Anselm.

—Bien liado sea tu porro, venga a nosotros tu costo… —siguió la cara ojerosa, leyendo un papel.

—¿Y qué quiere decir Justino Mártir, cuando dice que «los espíritus malignos practican la parodia»? —preguntó perentoriamente Anselm—. ¡Crucial…!

—La mandanga nuestra de cada día fíanosla hoy, y perdónanos nuestras pasadas, como nosotros perdonamos a nuestros camellos cuando nos dan el palo… —siguió la cara ojerosa, llenando el silencio tirante entre Max y Anselm—. Pues tuyo es el caballo, el *hash* y la coca…

—¡Maldito seas!, ¡dame esa puta mierda! —exclamó Anselm, girando en redondo y arrancando el papel de los dedos flojos; y la cara ojerosa se perdió de vista, para asomar otra vez con «No nos dejes caer…» y desaparecer de nuevo, mientras Anselm rompía el papel en trocitos cada vez más pequeños.

—Mira, Anselm —dijo Max, acercándose a él—, ¿por qué no eres razonable? Acabarás como Charles, con esa actitud que tienes…

—¡Como Charles! Y tú qué… ¡que sea razonable! —Anselm se levantó—. ¡Esa actitud!, esa… *Gott-trunkener Mensch,* sí, tú… ¡que sea razonable! Eso es lo que llamaron a Spinoza, tu príncipe de los racionalistas, maldito sea, ¿sabes lo que le ofrecieron a Spinoza para que se retractara? Mil florines. «Retráctate exteriormente», le dijeron, pero qué hizo él, se cambió el nombre de Baruch a Benedictus. ¡El príncipe de los racionalistas!

Max había retrocedido un paso, y luego otro, sonriendo como azorado por Anselm, mientras Anselm se acercaba.

—Y qué hicieron ellos, condenaron al tallista de lentes Spinoza. Lo excomulgaron en la oscuridad de la razón. El *Schammatha*, lo condenaron en el nombre que tiene cuarenta y dos letras, lo condenaron en nombre del Señor de los Ejércitos, y del *Tetragrammaton*, en nombre de las Esferas, y de las Ruedas, y de las Bestias Misteriosas…

Max retrocedía hacia la puerta, hacia el hombre del traje a cuadros, que dijo: «La verdad es que yo no

me atrevería a entrar ahí, están todos como cabras». «Estoy muerto de frío», dijo su compañero.

—En nombre del Príncipe Miguel y de los Ángeles Sacerdotales, de Metatrón, Achthariel Jah, los Serafines, los Ofanines… —siguió chillonamente Anselm mientras Max retrocedía saliendo a la noche—. Bajaron las trompetas, invirtieron las velas, Amén, he ahí el *Schammatha*, condenado a perderse en la oscuridad de la Razón… —Y se quedó temblando en la entrada vacía durante un minuto, indiferente a los ojos vueltos hacia él. Luego escupió en la calle y volvió a la mesa, donde Otto acababa de levantarse, preparándose para irse—. Toma, llévate esto —le dijo Anselm, tendiéndole su revista—. Tiene dentro un reportaje especial, «¿Pueden los monstruos hacer el amor?», con ilustraciones, una «foto única de Chang y Eng, los auténticos gemelos siameses, con dos de sus hijos naturales…».

Volvió a derrumbarse en su silla, y un momento después se puso a silbar entre dientes.

—¿Qué es eso?, ¿qué estás silbando?, ¿es Bach, no?

Alzó la vista hacia Stanley, y al cabo de un momento admitió:

—Sí, la cantata número setenta y ocho.

Tenía el codo apoyado en *El gemido del Tiber*.

—¿Un aria? —preguntó Stanley a su cara vacía.

—«Avanzamos con pasos débiles pero diligentes…», un dúo —dijo distraídamente Anselm, mirando con ojos fríamente exánimes cómo revolvía Stanley el café frío—. Cantado por mujeres, por voces de mujeres…

Stanley sofocó un grito, mientras levantaba la cuchara de la taza de café.

—¿Qué es esto? —susurró, mientras la cosa caía de nuevo en el café. Volvió a sacaría.

—Ja, ja, jajaja…

El despertador colgado del cuello del señor Feddle empezó a sonar.

—¿Qué es esto? Es un… —Lo sostenía en el aire, incapaz de moverse, mirándolo.

—Puedes usarlo como marcapáginas, Stanley. Para cuando leas a Malthus. Jajajajaja… mirad lo que ha encontrado Stanley en su café.

—Anselm, ¿lo has…?

—Jajajajajajajajaja.

El señor Feddle apagó el despertador con una mano, terminó su cerveza con la otra, se inclinó ante tres personas y se alejó tambaleándose de la hueca risa desesperada a su espalda hasta llegar a la puerta, donde tropezó con el hombre del traje a cuadros, que dijo: «Allí, allí va, por la otra puerta, por la puerta lateral».

La palpitación rosada persistía sobre las calles desiertas, sobre los cuerpos retorcidos de sueño, esparcidos entre las almenas erigidas en esta interminable guerra común, algunos dislocados como en el último abrazo, ensartados con lenguas, desatendidos y abandonados, miembros y extremidades extendidos hasta tropezar con el muslo de otro caído, y quedar igualmente inmóviles, o erguirse distendidos hasta penetrar de nuevo en el cálido nido y nadar en el oscuro canal, perpetrando el asalto final en el anonimato del agotamiento, con corazones vacíos de plegarias. Pero el resplandor sangriento del cielo daba fe de que la batalla no había terminado, aunque todos estuvieran muertos: brillaba como el cielo sobre la Campagna donde los hunos de Atila se batieron con los romanos en una acción tan feroz que todos murieron de hecho, de forma extrema pero inconclusa, pues sus espíritus continuaron la batalla durante tres noches y tres días sobre el campo sembrado de cadáveres insepultos.

En el bar de un hotel del centro, donde la retaguardia vivaqueaba entre cromo y cristal, cubierta de cicatrices, alerta, en sus puestos de combate (porque en la guerra no hay licénciamientos), Otto apoyó abiertamente ante sí el brazo izquierdo, arqueó una ceja, dobló hacia abajo las comisuras de los labios, ensanchó las ventanas de la nariz y pagó con un billete de veinte dólares. Derramó su copa.

—Mejor deme otro —dijo—. Irlandés.

—Ya ha tomado suficiente, amigo.

—¿Quiere ponerme otra copa?

—Ya ha tomado suficiente por esta noche. Váyase a casa a dormirla.

—¿He tomado suficiente? ¿Puedo invitarla a una copa, señora?

—Vamos, amigo, no se busque problemas. Deje en paz a la dama.

—Le estoy hablando a ella, no a usted.

—Vamos, oiga. Sea buen chico. Váyase de una puta vez.

El hombre del traje a cuadros entró por la puerta de la calle mientras Otto, con «¿Pueden los monstruos hacer el amor?» enrollado en la mano derecha, salía a grandes zancadas del bar al vestíbulo del hotel.

—¿Quieres comprar unas fotos?

—¿Fotos? —preguntó Otto, volviéndose.

—Chicas, ¿sabes?

—¿Sólo chicas?

—Sí, ¿qué pasa, eres marica?

Empezó a meter otra vez en el sobre las fotos que había mostrado a medias, marañas de miembros blancos.

—¿No te conozco? —preguntó Otto, mirando fijamente a aquel joven con el sombrero echado hacia atrás, la colilla apagada en la comisura de la boca.

—No me conoces, tío —dijo rápidamente el joven—. No me conoces. ¿Las quieres o no?

—Déjame verlas.

—¿Qué pasa, no te fías de mí? No puedo sacarlas aquí. Un pavo por el lote.

—Vale, toma. Toma —dijo Otto, tendiéndole un billete de un dólar.

En el servicio de caballeros abrió el sobre. Entró un marinero dando un portazo, y Otto se metió en una cabina. Miró la primera foto; y luego se sentó, mirándola. La puso al final y las fue pasando una a una, los dedos temblando contra su superficie satinada, mirando rápidamente cada una, confirmando la cara, incapaz de abarcar la figura entera en su percepción, captando detalles, la silla de arce desconocida en la que estaba sentada, encogida, las persianas, el papel de la pared, el dibujo del tapizado de la silla, sus uñas, las arrugas de sus nudillos, la mella irregular de su ombligo y los dos bultos turgentes que despuntaban hacia él, manchas detalladas en la extensión de su carne, que la delineaban pero no podían traerla a la vida en ninguna variedad de postura y exposición, obstáculos en los que tropezaba su mirada, pasando sobre el blanco sombreado en una silenciosa manía de búsqueda que le llevaba desvalidamente basta su cara, y le abandonaba allí, prendido de la boca que estigmatizaba su ansia, prendido de los ojos que le conocían, y que no se movían.

Consciente del silencio, se quedó mirando estas rúbricas manchadas ¡AVISO! TODOS LOS LLAMADOS TUBOS PROFILÁCTICOS... ANTIHIGIÉNICO... ¡AUTÉNTICO!, en la puerta metálica que tenía delante, dándose cuenta sólo ahora que los ruidos habían cesado de que el marinero había estado vomitando en un lavabo.

—Eh, sal de ahí, ¿quieres una buena browning?

Se quedó sentado, paralizado por el silencio, súbitamente frío y en detallado movimiento, temblando. La puerta metálica que tenía delante retembló de golpe, y el picaporte osciló.

—Eh, sal de ahí, ¿qué estás haciendo ahí dentro, meneándotela?

Se oyó el golpetazo de otra puerta.

—Vale, marinero. Sé buen chico. Vete de una puta vez.

Oyó eso; y oyó arrastrarse unos zapatos por el suelo de baldosas; y luego, prestando atención, no oyó nada.

En la calle se detuvo mientras dos hombres se le acercaban por un lado, una mujer por el otro. La mujer andaba despacio, mirándolo con un interés aparentemente despreocupado, una mirada apreciativa.

—Perdone —dijo él. Ella se detuvo—. Es usted… es usted…

—¿Tratando de pescar una chica? —le preguntó.

—Sí tal vez pero no es tan malo, no es tan crudo, no es sólo por eso, es que quizá pueda usted… que necesito…

El hombre del traje a cuadros paró en seco, detenido por la mano del señor Sinisterra. Otto dejó de tambalearse, detenido por la mano de la mujer en su muñeca.

—Acompáñeme —dijo ella.

Él empezó a retirar la mano para cogerla del brazo, y sintió su muñeca atrapada por una cadena.

—Pero ¿qué es esto? Yo… quiero decir usted…

La mujer dio un leve giro a las esposas, y repitió:

—Acompáñeme.

—Lo sabía —dijo el señor Sinisterra, parado tras un cubo de basura.

—¿Una poli?

—Da el cante de los pies a la cabeza.

—Desde luego. Tiene una delantera como una caja registradora. Estamos jodidos. Como lleve algo del papel encima estamos jodidos de verdad. ¿Qué vas a hacer?

—Cállate.

—¿Adónde vas?

—Voy a la iglesia.

—¿Para qué demonios vas a la iglesia?

—A confesarme.

—¿A confesar *esto*?, a contarles… Pero qué te pasa, esos curas tienen línea directa con los polis…

—Cállate. ¿Crees que soy imbécil? Voy a confesar un pecado.

—¿Qué pecado, por el amor de Dios?

—La soberbia —dijo el señor Sinisterra, quitándose el bigote del labio y guardándoselo en el bolsillo—. Y a encender una vela.

—¿Por quién vas a encender una vela? —dijo el hombre del traje a cuadros, retrocediendo para mirar a su compañero, mientras su cara simplona adoptaba una de las pocas expresiones de que era capaz, la de completo desconcierto.

—Por Johnny el Caballero —dijo el señor Sinisterra, alejándose—. Tenía humildad.

La música era *El aprendiz de brujo,* que se colaba en el vestíbulo como buscando un oyente, pues el bar estaba vacío.

Avanzaba como embistiendo desde un carrete oculto tras las cortinas, arrastrándose y embistiendo, como si aquellas notas que ahora llegaban al vestíbulo se hubieran podido oír momentos antes en el bar; y como si, sentado en el bar, uno hubiera podido seguir por detrás el curso singular de aquella cosa, para ver cómo se abalanzaba sobre su presa.

Entonces golpeó. El señor Pivner se agitó, se sobresaltó y despertó alarmado, para recuperar lo único que podía en aquel sillón desconocido, su periódico, que había resbalado basta el suelo mientras leía: «AUMENTAN LAS FUGAS DEL ZOO, CAZA DEL LOCO. La policía cree estar tras la pista del hombre, al parecer perturbado, que la semana pasada forzó la entrada de la Casa de los Pájaros del Zoo de Central Park en un intento por liberar a los ejemplares que se exhiben allí. Se ha descartado el robo como móvil. El lunático, descrito como un negro alto de edad incierta, fue visto por Bertha Hebble, una mujer de la limpieza, cuando pasaba…».

—Perdóneme, señor, el joven caballero al que estaba esperando no ha venido aún. Se está haciendo bastante tarde, y…

—Debo irme a casa. Debo irme a casa, pero quiero escribir una nota —dijo el señor Pivner, levantándose. Se acercó al mostrador de recepción, y la música acechó mientras escribía. Luego se puso el sombrero, que llevaba en la mano, se volvió hacia la puerta giratoria, que el recepcionista puso en movimiento, y dijo—: Buenas noches —mientras la música se elevaba en tensa imitación del silencio de una emboscada.

A mitad de la manzana vio un bastón asomando de un cubo de basura. Miró rápidamente a su alrededor, para establecer su soledad de hecho; y cuando las cuatro notas golpearon a modo de final estaba ya fuera de su alcance, avanzando lentamente, huyendo de nuevo en desafío inconsciente de algo que no entendía, afirmando con cada paso una existencia aún menos comprendida, tan abundantes eran sus detalles, tan clamorosos de valor, hasta ser atendidos, y entonces tan mudos como la propia noche.

VI

«Des gens passent. On a des yeux. On les voit».

El cielo estaba perfectamente claro. Era una claridad rara, explícita, propicia a la revelación. La gente alzaba la vista; al no encontrar nada, rescataban sus sentidos del exilio, y volvían a bajarla.

Tras los barrotes que mantenían apartados a los niños de sus jaulas, los dos osos polares se movían continuamente sin tocarse, el macho en un circuito sin fin hasta la parte delantera, donde hacía ademán de ponerse de manos, se dejaba caer y volvía hacia su compañera, que balanceaba sin cesar la cabeza de un lado a otro, cronómetro de su cautiverio, midiéndolo con aquel grueso péndulo forrado de piel. «Siempre que vengo está haciendo eso, meneando el cuello», se quejó una niña, colgada de los barrotes exteriores. Un niño preguntó: «¿Cómo se *llaman*?». La hembra se volvió hacia la gruta rocosa, exponiendo a la gente a la inmundicia de su trasero indefinido. Un joven negro se detuvo y miró. Un hombre gordo con una corbata amarilla y marrón consultó su fotómetro, y retrocedió un paso para ajustar una costosa cámara.

—Creía que me había ido a Laponia, ¿verdad?

—Mi querido amigo, no tenía la menor idea de adonde había ido —dijo Basil Valentine sin apartar la vista de la jaula de los osos. Su voz sonó tensa y un poco cansada. Llevaba un abrigo gris cruzado, levemente ajustado, completamente abrochado; un sombrero gris con el ala doblada, guantes grises y corbata a rayas negras y rojo oscuro. El oso polar se acercó mirándolo por encima, se puso de manos ante los barrotes, con el sexo oscilando a la vista entre el pelo agrupado en puntas por el agua, y se retiró, manchado de verde en torno al cuello—. Pero hoy tiene mucho mejor aspecto —añadió Valentine, como si necesitara improvisar esta observación para volverse y mirar—. ¿Dónde ha estado?

—¿Yo? En un baño turco. Dios santo, pero qué frío hace.

—Si se pusiera un abrigo para salir a la calle…

—¿Qué diferencia habría? Seguiría haciendo frío, ¿no?

—¿Sabe? —siguió Valentine, mientras salían de la galería—, cuando miro hacia sus pies me sorprende casi verlos ahí, en el suelo. Casi espero encontrar unas vueltas de pantalones agitándose al viento.

—Sí. Odio el frío.

—¿Vamos al centro a comprarle un abrigo? Verle todo encorvado, con las manos en los bolsillos…

—¿Un abrigo? No, pero escuche, pasa algo. Pasa algo. Esta mañana he ido al banco, a por dinero. He ido a sacar dinero, y me han dicho que sólo hay unos centenares de dólares. Bueno, debería haber… debería haber…

Basil Valentine frunció los labios, no como abordando aquel asunto inmediato, sino pasando de una preocupación a otra.

—Nunca ha sabido qué tipo de control tiene Brown sobre esa cuenta, ¿verdad?

—Pues no, yo… Él mete dinero, y yo lo saco.

—Y no le ha visto… últimamente. Desde que… se fue de excursión, ¿no?

—Interrumpí su asesinato… pero en fin. Acababa de escapar del mío.

—¿Qué quiere decir? —preguntó Valentine impacientemente.

—No importa. No intentaré explicarlo. Las situaciones son frágiles.

—Vamos… ¿qué ocurrió? —preguntó Valentine de forma perentoria, andando con la cabeza inclinada mientras se acercaban a unos escalones de bajada. No habló más alto de lo que lo habría hecho haciéndose una pregunta a sí mismo, y con la misma impaciencia, conociendo la pregunta pero juzgando necesario oírla en palabras, como si la respuesta, tan convincente como la pregunta, hubiera de seguirla por fuerza—. Y basta de tonterías —añadió.

—No. No bromeo. ¿Quién puede decir lo que ocurrió? Bueno, tenemos movimiento y sorpresa, movimiento y sorpresa y reconocimiento, una y otra vez, pero… ¿quién sabe lo que ocurrió? ¿Qué ocurrió cuando apuñalaron a Carnot? Bueno, el tipo se subió al coche y le hundió un cuchillo en el vientre, y nadie lo habría sabido jamás si no se hubiera detenido a gritar «Vive
l'anarchie
!». Todas nuestras situaciones son tan frágiles, ¿entiende? Si le encuentro, ¿es por sorpresa, en un portal?, ¿o por invitación a un cóctel?, ¿o por un accidente cuidadosamente arreglado de antemano? Incluso eso. No

importa, ya ve. Son extremadamente frágiles. Y todo este… todo este…

Una mano se agitó ante Basil Valentine cuando se detuvo a quitarse los guantes en lo alto de los escalones. Todo esto duraba ya varios minutos, y Valentine estaba obviamente irritado. Desde luego, conocía la absurda patochada cometida por el anarquista Caserio tras asesinar al presidente de Francia, hacía medio siglo, una imagen que le asaltó ahora con toda la vivida insistencia de esos detalles irrelevantes que atestan una memoria puesta a prueba por una calamidad tan alarmante, o tan ignominiosa, que la memoria no quiere rendirla a la conciencia hasta que está fermentada por el tiempo, cuando la enormidad del hecho puede apreciarse a distancia y, desde esa distancia, rechazarse. Basil Valentine se quitó los guantes, y se quedó parado un momento en lo alto de los escalones mirándose las manos, como recuperando lo que los guantes habían mantenido oculto, y verificando la mano izquierda doblada sobre la derecha con el brillo al sol del anillo de sello de oro. Luego, con los guantes apretados a la espalda, bajó.

—¿Vio anoche la luna?

—No puedo decir que me fijara en ella —contestó Valentine, con un aspecto bastante avejentado; aunque de perfil su cara conservaba su expresión de fuerza, incluso reforzada ahora por la severa preocupación que reflejaba su voz.

—Sí, en su último cuarto. La luna con cuernos.

Se habían acercado al estanque de las focas, en el centro, donde había una niña de unos dieciocho meses bloqueándoles el paso, mirando fijamente a Basil Valentine, que volvió a detenerse para sacar un paquete de cigarrillos de Virginia. La niña iba destocada, tenía la nariz húmeda y su pañal goteaba sin parar.

—Vamos, vamos… —exclamó Valentine, alzando la vista—. Yo que usted no lo tocaría.

Le ofreció un cigarrillo para desviar su atención.

—¡Tocarla! ¡Pero si es preciosa! ¿Y la rosa…?

—Nunca se sabe lo que pueden tener en el pelo, y no quiero ni pensar de dónde habrá sacado esa flor. Está estropeada, deje que se la coma y sigamos adelante.

Valentine se volvió sin dirigir una mirada a la figura goteante, torcida para observar su retirada, mascando pétalos de rosa. Su esfuerzo por mostrarse agradable estaba siendo minado por aquellos arranques, y ahora oyó a su lado:

—¿Ha leído a los hermanos Grimm?, ¿el *Froschkönig?* No, da igual. Escuche, ¿esos fragmentos?, ¿los tiene?, ¿todavía los tiene bien guardados?

Se detuvo a encender sus cigarrillos.

—No le he perdonado por largarse con esa pitillera, ¿sabe? ¿Dónde está?

—No le he preguntado… ¿eso?, ¿eso? Bueno, probablemente estará en Etiopía a estas alturas. Las tres Indias. ¿Y el toro? Bueno, maldita sea, le he traído a cambio un huevo de grifo, un producto mucho más escaso. Lo encontré en un santuario apartado en…

—Todavía no me ha dicho dónde ha estado. —Encorvado sobre su cigarrillo, Basil Valentine miró a través del humo sin quitárselo de los labios; y se quedaron inmóviles como plantas, Valentine en curva epinástica mientras la expresión de su cara se desdoblaba en inmediatez, y le hacía inclinarse sobre la fronda de las superficies inferiores que tenía delante—. De modo que aún confía en denunciar esas falsificaciones, ¿no? —dijo con calma. El tallo que tenía delante estaba arrancado.

—¡Por eso he vuelto! Yo…

—¿Vuelto? —Valentine se enderezó—. Se fue a casa, ¿verdad? —dijo, y pareció percibir la confusión que provocó este comentario en la cara abatida que tenía al lado mientras seguían andando: era en momentos como aquel, absorto en una satisfacción, subrepticiamente abismado en una mirada fija con el rabillo del ojo bajo párpados entornados, en los que Basil Valentine añadía diez o incluso el doble de años a la cara que mostraba a los demás. Aun así, su silencio no provocó nada mientras caminaban hacia la casa del león, ninguna respuesta, salvo una cadencia desigual en los pasos que flanqueaban los suyos, y finalmente preguntó—: ¿Y ese corte que tiene en la mejilla? ¿Qué es?

—Me caí en la nieve, matando reyezuelos. Allí. Pero este…

—En cualquier caso, habrá abandonado ya esa ebria vocación por el sacerdocio… ¿Eh? Dígame, ¿qué ocurrió?

—¡Qué ocurrió! ¿Qué le ocurrió a Huss? John Huss, falazmente atraído con un salvoconducto a Constanza, donde tres obispos presidieron su juicio, y lo quemaron…

—Quienquiera que sugiera que el Anticristo se encuentra en Roma, mi querido amigo —le interrumpió Valentine pacientemente—, y niegue a Pedro como cabeza de la Iglesia…

—Lo quemaron y arrojaron sus cenizas al Rin, intentando pescar hombres, *o sancta simplicitas…!* Sí, he ido a ver al buen anciano rey Wenceslao, allí, y… ¡mi santa madre!, las voces de las mujeres… ¿se acuerda

del Boyg? Bueno, casi me arrastraron al sacerdocio.

—¿Y no fue a eso a lo que fue?

—¡Y qué si fue a eso!, ¡si fue a eso! ¿Mi santa madre…? Es como si me hubiera ido antes de que me pusiera nombre. ¿Recuerda la historia que cuenta el poeta?: «Le impongo este destino: que nunca tendrá un nombre hasta que lo reciba de mí…». Da igual. Las voces de las mujeres, e incluso ésa, me fui con su beso en la mejilla, ¿ve la cicatriz…? Me marché dejando allí a esa virgen prudente sin un mero *talitha cumi*…

—¿Y ahora? —La mirada de soslayo de los ojos de Valentine expresaba la misma apreciación absorta de unos pasos antes—. La última vez que hablamos…

—Sí, hablamos de Shabbetai Zebi, ¿no? Es una forma de llegar a conocerse, discutir las flaquezas de amigos mutuos. ¿Un mesías? En Esmirna cae del cielo una carta de Dios para confirmarle. Lo han azotado y encarcelado. Niega que sea el mesías, mientras fuera los judíos se rompen el cuello por liberarle, ayunando, arrojándose desnudos a ríos, ¿recuerda? Dicen que nunca ha yacido con mujer, aunque Dios sabe que lleva años casado. Ante el sultán vuelve a negarlo, le dan a elegir entre muerte o Islam. ¡Maldición! Sirio, la Estrella Perro, la brillante estrella del Yemen, Al-Shira… ¿cómo era?, un sol de suyo donde sale con el color del rubí, luego zafiro, esmeralda, amatista, y luego el diamante más brillante… maldita sea, escuche. En esa inmaculada casa suya, usted… sí, inmaculada, una cosa como esa debe llamar la atención. Debe llamar la atención inmediatamente, un paquete como ese envuelto en viejo papel de periódico.

—¿Sigue aún empeñado en ese… suicidio? —preguntó Valentine dando una calada a su cigarrillo, bajando la mano para quitárselo de los labios. Se le quedó pegado a los labios, y la brasa le quemó los dedos cuando la rozaron. El cigarrillo cayó al suelo, el labio inferior le tembló en aquel instante en que se le escapó, la mano derecha se levantó cerrada, y la izquierda, a su espalda, dejó caer un guante—. Pero venga aquí —le espetó—, haga el favor de caminar a mi lado, donde pueda hablarle, en vez de…

—¡Suicidio!

Al acercarse a los escalones de la casa del león pasaron junto a una mujer gorda sentada en un banco con dos libros en el regazo, uno llamativo pero cerrado, *Un día con el papa,* y el otro abierto, *Lecciones elementales de italiano.* Con una mano en la que llevaba dos perlas diminutas montadas en una fina línea de oro casi hundida en la carne, pasaba una uña pintada por la página y luego se enjugaba la nariz, doblando en dos cada vez el pañuelo de papel basta reducirlo a una apretada bolita húmeda, formando tras él con los labios las palabras *mipiace,* «mee piachay, mee piachay…».

Tres niñitas acababan de rendirse a los clamorosos deseos de la más pequeña, y compraron un globo.

—Se ha dicho, por supuesto, que la idea del suicidio ha ayudado a más de un hombre a pasar una mala noche. Nietzsche, creo…

—¿Suicidio?, ¿esto? Entonces, ¿cree usted que sólo es uno?, ¿que esto no es un homicidio?, ¿algo más cercano al homicidio?, eso, escuche…

Cuando se acercaban a la puerta, al quedarse mirando la cara ansiosa vuelta hacia él, las arrugas que surcaban y rodeaban los párpados de Basil Valentine se hicieron visibles; y al dar paso el perfil a la sonriente duplicidad de la cara de frente, la fuerza pareció escurrírsele por la estrecha barbilla.

—Puede que no sea tan sencillo, ¿sabe? Ese presunto homicidio suyo —dijo—. ¿Ese desembarazarse del hombre viejo?

Un niño parado ante la puerta señaló la espiral notablemente simétrica de un perro ovillado en la acera. «¡Mira ese perrito!», dijo el niño con intensa admiración.

—Quita de en medio —le espetó Valentine, apartándolo con un pie firme y estrecho—. ¿Entramos? —preguntó, sonriendo aún, mientras retrocedía un paso para mantener la puerta abierta.

El lugar estaba lleno de ruido procedente del fondo, gemidos que se quebraban en un grito sofocado, que recaían en un sollozo jadeante, que se repetían una y otra vez, interrumpidos por silbidos y bufidos. Los animales se movían por sus jaulas siguiendo las pautas desasosegadas de sus vidas, volviendo la cabeza hacia ellos cuando pasaban, cruzando por la parte delantera de la jaula, girando hacia la trasera, surgiendo de nuevo; y los tigres se acercaban en su avance a los barrotes como si fueran a atravesarlos limpiamente. Algunos animales no se movían. Una pantera negra, enjaulada al fondo de la nave, permanecía alerta e inmóvil, salvo por la cola negra cuya punta oscilante rozaba casi el suelo. Otros leopardos esperaban tumbados, y observaban; había uno albino de ojos rosados. El león yacía inmóvil, arquetipo de la calma de la vigilancia permanente, con las patas delanteras extendidas. La barahúnda no cejaba, dejando sólo a dos monos, enjaulados hacia el centro de uno de los lados, genéricamente indiferentes.

—Y no odia a Brown, ¿verdad? —preguntó bruscamente Basil Valentine—. Por lo que le ha hecho.

—¿Brown?, ¿odiarlo?, ¿por lo que me ha hecho?

—Tengo que pedirle un favor —siguió Valentine, como si considerase contestada su pregunta.

—¿Ese Patinir? Me acuerdo. Usted cree que no, pero me acuerdo.

—No. Otra cosa —empezó Valentine, con un tono descarado y al mismo tiempo despreocupado—. La *Stabat Mater*. ¿Qué piensa hacer…?

—¿Con ella…? Enterrarla y casarme con ella, al fin y al cabo es…

—No, no. Ese cuadro, el último en el que estaba trabajando.

—¿Por qué?

—Bueno, si ha acabado con todo esto, como dice, he… pensado que me gustaría tenerlo. ¿Qué pasa?

—¿Usted? Sí, se lo dije, ¡qué frágiles son las situaciones! Cada momento rehaciendo el pasado. ¿Usted?, ¿lo quiere usted?

—Si me lo diera, como un… a un amigo, ¿un favor a un viejo amigo?

Valentine extendió una mano hacia su hombro, pero él se apartó.

—Todo lo de allá abajo está destruido. Lo quemé todo. Puse todo en la chimenea y le prendí fuego.

—Pero no eso, ¿verdad? ¿No ese cuadro?

—¿Por qué no? —preguntó, volviéndose.

—Si estaba llegando a ser, como dice… ¿no un Van Eyck, sino lo que usted quiere?

—¿Lo que yo quiero? —susurró, y se estremeció. Al fondo se elevaron gemidos sobre los ecos rotos de voces humanas.

—La cara —dijo Valentine—. El… reproche en esa cara, me pareció muy hermoso.

Entonces Valentine sintió su muñeca fuertemente apretada.

—¡Sí, el reproche! Eso es, ¿entiende?

Estaban hacia la mitad de las hileras de jaulas.

—Eh, mira cómo lo hace *ése* —dijo un niño ante la jaula de los monos.

—Eso es una hembra… y mira cómo se lo come, se inclina y se lo *come*.

Arreciaron los rugidos. Los dos pumas, como resultaron ser, estaban en la última jaula de la derecha. Junto a ellos, separada por una mampara metálica, una leona blanca africana pasó rozando los barrotes de su jaula, se alejó con paso majestuoso hacia el fondo y volvió rodeando el tronco de un árbol que había en el centro, todo arañado por sus garras y sus dientes. Su cola oscilaba de un lado a otro, y se retorció para enseñar los dientes y lanzarle un zarpazo, sin detenerse cuando se alzaron rugidos en la jaula contigua. «Ea ea ea, muy bien bonita, sí, vamos, ¿te lo vas a comer entero hoy?, ¿te vas a comer el rabo entero? Sí… ea ea ea…», decía una mujer ante la jaula, con nariz aguileña y demasiado maquillaje, tendiendo hacia la leona una mano descarnada en la que llevaba una sortija con una piedra miserable.

—Escuche. ¿Entiende por qué es importante ahora?

Tan sobresaltado por la sonrisa fija en él como por la mano que le aferraba firmemente la muñeca, Valentine había empezado a apartarse. En el mismo instante en que su brazo se puso tenso la arriesgada mano lo soltó, pero la sonrisa persistió; y Valentine preguntó:

—¿Por qué es importante qué?

—Sí, aclarar todo esto, estos… esos fragmentos, si no quieren creerme. ¿Si también lo ha visto, en esa cara? Los ojos desviados, los ojos que no te miran, pero el perdón, la… ¿gracia? Sí, pero aun así, el reproche. ¿Si también lo ha visto, ese reproche? Entonces, entiende, ¿verdad? ¿Cómo me he sentido desde ese sueño? Los Siete Pecados, cuando van a confesarse, ¿y a recibir la absolución? El segundo sueño, no recuerdo el primero, pero el segundo, se despierta pero vuelve a quedarse dormido mientras reza sus plegarias, y aparece la Razón predicando, ¿un «prado lleno de gente»? Y uno a uno, *Superbia, Invidia*…

—¡Maldita sea…!

—¿Qué?

—Se me ha caído un guante en algún sitio —dijo Valentine en un tono que traspasó el rugido del puma. Ante él avanzaba la leona con la cabeza baja y ladeada, esperando a que apareciese en su campo de visión. Entonces se encontraron sus ojos, y sin apartarlos de ella, como ella los apartó de él al pasar ante los barrotes, añadió—: Vamos, ¿qué es todo eso…?

—Se lo contaré, escuche. Cuando estuve fuera me soñaron, quiero decir que soñé, tuve dos sueños, creo, pero el primero, no recuerdo el primero. Pero el otro, ¿sentado en una silla, todo derecho? Y allí estaba ella, me tocó. Tenía los labios azules, como añil, y… Entonces no lo comprendí, pero ahora, entiende, sí, ese reproche, si usted también lo ha visto. Entiende que no puedo acercarme a ella sin más, así, después de lo que he hecho, de lo que le he hecho. Que no puedo acercarme a ella y ofrecerle esto… lo que queda.

—¿Qué es todo eso, ese sueño…? —le interrumpió Valentine, sin volverse ni elevar la voz, y sin desviar la atención, que parecía avivarse y menguar a medida que la forma de la leona avanzaba hacia los barrotes y se alejaba—. ¿Esa mujer, la cara aquella del boceto…?

—Sí, y usted entiende por qué es crucial. Bueno, cuando hayamos arreglado todo esto y podamos marcharnos…

—¡Marcharnos! —Valentine retrocedió un paso, y sin mirar alrededor, su mano agarró la muñeca que se levantaba ante él—. Dígame, ¿de qué está hablando?

—Ella…

—¿Ella? Esa… *Stabat Mater*… dolorosa, la que está siempre encima de usted, ¿no?, ¿no es así? Sí, me lo ha contado, ¿esa bendita Reina del Cielo…? —Valentine alzó rápidamente la vista mientras la leona se alejaba. Los siseos de la jaula contigua se convirtieron en roncos rugidos—. Sí, su madre, ¿no? ¿Su… «santa madre»?

—¿Mi madre?

Se retorció bajo la mano de Valentine, que más que apretarlo estaba rígidamente cerrada sobre su muñeca. Más allá del hombro de Valentine, al otro lado de la nave, la rígida pauta de los barrotes se vio alterada por un pelo rubio oscuro y unos ojos oscuros, la brusca delicadeza consciente de una mujer de belleza intacta, que apartó la vista de la jaula del leopardo para buscar al niño que iba con ella. Llevaba un abrigo de pieles sobre el brazo de un traje sastre, y sus caros zapatos de calle daban un aire decidido a los pasos de su esbelta figura, engañosamente frágil, de pecho lleno y tan bien entallada que su modestia era tal sólo porque podía permitirse la sencillez, volviéndose ahora para captar por un instante los ojos de aquella cara turbada, vuelta hacia ella sin razón alguna. Él musitó algo, o se aclaró la garganta constreñida, ¿qué fue?, y ella siguió andando rápidamente.

—Su… ¿bendita Reina del Cielo? —Basil Valentine parecía forzar la atención hacia sus palabras mientras miraba con fijeza a la jaula, donde la leona avanzaba de nuevo con la cabeza baja, girando, para mirar hacia arriba; al llegar a los barrotes se paró con las patas delanteras cruzadas, la izquierda sobre la derecha, y luego saltó a un lado sin esfuerzo, y desapareció—. Esa mujer, las «voces de las mujeres», ¿y si vi la luna anoche?, esa… cielo santo, como Lucio en *El asno de oro,* ¿eh? —siguió titubeando Valentine, reacio a detenerse y dejar que le contradijeran, posponiendo la negación con cualquier recuerdo que le viniera atropelladamente en mente, arrojando a borbotones formas y fragmentos rotos, formas y olores—. Y usted, supongo que bajó y sumergió la cabeza siete veces en el mar, ¿no? Sí… «Poco a poco me pareció ver la entera figura de su cuerpo, brillante, surgiendo del mar, erguida ante mí…». Uno recuerda sus «odoríferos pies», pero… sí, ¿entonces no es eso? ¿No es su madre en modo alguno, ese reproche y todo lo demás…? —Reacio a detenerse hasta que le arrebataron su presa, reacio a soltar la muñeca hasta que se desasió de su mano, reacio a escuchar, hasta que la risa cortó de un tajo su abrazo.

—¿Mi madre?, pero si ella… Dios santo, ¿ella en el cuadro?

—Sí, usted me lo dijo, ya sabe…

Un niño con los restos, o quizá los rudimentos, de un uniforme de *boy scout* se había colado entre Valentine y los barrotes, y alargaba la mano por encima de la barandilla. «Dametucola, Zimba», dijo. La mujer de nariz aguileña repitió: «Sí, ea, ea, ea…». La leona se acercó, mirando por encima de ellos.

—Es alguna chica que ha conocido, ¿no? Y toda esa palabrería sobre aclarar las cosas no es más que una idea que ella…

—No. No es eso, todo eso sigue siendo ello mismo, es sólo parte de ello mismo.

—La verdad…

—¿Me oye?

—La verdad, dígame, ¿quién es esa… Solveig suya?, ¿esa Senta? La chica que ha estado utilizando de modelo, supongo, ¿no dijo Brown que le enviaría a alguien?

—Escuche…

—¿Y cómo es que no la vi la noche que me pasé por su estudio?

—Pero si ella no… nunca hemos siquiera…

—Dametucola, Zimba —dijo el niño entre ellos y la jaula.

—O todo no es más que una fantasía suya, ¿eh?

—Sí, lo estoy resolviendo, y todo encaja, todo encaja hasta ahora, todo. ¿Y ese sueño? Ya le he hablado de eso. Bueno, ¿usted ha soñado?, y luego, ¿se los ha encontrado, a aquellos con los que soñó? ¡Qué ventaja! Sabes cosas que ellos no saben, cosas de ellos que no saben que sabes, cosas que han hecho, que nunca sospecharían que sabes. Bueno, pueden seguir hablando como si no hubiera pasado nada. Sí, como los santos, ¿Rosa de Lima?, ¡y qué inocencia entretejió en su pasado su confesor jesuita! ¿Qué defensa tienen frente a nuestras fantasías? Y al volverla a encontrar, ¿puede imaginarse lo que ha compartido?, ¿donde han gozado de ella, en privado? ¿Puede imaginar las posturas y placeres que ha compartido? Y tú lo sabes durante todo el tiempo. ¡Qué ventaja tienes sobre la gente con la que has soñado!

—Dametucola dametucola dametucola…

—Así que ¿entiende lo importante que es esto? Lo crucial…

Basil Valentine se volvió y se rio en su cara.

—La verdad, la verdad, mi querido amigo. No —dijo, apretando ante sí el guante gris sin pareja—. La «luz sombría» al final del segundo acto, ¿no?, el dúo con Senta, ¿es eso…? «La luz sombría niego, es salvación lo que ansío», ¡eh!, «Quizá acuda un ángel luego, a salvar mi espíritu impío», canta su Holandés Errante, ¿eh? ¡Cielo santo! Y allá suben al cielo en una ola, o lo que quiera que sea. ¡La verdad! Y todas esas tonterías que tenía en la cabeza la última vez que le vi, ese «I min Tro…» y todo lo demás, ese «¿Dónde habrá estado durante todo este tiempo?», y su Solveig contesta «¿En mi fe? ¿En mi esperanza? En mi…», ¡cielo santo! ¡Es usted un romántico, qué duda cabe! Si cree de verdad que todo esto lo dice en serio. ¿Y luego qué? ¿Vivieron felices por siempre jamás?

—Pero escuche, escuche, ella…

—No, no, es demasiado fácil. Después de todo, ya sabe. —Sin que lo interrumpieran, Valentine hizo un pausa, mirando hacia la jaula de la leona. La leona había llegado al centro de la jaula, observándolo. Rodeó el tronco del árbol, entorno al cual se ciñó tras ella su cola. Se detuvo y bufó hacia la cola. Se volvió y le lanzó un mordisco. Luego bufó y volvió a mirarle de frente. Él no habló hasta sentir la amenaza de la voz a su lado, y entonces siguió burlonamente—: ¡Y santa Rosa de Lima! Vaya, ¿y de repente ese intento de arreglar el mundo entero denunciando ante él sus propias falsificaciones? ¿Y luego? ¿Felicidad por siempre jamás? Luego alcanzará la redención, y la redimirá a ella, y… ¡Dios sabe qué! ¿Y luego qué? Primero fue Shabbetai Zebi, ¿y ahora el Holandés Errante? Escúcheme —siguió, bajando la voz—, esa inocencia perdida que está tan frenético por recuperar se remonta a edades mucho más remotas, ¿sabe? Y esa idea de que puede arreglarlo todo de una vez es… es pueril. Sé lo que es depender de Brown, desde luego que lo sé, sé que no puede seguir así. Pero usted y yo, mi querido amigo…

Los rugidos discordantes de la jaula contigua habían cesado, dando paso a jadeos y gruñidos.

—¡Qué! ¡Usted y yo qué!

—Escúcheme —dijo Basil Valentine, cerrando de pronto la mano sobre la muñeca que había recobrado, sin apartar los ojos de los de la leona—. ¿Recuerda cuando le dije que los dioses sólo tienen un secreto que revelar?

Ninguno de los dos miraba al otro. Por encima del hombro de Valentine, la mujer rubia alcanzó al niño que había corrido hacia ella. Ahora estaba inclinada, escuchando, con la falda tirante, la chaqueta llena con el peso de sus pechos, la cara encendida con atención. «¿Estaban peleando de verdad?», preguntó, inclinada aún sobre el niño, viéndose arrastrada hacia la jaula siguiente donde estaban los pumas, con ese tono en la voz que los niños aceptan como temor reverencial, encantados de turbar la inocencia de quienes les inspiran ese temor.

—Ese secreto, ¿recuerda? —dijo Basil Valentine, sujetándole aún con fuerza y mirando aún hacia la jaula de la leona—. ¿Lo que Wotan enseñó a su hijo?, ¿el único secreto que merece la pena tener?

—Pero ¿cómo peleaban?

—El poder de pasarse sin la felicidad —dijo Basil Valentine.

—*¿Ves?* —dijo el niño.

Ella vio. Atrajo el niño hacia sí, y miró rápidamente a las otras caras que había ante la jaula de los pumas. Todos eran hombres. Todos ellos descubrieron al instante su cara vuelta hacia arriba, percibieron sus ojos oscuros, uno con una sonrisa, otro con una mueca de reconocimiento íntimo, hasta que buscando la huida se encontró mirando unos ojos que le resultaron familiares de un minuto antes, ojos no atraídos hacia ella por aquel instante de nivelación, sino clavados aún en ella, ojos que no respondían en absoluto. De modo que siguió mirándolo fijamente, allí donde estaba sujeto por la mano de Valentine, hallando por momentos refugio donde poder recobrar todo lo asaltado de forma tan brusca, en ojos que no compartían nada, no reconocían nada, no la acusaban de nada: pero esos momentos pasaron y, recuperándose, buscó a tientas la buida. Pero aquella falta de respuesta la retuvo, aquella ausencia de reconocimiento que no ofrecía más refugio que los ojos abiertos de un cadáver, aquella negación que no era asilo para la vergüenza sino la trampa desde donde proclamaba el derecho a su viva identidad. Agarró al niño por el hombro, como quien prueba un asidero en la pared para salir de una sima, y se volvió a mirar hacia la jaula de los pumas, enrojeciendo enteramente por la cara y el cuello y, aunque nadie más que ella lo supo, hasta la misma línea donde nacían sus pechos.

El sol estaba visible, blanco, en un cielo que no mostraba ninguna premonición más que en su efímera vecindad. La mujer gorda lo había seguido, trasladándose de su frío asiento junto a las focas a otro orientado al sol, aunque su vista no llegaba tan arriba, no rebasaba el nivel de las cinturas que pasaban,

formando palabras tras la bolita empapada, o de las caras de los niños. «Frerra jacka, frerra jacka, dormay-voo?», cantó una. «¿Qué es eso?», preguntó la más pequeña. «Soney malatina, soney malatina…». «¿Qué quiere decir eso?», preguntó la más pequeña, y el hilo del globo se le soltó del dedo. «No quiere decir nada estúpida es francés, y mira ya has perdido el globo».

Qué viejo habría parecido Valentine a alguien que hubiera compartido con él las crueles familiaridades de la juventud. ¿O hay momentos de intimidad de los que sólo son capaces los extraños?, que aquellos a los que uno conoce y sufre desde hace años no podrían concebir nunca, ocupados como están en buscar su propio reflejo en el desgaste de la familiaridad. Así, la mujer gorda que ahora articulaba «grot-zy,
grot-sy
» tras su bolita empapada alzó la vista hacia él como si en aquel instante pudiera conocer la historia de cada una de las arrugas que rodeaban sus ojos y solo le faltara tiempo para situarlas, situarlas en cualquier parte, incluso en los suyos, o situarlas en la presciencia, no en la magia, no en el arte, sino sólo en la historia antes de que ocurriera: no en la edad como mera realización, sino en la actuación, viviendo hasta el fin lo que hubiera que vivir, la edad conociéndose a sí misma, ganándose a sí misma en aquel instante efímero. Hasta que lo único que habría podido decir, si la hubieran interrumpido un momento después, ¿sorprendida?, ¿indignada?, mientras formaba «grott-sy» con los labios, probablemente lo único que hubiera podido contestar habría sido «Qué aspecto más viejo tenía justo entonces, cuando al salir de la casa de los felinos tiró aquel guante gris a la papelera».

—¿Y ahora qué? ¿El sol? ¿Un sacerdote de Mitra, era eso? Vamos, mi querido amigo, le diré por qué fracasó el mitraísmo, el mayor rival que tuvo el cristianismo. Fracasó porque le faltaba autoridad central. Se extendió por todo el campo con las legiones romanas, pero el cristianismo era una religión de ciudad, y el poder reside en las ciudades, recuerde eso. ¿Y qué fue lo que dijo usted? ¿Que la condenación de un hombre es maldito asunto suyo? Eso no es verdad, ¿sabe? No es verdad. Vaya, cielo santo, ¿y ese suicidio suyo? Vaya, ¿como Crisipo entonces?, ¿alimentando a un asno con higos y vino, y muriéndose de risa? ¡Mire!, mire allí, en el cielo, donde todavía está azul, ¿ve esa línea? Esa línea blanca que ha trazado el avión, ¿la ve?, ¿ve cómo la ha ondulado el viento como una cuerda en una corriente de agua? Sí, su hombre en el mar celestial, ¿eh?, bajando para soltarla, hasta el fondo, y luego le encuentran muerto, como si se hubiera ahogado. Vaya, esa… atmósfera pelagiana suya, ya sabe. ¿Homicidio, era eso? ¿Qué fue lo que dijo Pascal? Hay tanta diferencia entre nosotros y nosotros mismos como entre nosotros mismos y los demás, ¿no…? No, eso es de Montaigne, ¿verdad?

Se inclinó un poco, subiendo los escalones que llevaban a la calle.

Las tres niñas se pararon en la esquina a mirar a un ciervo colgado de los cuartos traseros, y una de ellas comentó: «¡Mirad dónde le han pegado la flor de papel!».

Al fondo de la manzana se acercaban dos mujeres. «Y la verdad es que no he vuelto a ser la misma desde el Morro Castle…»,[8] dijo la mujer alta, y se echó a reir. «Y me gustaría, pero no puedo, esa horrible fiesta de esta noche, mi marido tiene que ir, es su editor, y yo soy su mujer. Este año volveremos a perdernos el Festival del Narciso en Hawái, le dije que organizaremos uno en privado…».

Basil Valentine llevaba las manos hundidas en los bolsillos del abrigo. «¿Y ahora?, ¿un baño turco?», murmuró. «Bueno, no se preocupe por esos fragmentos, estaré allí esta noche, en casa de Brown». Y se quedó mirando hacia arriba, como observando algo arrastrado por el viento.

Más adelante, las tres ruñas se acercaron a una figura despatarrada sobre la acera, alrededor de la cual giraba un niñito montado en un triciclo. «¿Qué es eso?», preguntó la más pequeña. «Un hombre, ¿qué va a ser?». «Parece un Sanny Claus. Eso que lleva parece un traje de Sanny Claus, ¿no?». «¿Cómo va a ser un Sanny Claus? No lleva barba blanca». «Pero le está saliendo barba».

La mirada de Valentine no era tan fija: la elevaba cada dos o tres pasos con esa especie de muda sorpresa con que la eleva un hombre que, acostumbrado a ver un espejo al entrar en una habitación, encuentra la pared vacía. «¿En Filipos?», murmuró. «Sí… Bueno, entonces te veré en Filipos». Como el cielo, sus ojos no se habían nublado aún, sino (quizá fuera el cielo tras él el causante) simplemente oscurecido de modo uniforme, adquiriendo una dura solidez y la textura duradera del gris, como hacía el propio cielo, como hubiera podido ver alguien alzando la vista hacia ambos.

La mujer alta hizo torcer a su amiga ante un portal, ante la figura de barba incipiente despatarrada en la acera ante su casa, «Debajo mismo de la ventana del comedor, de hecho, ahí mismo», según observó, «delante de Dios y de todo el mundo». Estuvo a punto de tropezar con el niño del triciclo, pero se agarró a la barandilla y bajó los escalones diciendo: «Mi marido dice que es a esta hora cuando hay que tener cuidado, a la hora de la comida, es cuando se tiran casi todos, cuando la calle está llena de gente, lo hacen a esta hora por la publicidad».

Por encima de ella se oscurecía el cielo. No lo miró, sino que entró con los ojos fijos en su mano posada a elegante distancia en las pieles de su amiga; mientras fuera, a su espalda, el triciclo trazaba círculos cada vez más pequeños, en tanto que su jinete observaba por encima del hombro izquierdo lo cerca que podía pasar la rueda trasera de los dedos en la acera.

A última hora de la tarde empezó a nevar.

Los copos eran pequeños, y no soplaban hacia uno u otro lado, ni cayendo directamente a tierra, sino llenando el aire con un movimiento continuo.

Mickey Mouse señalaba las cuatro menos diez.

Lo primero que vio al entrar en su piso fue el resplandor artificial de la lámpara solar. Agnes Deigh se quedó parada, sosteniendo aún las llaves, como para apreciar plenamente la desgracia que tenía ante sí, peor a cada segundo mientras vacilaba, considerando lo que habría podido ocurrir si no hubiera llegado; quizá incluso que todavía tenía tiempo para marcharse, tan calladamente como había entrado, de vuelta a la intemperie en transfiguración: pero antes de que pudiera abarcar esta posibilidad durante el tiempo suficiente para examinarla, y encontrar en ella una de esas sacudidas mortales con las que la vida nos ofrece rara vez la oportunidad de abandonar los vínculos de las circunstancias urdidos con tanto esmero, y echar a andar por cualquiera de las mil rutas alternativas entre las cuales, como la aguja en el pajar, se encuentra la real. La costumbre nos traiciona, como traicionó a Agnes Deigh. Puso una mano en el hombro del sueco, e hizo un ruido.

—Ouuuayy… qué… qué…

—¿Cuánto tiempo llevas dormido bajo esta cosa?

—¿Qué *hora* es?

—Casi las cuatro —dijo ella, y apagó por fin la lámpara solar.

—Oh, Dios mío, Dios mío, llevó aquí desde… ouuuuu… ¿qué voy a *hacer*…? —gimió el sueco.

—Hay un poco de mantequilla. Te traeré un poco de mantequilla.

Y eso fue lo que hizo.

—Me voy a *morir*… —lo oyó decir un minuto después desde el cuarto de baño, mientras se la aplicaba —. ¿Cómo ha podido *ocurrir?* ¡Pero *mírame*…!

En vez de eso apartó la vista y dijo: «Me gustaría que te…». Pero había apartado la vista a tiempo, y dejó de hablar, mordiéndose el labio, con los ojos fijos a la misma altura (mirando una lámpara de mesa) como si no pudiera levantarlos.

—Cariño. ¡Ca-riño! Ouuuuuuuuu.

—Me gustaría que te pusieras algo encima —dijo, recuperada, levantando la vista, y volvió a morderse el labio, pues había estado a punto de ocurrir de nuevo: había estado a punto de decir lo que no sabía que quería decir, en vez de lo que quería decir; igual que aquel día en la oficina, cuando había pretendido decir: «¿Eres católica…?», y de repente se había oído a sí misma preguntar perentoriamente: «¿Crees en Dios?».

El sueco había vuelto a entrar en el cuarto de baño. Agnes Deigh se sentó, y abrió la única carta que la esperaba. Leyó:

> Estimada señora… El caso que usted denunció como sadismo y brutalidad, comunicado por usted a esta comisaría el martes 20 de diciembre a las 10.17 a. m., causó una detención injustificada de la que se le puede hacer a usted responsable. El doctor Weisgall, a quien usted acusó, estaba castigando a su hija, en cuyo caso, a menos que se produzca alguna lesión, ninguna tercera parte está obligada a intervenir. Este caso está clasificado como cerrado en nuestros archivos, pero creemos nuestro deber aconsejarle que si en el futuro acusa a alguien de un acto criminal investigue los hechos a fondo antes de denunciarlo a la Policía. Creemos también nuestro deber advertirle de que el doctor Weisgall tiene derecho a ponerse en contacto con usted como causante de su injusta detención, y que cualquier acción futura tendrá lugar entre usted y la parte agraviada…

—Cariño, ¿quién te ha mandado
ro-sas
?

El sueco había aparecido vestido. Agnes levantó la vista. Hizo un ruido, estuvo a punto de decírselo, y se mordió el labio sobre aquella dura sílaba erecta. Entonces sonó el teléfono.

—¿Qué? —dijo tras cogerlo, estremecida—. Diga.

(—Hola, ¿la señora Deigh?).

—Sí, ¿qué pasa?, ¿quién es?

(—Lo siento, soy Stanley y creo que el otro día me dejé las gafas en su casa, y cuándo podría… cómo…).

—Odio tener que largarme de este modo, cariño, pero te llamaré, probablemente desde el hospital, pero no puedo ir al hospital en Nochebuena…

—Stanley, Stanley, yo… me alegro tanto de que hayas llamado. Sí, las encontré. Encontré tus gafas, Stanley. Pero no voy a estar en casa ahora, me voy a una fiesta dentro de un rato. Pero ¿no podrías ir allí? ¿No podrías reunirte conmigo allí?

(—Pero me está empezando a doler una muela, pero sí, vale, puedo ir un rato, pero tengo que acercarme a ese nuevo hospital adonde han trasladado a mi madre…).

—Sí, toma, toma la dirección…

Se la leyó; y después de colgar el teléfono y sentarse, mirando fijamente la carta que acababa de recibir, tardó casi un minuto en alzar la vista y darse cuenta de que estaba sola.

Inmediatamente cogió papel y pluma y empezó a escribir. «Estimado doctor Weisgall. No sé cómo empezar a decirle lo mucho que lamento mi reciente error. ¿Cómo podría explicárselo de modo que me perdonara? La vida de una mujer no es…». Se detuvo y lo leyó; como se detendría y leería una y otra vez lo que había escrito, hasta que la carta que colmó la papelera empezaba: «Estimado doctor Weisgall. Quizá debamos llegar a una edad avanzada para darnos cuenta de que no siempre pagamos por nuestros errores. Pagamos por los errores de los demás, y ellos…». Y la carta que revoloteó hasta el suelo: «Estimado señor: Confío en que sea lo bastante inteligente para distinguir entre un acto vulgar de maldad y venganza, que Dios sabe no tengo ninguna razón para cometer, y el acto de un ciudadano y un ser humano que hace lo que considera…», momento en el que se levantó a buscar dos tiras de cinta adhesiva. Después se quedó parada ante la ventana estirándose la piel de las sienes, pegándose allí la cinta adhesiva para desanimar a las arrugas mientras descansaba. Miró la nevada durante otro minuto, sin pestañear; y cuando se volvió hacia la habitación sus ojos en movimiento encontraron las rosas. El intenso calor las había abierto enteramente, y en el preciso instante en que su mirada las rozó cayeron tres pétalos.

Los copos de nieve revoloteaban juguetonamente en torno a la cara del sueco, que iba hinchándose por momentos y volviéndose más brillantemente roja. Trató de apartarlos a manotazos, como si fueran una bandada de insectos enviada para atormentarle. No sirvió de nada. Venían de todas partes, hasta que al ver un bar se refugió del blanco enjambre en su interior, donde los clientes se quedaron mirando con descortés interés su semblante pródigamente untado de mantequilla. Tras una sola copa entró en la cabina telefónica y marcó. «He salido con esta ventisca a buscar un médico, pero no conozco a ningún médico…».

(—Mi médico está fuera… de vacaciones… en la cárcel… no estoy segura… El tono era distraído).

Marcó tres números más, no recibió respuesta, y volvió a la barra para intentar recordar números de teléfono.

—¿Nada?

—Nada. Absolutamente nada, salvo esta… humedad —dijo Maude, apoyada contra la puerta que acababa de cerrar a su espalda. Los cristales de nieve se derretían y goteaban de su abrigo al suelo—. He tenido que venir a casa en taxi.

—¿El mismo juez?

—Oh, sí, y casi estoy empezando a odiarlo, aunque se parezca a papá.

—Esa es ya una buena y sensata razón.

—Arny, por favor, no seas cruel, hoy no. Es Nochebuena, Arny. Me siento tan mal. Y eso que mi médico ha dicho: «¿Le parece que tiene aspecto de estar fingiéndose enferma? ¿Se sometería *usted* a una operación de columna si estuviera *usted* fingiéndose enfermo?». Y su abogado ha dicho que lo sentía, pero… Oh, Arny, estoy tan cansada.

—¿Quieres una copa?

—No. El médico me ha dado un poco de morfina. ¿Ya estás bebiendo?

—Sólo un par antes de tener que empezar a beber en la fiesta.

—Arny, me gustaría que no bebieses tanto. ¿Has rellenado los papeles?

—¿Qué papeles?

—*Los* papeles. Ya sabes, los de… no sé pronunciarlo, los de Suecia.

Arny pensaba rellenar esos papeles, declarando su aptitud como padres, después de la fiesta. Ahora se sirvió en el vaso lo que quedaba de una botella de whisky y se sentó lentamente, torciendo el gesto, sujetándose la parte inferior del abdomen con una mano metida en el bolsillo del pantalón.

—Tengo hambre —dijo de pronto—. No he comido nada.

—¿Quieres unos espaguetis? —dijo Maude con aire distraído.

—¿Espaguetis a media tarde? —musitó él mientras se dirigía hacia la cocina. Pero lo que Maude creía que eran espaguetis resultó ser una caja de papel encerado. Le ofreció ensalada; pero se les había acabado el whisky. Cuando salía a por más, ella le urgió diciendo:

—Pero compra un litro, hay algo pecaminoso en una pinta de whisky.

—¿Pecaminoso?

—Bueno, obsceno… —Se sentó cansinamente, y acababa apenas de adoptar ese aire ensimismado de un viajero en un tren que la embargaba en cuanto se veía sola, cuando sonaron a la vez el teléfono y el timbre de la puerta. Se estremeció de pies a cabeza, extendió una mano en ambas direcciones y finalmente se dirigió a la puerta. Pero una vez hubo dejado entrar a Herschel y cogido el teléfono, lo único que pudo decir fue—: ¿Qué?

(—Cariño, ¿conoces a algún médico? Necesito un médico).

—¿Un médico de huesos? —logró decir Maude, y se quedó mirando desvalidamente a Herschel.

(—Acabo de tener un accidente de lo más terrible…).

—Cariño, ¿estás en el hospital? —dijo Herschel, cogiendo el teléfono.

(—No, pero lo estaré en cuanto me indiques un médico).

—Pero ¿dónde estás, cariño? Siempre te he dicho que pasaría esto, nadie puede conducir como tú y seguir viviendo en *este* mundo…

(—Pero si no ha sido un accidente de coche. Tengo una insolación).

—¿Quién *eres?*

(—Soy *yo*).

—¡Oh, tú! Creía que eras ya-sabes-quién. ¿Una *insolación?* ¿Estás bebiendo?

(—Quemaduras de segundo grado como mínimo, y deja de preguntar tonterías).

—Escucha cariño vamos a ir a una fiesta. Tú simplemente ve allí y te encontraremos el doctorcito más mono que hayas visto en tu vida, ¡ya *verás*! Ahora escucha, esta es la dirección…

Y después de colgar, Herschel se volvió hacia Maude.

—Y *yo* he tenido un día de lo más… simplemente de lo *más,* ¡no puedes imaginarte dónde me he despertado! ¿Te das cuenta de que llevo esta camisa del revés?

—¿Quién era ése? —preguntó Maude, señalando hacia el teléfono.

—Era Rudy, creo que ha tenido un accidente de coche o algo así. Decía unas cosas de lo más extraño, debe haberse dado un golpe en la cabeza, así que le he dicho que fuera directamente al cóctel de Esther, cariño, ¿tienes una camisa limpia? Porque no puedo ir a ningún sitio con esto.

La siguió al dormitorio, donde Maude abrió una cómoda y sacó la última camisa limpia de Arny.

Cuando llegó Arny, con una botella de litro cogida del gollete, Herschel estaba ya revelando su último arcano:

—Chavenet. En realidad no significa nada, pero si lo dices deprisa le parece familiar a todo el mundo. Mencionan el estilo de un pintor, tú asientes con la cabeza y dices «Como muy… Chavenet», o «Tiene bastante influencia de Chavenet, ¿no te parece?». ¿Que si has pasado fuera el verano? Sí, en el sur de Francia, una casita cerca de Chavenet. Poetas, estrellas de cine, perfume… «shavenay» —rebuznó encantadoramente Herschel.

El anochecer de aquel día festivo, pues tal era, perpetuamente dedicado a los SS Adán y Eva, y a las cuarenta doncellas martirizadas en Antioquía, resultó fresco o frío, según los recursos de cada cual. La gente que iba por la calle no había cambiado; ciertamente, en su mayor parte era la misma gente que podía verse pasar por los mismos puntos con las mismas expresiones a la misma hora de casi cualquiera de los trescientos sesenta y cinco días festivos del año. Sin embargo, había ocurrido algo. Había una cualidad en el aire que cada figura transeúnte parecía intensificar, una cualidad profesional, a medida que todo el mundo se convertía de modo más consciente, más porfiado, en lo que en sus mejores momentos fingía o se veía obligado a fingir ser. Esto era tan cierto para cada *quantum* de la ajetreada corriente de anonimato, que

avanzaba con una urgencia propia, como lo era para esos prodigios de la tiranía del servicio público que son los policías, que mostraban sus caras inexpresivas talladas y curtidas en la autoridad de la piedra roja, y sus contrarios, un grupo poroso con uniformes de baja saturación y bajo brillo reunido en torno a algo en la acera ante la Sociedad Bíblica Americana, un objeto tan apremiante que prestaba a su diligente caos un aire de orden. Parecía ser un gigantesco Heidi masculino.

—Crúzale los brazos sobre el pecho, Maurice. Eso es, agárralo por los pies. Espera un momento, no lo levantes hasta que te lo diga.

Los policías, ocupados en otros sitios vigilando el buen funcionamiento de ese mecanismo opresivo que llamaban la ley y el orden, tenían un aspecto tal que la idea de verles alguna vez bajo otra combinación de labios, narices y ojos fríos, placa, uniforme y circunstancia, resultaba tan improbable como la estatua del puritano de Saint-Gaudens; del mismo modo, los *boj scouts* no aventuraban el pasado ni el futuro, herederos de todas las épocas y aun así parte de las líneas avanzadas del tiempo, componían y expresaban un modelo dotado de permanencia.

—Ten cuidado con la cabeza, ¿es que quieres romperle algo?

—¿Cómo se habrá puesto tan rojo?

—Está todo rojo hasta abajo. Le he mirado.

—¿Y cómo se habrá puesto así?

—Dínoslo tú, tu padre es médico.

Sed autores de la palabra, y no sólo oyentes, decía tras ellos un letrero luminoso. En el escaparate había un libro grande de hojas sueltas, cuyas páginas rayadas estaban cubiertas de una letra menuda y redonda. Al lado un cartel decía: «La señora Gille tardó /15 años en / copiar la Biblia // Esta Biblia / se la regaló / a su hijo / en Navidad». Había una foto de la señora de William Gille, vecina de Nueva York, y su Biblia copiada a mano.

—¿Aprobaste Primeros Auxilios, Maurice?

—Diploma de honor.

—¿Y qué dices?

—¿Respiraciónartificial?

—Correcto. Agárralo por los pies y dale la vuelta.

—No quiere volverse. Es grande.

—*Dale* la vuelta.

Retrocedieron un paso mientras el bulto giraba, y la nariz golpeó la acera.

—Protégele la cara con el brazo, vamos.

—Vale. Ponte encima de él.

—Ponte *tú.*

—Me pondré yo.

—Nos pondremos los dos.

—Vale. ¿Preparado con tu lado? Un dos tres vamos…

—Ughhh.

—… dos, tres… *aprieta,* dos, tres… aprieta,

—Dulces muchachitos.

—Está hablando. Ha dicho algo.

—Me ha agarrado la rodilla.

—Dulces muchachitos.

También la policía estaba ocupada en tareas igualmente serias, aunque menos coordinadas. En la estación de metro I.R.T. – B.M.T. de la calle Catorce, uno de ellos detuvo a Hannah. Una mujer policía entregó a aquella lavandera nómada al brazo más fuerte de la ley.

—Al menos podía haberme dado tiempo para aclararla —dijo Hannah, con una clara nota de altivez en la voz, mientras se metía bajo el brazo la ropa húmeda. Antes había ido a ver a Stanley. Había llamado a su puerta y descubierto que no estaba en casa. Aun rodeando hasta la fachada y atisbando por los barrotes de la reja y la sucia ventana, todo lo que había podido ver estaba en orden, ese orden silencioso y paciente de las cosas abandonadas. Distinguió la foto de la catedral de Fenestrula, los rimeros de papel, palimpsestos a la izquierda, intactos a la derecha, doce pentagramas vacíos por página pero ya dedicados y, advirtió con una punzada de frío, como si el frío se lo indicara claramente por primera vez, no a ella. Todo esto vio atisbando, incluso lo suficiente de la cama para asegurarse de que también estaba vacía. De hecho podía ver todo lo que había en su habitación, menos el crucifijo, pues estaba colgado encima de la cama, junto a la ventana por la que atisbaba.

Este terco empeño de finalidad era tan dominante que, en las ocasiones que parecían resistirse, intervenía un elemento que habría sido demasiado fácil llamar fatídico, en algunos sitios con mano dura como si el destino estuviera ya exasperado, y en otros sólo con la mano obsequiosa de la cooperación.

La madre de Stanley había sido trasladada a una habitación del primer piso de un gran hospital municipal, y había ido todo el viaje reclamando sus pertenencias. Tras la visita de Stanley, los que la atendían habrían podido notar que había algo más que la acostumbrada ansiedad inmediata en su voz, que se había ahondado con sus preguntas hasta un tono que implicaba que nunca volverían a tener la oportunidad de separarla de otra de ellas. ¿Habían traído su apéndice?, ¿sus amígdalas?, su pierna amputada… ¿y sus dientes?

Pusieron la dentadura en un vaso limpio sobre la mesita de noche, donde la enfermera, atenta al médico que se iba, vertió una solución errónea sin derramar una gota, y dejó a su anciana paciente mirando aquella quimera submarina. La madre de Stanley se quedó mirando. Se movía lentamente, flotando, como fundiéndose ante sus propios ojos. Se hundió en los ojos unos nudillos del tamaño de nueces, y volvió a mirar. Farfullando imprecaciones de una senilidad exhausta, se quedó dormida.

Despertó, devuelta bruscamente a la conciencia por un eructo, atrayendo hacia sí sus tres miembros, sobresaltada. ¿Qué pasaba? Miró hacia el vaso. No había nada en el vaso, salvo una plácida solución transparente con un precipitado levemente rosa en el fondo. Era demasiado. Debía llegar adonde iba mientras quedara aún tiempo.

Quién sino un sacerdote, que llevara muerto mil años, habría podido leer las palabras que se formaban por sí solas en aquellos restos de labios, mientras avanzaba informalmente por la habitación, moviéndose como impulsada por espasmódicas ráfagas de viento, ingrávida, como una vela sin barco, hacia el alféizar de la ventana. La ventana se levantó fácilmente; la persiana se enrolló como un disparo. Se movieron las tijeras, empezó la música y se santiguó, pesadilla de la niña que había sido dos generaciones antes, corriendo hasta el borde del agua, deteniéndose allí un instante sin aliento para encomendar su salvación antes de zambullirse.

Traspasada abajo, la oscuridad se desplegaba hacia arriba, horadada por luces en cada punto de su ascenso hasta que quedó suspendida, empalada, sobre la ciudad. Por encima y por debajo del suelo se apresuraba hacia su casa.

Los labios del señor Pivner se movían mientras caminaba. Quizá fuera este complemento lo que le daba, como daban los adornos festivos a la cara picada de la ciudad, aquella intensa cualidad de realización inmediata, lo real no opuesto ya a lo ostensible sino ahora bruscamente fundido con lo necesario, lo real no opuesto ya a lo facticio ni, como en el derecho, opuesto a lo personal, ni como en la filosofía distinguido de lo ideal, ni el número real de las matemáticas que no tiene ninguna parte imaginaria, sino lo real plenamente lleno para abarcar aquellos contrarios que hacían posible su definición y así, una vez definido, capaz de resolver la paradoja en el momento en que la máscara y la cara se funden en una, el momento eterno del Dios cartesiano, Que puede obligar aun círculo a ser cuadrado.

El monólogo del señor Pivner no era ni un galimatías ni un bisbiseo distraído. Con voz clara, aunque inaudible, iba dando cuenta de todos y cada uno de sus movimientos. Era difícil saber (y quizá también él habría tenido dificultades para decirlo) si estaba preparando cuidadosamente una explicación o si se creía ya realmente ante un Tribunal donde le habían citado para que diera cuenta de sus movimientos. Lo que en tiempos había sido ansiosa inclinación se había convertido en severa práctica; podían haberla provocado las horas que tan recientemente había padecido en manos de la policía, un interrogatorio que, juzgado por los raseros de casi todos los demás que aquel día pasaron por la comisaría, había sido un trámite indiferente, incluso tedioso, a la luz de la envergadura de sus propios talentos aplicados, y de nuevo detectados. Para el señor Pivner había sido algo a todas luces diferente; y quizá fuera precisamente esa cualidad de aburrimiento despiadado con que sus captores le trataban, el modo enteramente desinteresado con que su implacabilidad le perseguía, lo que le había grabado en lo más hondo la idea de su presencia impersonal en el mundo. Acosado por sus preguntas, empezó a sentirse capaz de casi todo, alguien a quien había que vigilar y pedir cuentas luego de aquellos incidentes violentos que componían la biografía de la ciudad cuyo turbulento diario estaba acostumbrado a seguir en los periódicos.

Consultó su reloj, bajó la mano mientras sus labios seguían moviéndose, y de pronto volvió a levantarla, se llevó el reloj a los ojos, luego al oído, y apretó el paso. Compró un periódico, dobló su esquina y hasta que no se vio subiendo, inmóvil, en el ascensor, no se detuvieron sus labios, concluyendo su declaración ante el Tribunal mientras se acercaba a su puerta, y al grupo de testigos recluidos que esperaban para

corroborarla. Con media llave metida en la cerradura se detuvo, escuchó y empezó a moverse frenéticamente, sacudiendo la puerta para abrirla y entrar, para encender la luz de un manotazo y lanzarse sobre el teléfono, que cogió y levantó con tal precipitación que le golpeó en el ojo. «¿Diga?, ¿diga?». Oyó ese ruido de paciente vacuidad que se llama el «tono de marcar». «¿Diga?, ¿diga, operadora?». Su mano tembló sobre el disco: lo hizo girar hasta el tope:

(—¿A qué número estaba llamando, por favor?).

—¿Operadora? Oh, no era… Lo siento, me pareció oírlo sonar.

Se movió más despacio, volviendo al vestíbulo para quitarse el sombrero y el abrigo y recoger su periódico. Dejó el periódico en la mesa que tenía junto al sillón, encendió la radio y entró en el cuarto de baño.

Volvió con su medicina y una jeringuilla, se detuvo a cambiar la emisora de radio, sin otra razón que cambiarla, y regresó a su sillón para relajarse en ese estado de desocupación espiritual que llamaba ocio.

Entonces sus ojos atrajeron los suyos, mirándolo melancólicamente desde la tosca reproducción fotográfica del periódico, donde aparecía con aire paciente y largas medias blancas; y el señor Pivner pareció confuso, como si lo hubieran arrojado bruscamente entre los pueblos clásicos de las épocas precristianas, cuyas fechas, disminuyendo con el avance del tiempo, le habían dado siempre la sensación de que habían vivido hacia atrás. Cogió el periódico, y sus ojos siguieron automáticamente el relato del reportaje especial sobre la niñita española que pronto iba a ser canonizada, mientras su mente revolvía en su rico desconcierto de glorias y derrotas, que ya no eran noticia, en busca de reconocimiento. Desplegó la página y vio el titular sobre el autobús despeñado por un barranco chileno, en el que habían muerto un americano y once nativos, antes de darse cuenta de que era un periódico atrasado, y miró la fecha para asegurarse. Lo dobló rápidamente y lo tiró a una papelera que tenía a la espalda. Encontró el periódico que acababa de comprar, y se recostó en el sillón con un suspiro, un sonido cansado que sugería la sospecha, si se hubiera detenido a analizarlo, de que si a cada día le basta su propio mal, también a cada lugar. Pues aunque no lo sabía, en aquella región de Chile donde se había despeñado el autobús no había ocurrido ningún gran desastre desde el siglo XIX, cuando el derrumbamiento de una iglesia incendiada dio a cientos de familias afligidas dolor suficiente para varias décadas; y estas once nuevas muertes súbitas bastaban para ser lloradas durante otra veintena de años, hondamente sentidas sin publicidad, comprendidas en su pleno derecho como sufrimiento y muerte, no afectadas por el desgaste de las tragedias de un mundo difundidas en otros sitios sobre lo que habían sido, pero seguían siendo allí, hectáreas de árboles verdes.

«Si sabe usted contar, sabe pintar…», leyó, un anuncio en el diario de la tarde. «Nuevos temas para su colección "Píntelo Usted Mismo"…», y su labio se contrajo con el tic que le daba cuando estaba cansado: pues sobre esta sugerencia artística se cernía amenazador el espectro de su jubilación. «Sí, aunque su talento artístico sea nulo, será capaz de decorar su casa de pared a pared con bonitos cuadros, y podrá decir: "Lo hice yo"».

La música era el Concierto de Navidad de Francesco Manfredini, y se acercaba al desenlace de su último movimiento cuando cesó bruscamente para dar paso a una voz, una voz lastrada con las pausas viscosas de la sinceridad, que suplantó el último movimiento de aquel concierto interrumpido con tal confiada presunción como si en aquellos minutos de música el oyente se hubiera no aburrido, sino sentido solo, incluso alarmado al verse abandonado durante tanto tiempo a las seducciones de una posibilidad de belleza. Aislando en confiada repetición el nombre de un producto que tenía la distinción de no haber sido nunca una palabra en ninguna lengua, la voz acudió al rescate, pegajosamente apremiante, glutinosamente articulada.

«Simplemente empareje sus lienzos preplaneados y numerados con sus pinturas premezcladas y numeradas. Si sabe usted contar, no puede perderse…», leyó, antes de volver la página, esta razonable apelación, cabeceando ya sobre la jubilación de los medios que habían llegado a ser el único fin razonable. Sin embargo era a él a quien apelaban; y se llevó una mano al bolsillo, donde el pasado (el suyo, pues no había otro) yacía acuñado como justificación.

Con su último destello de atención se enteró de que la Sociedad Birmana de Traducción había publicado *Cómo ganar amigos e influir en la gente,* y de que U. Nu (Thakin Nu) confiaba en que le siguieran más libros, para que su nación no permaneciera «estancada en la ignorancia… Esta es realmente una cuestión de vida o muerte para todos nosotros». Lentamente se le cerraron los ojos; y al pensar en ello se apretó la mano contra su extravasado corazón, contento al menos de encontrar reconocimiento y familiaridad, pruebas contra la Razón y los gritos del mendicante Pasado.

Cuando sonó el timbre de la puerta, el señor Pivner se sobresaltó violentamente y echó mano al teléfono. «¿Diga?, ¿diga?». Volvió a sonar el timbre. «Oh… lo siento», dijo al ruido de paciente vacuidad, «creía

que…».

Recibió el gran paquete de manos del repartidor, una figura de ojos feroces, con el doble de años que él, que se quedó esperando mudamente algo más que sus palabras de agradecimiento. «¿Para *mí? ¿Pivner*? ¿Va dirigido a mí? Oh, yo… Espere», dijo sin necesidad, «tome…». Se sacó del bolsillo una moneda de veinticinco centavos, que fue aceptada con un gruñido. Cuando el viejo se volvía, el señor Pivner dejó de mirar el paquete y exclamó: «¡Espere! Tome, yo… Feliz Navidad». Le tendió cincuenta centavos.

La bata era demasiado grande. Sin embargo, el modelo era tan conservador y el tejido tan fino que aquello parecía una muestra de prodigalidad más que una torpeza deliberada por parte del donante; además, en cierto modo caracterizaba la cosa como regalo, pues si se la hubiera comprado él le habría sentado perfectamente. Por esa razón, cualquier idea de cambiarla abandonó su mente nada más ocurrírsele. La tarjeta decía simplemente: «Feliz Navidad de parte de Otto».

Y aunque al percatarse de ello lo sorprendió, en realidad no fue nada extraño que el señor Pivner, cuyo mundo era una serie de imágenes inconexas, su vida una procesión de caras que reflejaban su propio anonimato por la calle, y caras que compartían momentos de severa intimidad en la prensa, no fue nada extraño que antes de darse cuenta hubiera implorado familiaridad y se hubiera visto contemplando la imagen de Eddie Zefnic, mientras pasaba la punta del dedo por los finos pliegues de lana chalis que le cubrían la rodilla.

Con la bata puesta, se levantó. Se quedó mirando a su alrededor en busca de algo que hacer, algo que, hecho con la bata puesta, la confirmase como suya. Lo primero que advirtió, sobre el álbum de fotos, fue la jeringuilla. La cogió, recordó que había pensado en ponerle una aguja nueva y entró en el dormitorio a buscarla. Abrió un cajoncito alto, y mientras sacaba la aguja el brillo apagado del oro atrajo su mirada. Levantó el reloj por la cadena, y lo tuvo colgando un momento antes de abrirlo. Apretó la ruedecilla con el pulpejo de la mano, y frenó el resorte de apertura de la tapa de saboneta con la punta de los dedos. Entonces se quedó mirando aquella continente esfera inalterada, con las manecillas paradas a las XII (aunque no sabía si del mediodía o de la noche) en el abandonado pasado de su padre. La tapa de saboneta se cerró con un chasquido sobre aquel instrumento que, mientras su mano se cerraba sobre él, parecía capaz de contener el tiempo, el tiempo como continuo, donde todas las cosas, hasta los fines, podían realizarse cumplidamente. El señor Pivner se metió el reloj en el bolsillo de la bata, y al hacerlo sintió allí la tarjeta de Otto. Metió la tarjeta en el cajón, donde había estado el reloj, y volvió al otro cuarto con la aguja nueva.

Sin embargo, era a él a quien apelaban (buscando aquel tiempo acuñado que estaba inactivo en su bolsillo). «Dentro de un momento, Necrostyle les ofrecerá la hora correcta. Pero primero, amigos, ¿se sienten torpes, pesados, sin ganas de nada, a primera hora de la mañana? Bueno…». El señor Pivner se puso la inyección con mucho cuidado, como hacía siempre. Cuando acabó, le dijeron que la hora correcta era las seis y media. Aquello lo alarmó; y pensándolo bien se sacó del bolsillo el reloj de oro, lo abrió y, tirando de un escape lateral, hizo girar la ruedecilla y ajustó las manecillas de filigrana de oro a sus propios asuntos.

«Cada hora, a las medias, las últimas noticias, que les ofrece…».

De repente le entró prisa. Se quitó la bata con reluctante cuidado y se puso la chaqueta. Fue de un lado a otro de la habitación, enderezando cosas, o solo tocándolas, mientras la voz repetía detalles sin mejorar sobre la guerra de la que nadie hablaba, iniciando un resumen de las mismas noticias resumidas una hora antes, que habían tardado esa hora en reescribir. Colgó cuidadosamente la bata, y al notarla ladeada mientras lo hacía, sacó el reloj de oro y se lo metió en el bolsillo del chaleco, sin detenerse a pasar la cadena por el ojal, pues tenía prisa, ya que aquella noche se había propuesto llegar al hotel bastante antes de las siete. Se puso el abrigo y la bufanda verde, y una vez con el sombrero en la mano se acercó a apagar la radio, esperando cortésmente, como tenía por costumbre, a que la voz terminara un boletín de última hora.

«En el área metropolitana, la policía está buscando esta noche a un hombre corpulento de cara roja, notablemente hinchada, que se cree ha secuestrado a un grupo de siete *boy scouts*».

Había empezado a nevar de nuevo. El señor Pivner corrió por la resbaladiza acera y cogió un autobús casi al momento. De hecho esperó por él, lo que lo puso aún de mejor humor mientras se sentaba y miraba por la ventanilla, permitiéndose maravillarse de aquel acorazado que lo llevaba velozmente hacia el sur y de los prodigios de la ciencia que lo habían hecho no solo posible, sino corriente. Después el autobús se detuvo, y volvió a ponerse en marcha a paso de tortuga, una mole cautelosa en la sólida fila oscura de vehículos. El tráfico que venía en sentido contrario estaba parado; y como si condujera reverentemente a un grupo de turistas por un venerable escenario de martirio, el autobús pasó lentamente junto a la figura de un hombre tendido en la reluciente superficie mojada de la calle. Uno de sus pies estaba en equilibrio sobre la punta. Su sombrero estaba a varios pasos de distancia, y lo único que se movía era su paraguas destrozado,

sus negros jirones agitados por ráfagas de viento. Fue la imagen de aquel pie, tan delicadamente sesgado, la que retuvo el señor Pivner mientras seguían adelante. Su autobús pasó junto a otro, parado en fila en sentido contrario. El conductor se asomó por la ventanilla para gritar al otro conductor: «Ahí delante tienes un atropello».

Los labios del señor Pivner se movían de nuevo. Abrió su periódico y se quedó mirando un momento el titular «Muere un cura tras 51 días de ayuno en busca de la "perfecta voluntad de Dios"», intentando recobrarse. Luego volvió las páginas buscando aquel anuncio de «Si sabe usted contar, sabe pintar…». Alguna que otra vez había considerado la posibilidad de iniciar una afición, quizá pintar, o construir barquitos en botellas; pero algo que le interesara. Mientras buscaba aquellas palabras, «Lo hice yo», una foto atrajo su mirada: «¡Críe chinchillas!, en su propia casa… ¡Nada de suciedad! ¡Ningún problema!».

Todos apelaban a él, juzgándolo excelentemente satisfactorio tal como era; pero si no lo era, ahora que tan tardíamente estaba aprendiendo a desconfiar, ¿cómo recompensarían su ingratitud?, ¿cómo pagarían su traición?

La ciencia nos asegura que cada vez se acerca más a la solución de la vida, es decir, de lo que es la vida («el último misterio»), y ofrece como ansiosa fundamentación una química anónimamente proclamada como submicroscópica. Pero nadie ha empezado siquiera a explicar qué ocurrió hace veinticinco años en la pista de ceniza de Langhorne, Pensilvania, cuando al coche de Jimmy Concannon se le desprendió una rueda, y en una multitud de once mil espectadores mató a su madre.

El señor Pivner se quedó mirando las chinchillas. Parecían abrigadas.

«Brindo por el fuego, no el que arrasa chabolitas…», se vio leyendo minutos después, parado por necesidad ante esta pintada en la pared. Desvió los ojos, desazonado por la posibilidad de que lo vieran mirando aquello, y los diversos grafitos circundantes, con tan atenta preocupación, aunque sólo fuera el joven similarmente preocupado, y equivalentemente ocupado, que estaba junto a él. Pero el pictógrafo que atrajo su mirada era tan alarmante que bajó los ojos, vislumbrando en aquella breve ojeada azorada la cara que tenía al lado, una cara ojerosa sesgada en un perfil afilado que miraba fijamente al frente. Y sus ojos se vieron de nuevo atraídos lentamente hacia arriba, hacia aquella figura a su misma altura, casi de la misma estatura, lentamente hacia arriba, luego trabados, frenados en seco, y luego hacia abajo, prendidos de unos flecos verdes. Y estaba mirando aquello, aquel trozo de lana que salía del bolsillo del abrigo, a la altura de la cintura, cuando la cara entera se volvió hacia él, clavándole con devastador desprecio unos ojos inyectados en sangre.

El señor Pivner desvió inmediatamente la mirada al frente: «Sino el que abrasa las bragas de las chavalitas». Y tras un aturullado encogimiento de hombros y abrochamiento a su lado, se quedó solo.

—¿Es que ese viejo chocho va a venir ahora todas las noches a sentarse sin más en el vestíbulo? —preguntó el botones alto cuando poco después salió, y el recepcionista nocturno se le acercó.

—¿Le importaría esperar en el bar el resto de la tarde, señor?

—Ese joven —logró decir el señor Pivner—, ése, ¿el que acaba de salir?

—Creo que ha sido huésped del hotel.

—Oh, bueno, sí, bueno, entonces no… —El señor Pivner bajó los ojos hacia las relucientes puntas de los zapatos del recepcionista nocturno—. ¡Pero…! —alzó la vista de pronto: unos ojos tan brillantes, tan poco curiosos como las puntas de los zapatos, le rechazaron.

—Si el joven que ha descrito…

—Sí, gracias, gracias…

El señor Pivner entró apresuradamente en el bar y pidió un zumo de naranja. Parecía cansado y poco preparado para sorpresas, ni siquiera una tan familiar como la turbia imagen presente ya, esperando a que alzara los ojos, en el espejo tintado. A su lado, una rubia se inclinó levemente hacia él. Su codo empujó hacia el suyo una pitillera de oro, y él desvió cortésmente los ojos para no leer la inscripción, y al apartarse chocó con el hombre que tenía a la derecha. El señor Pivner se aclaró la garganta, como quien se prepara para disculparse. Pero el otro se limitó a asaetearlo con unos ojos como puntas de alfileres, y se volvió, estirándose una solapa de la que colgaba una *boutonnière* lo bastante raída para parecer, bajo aquella luz, de papel. Y el señor Pivner se echó hacia atrás sus gafas sin aros, acercándoselas a los ojos, para clavar la vista al frente en el espejo tintado, cuya superficie reproducía las tres figuras en el vacío, manteniendo una oscura realidad propia, abarcando sus sombras en una suspensión subterránea.

Aun lado, la rubia abrió su bolso e intercambió un cumplido en voz baja con el camarero. Al otro lado se oyó un grito sofocado. El señor Pivner se aclaró la garganta, como preparándose para disculparse pero

incapaz de pensar, tan deprisa, en algo concreto por lo que disculparse. Pero los ojos penetrantes refulgían mirando algo más allá de él, y con tal intensidad que los suyos se vieron atraídos por reflejo hacia donde la rubia pagaba su copa. Pero lo único que vio el señor Pivner, bajo aquella luz débil, fue un crujiente billete de veinte dólares que cambiaba de manos: o eso le pareció, cegado en la penumbra tintada de aquel paisaje donde los tres estaban suspendidos, separados en su similitud, imágenes que aguardaban sin esperanza la aparición de figuras, o de una figura, de materia menos transitoria que la suya.

VII

«Ahora discutiremos un poco más por extenso la lucha por la existencia».

DARWIN, *El origen de las especies*

—Me recuerda bastante a aquel convento, el de… Champigneulles, ¿era ése? Cerca de Dijon —dijo una mujer alta, mirando a su alrededor—. El que convirtieron en manicomio.

—Sé lo que quiere decir —dijo la chica que tenía al lado—. Todo el mundo cambia de tamaño sin parar. —La mujer alta se la quedó mirando con curiosidad, y advirtió que llevaba ambas muñecas vendadas. Retrocedió un paso; la chica avanzó un paso—. ¿Qué *hace* usted?

—¿Yo? Bueno… ¿cuándo?

—¿Escribe?

—Oh —dijo la mujer alta, recuperándose—. Mantengo a mi marido. *Él* escribe. Es editor, ¿sabe? Va a publicar el libro de Esther.

—¿Quién es Esther?

—Vaya, querida, es nuestra anfitriona. Aquélla, la que está hablando con el tipo alto de la corbata verde. —Se volvió en el momento en que se acercaba su marido con un martini—. Qué grupo de gente tan interesante. Y qué música tan interesante.

—Es Haendel —dijo él, tendiéndole la copa—. *El triunfo de la verdad y la justicia.* [9]

Ella miró a su alrededor, y se llevó la copa a los labios.

—¿Crees que el año *que viene* podremos ir al Festival del Narciso en Hawái?

Se derramaban bebidas, otra raya marrón quemaba la repisa de la chimenea, la gente chocaba, se excusaba y se saludaba, y Ellery, metiéndose la corbata de seda verde por dentro de la chaqueta, dijo:

—Deja de hablar de eso durante un rato. ¿Quién es ésa? —añadió, señalando con la cabeza a una chica rubia.

—No lo sé. Ha venido con alguien. Se va a Hollywood.

—Voy por otra copa —dijo Ellery, y se dirigió hacia la rubia.

—Ellery, por favor…

Pero ya se había ido. Ella se sentó, abrazando a su gatito.

—¿Qué significa? —dijo un vozarrón a su lado—. Los cubos de basura en la calle, los críos del East End jugando en el arroyo, nadando en ese río asqueroso, ¿entiendes? ¿Qué significa eso?

—Bueno, *ella* dice que París *le* recuerda una boca llena de dientes cariados, pero yo creo que París es como ir al cine…

—Un hotelito precioso cerca de Saint Germain, no creo que cruzara el río más de dos veces durante todo el tiempo que estuve allí. Realmente *vivía* en la orilla izquierda, es mucho más bonita, la arquitectura, las formaciones de nubes por encima…

—Por supuesto si te gustan los Alpes. A mí me parecieron un rollo terriblemente pretencioso… Quiero decir, qué se puede *hacer* con un Alpe…

—Todavía está en París. Me ha escrito que se acaba de comprar uno de esos deliciosos Renaults…

—Oh sí, me encantan. ¿Un original?

Esther se levantó. Tenía la cara sonrojada. Le molestaba la música, porque parecía que ponían los discos sin orden ni concierto, una cara suelta de Haendel tras otra en una sucesión fortuita. Se dirigió hacia la habitación que había sido el estudio, de donde salía la música, y chocó con una persona que estaba diciendo: «¿Quieres decir que nunca has *oído* hablar de Murti-Bing?». No había atravesado aún la mitad de la habitación cuando un inmenso semblante reluciente le bloqueó el paso.

—Cariño, me han dicho que estabas buscando un médico, y…

—¿Conoces *tú* alguno? —preguntó Esther, demasiado sobresaltada para disimular.

—No, pero también estoy buscando uno. Tal vez podamos encontrar uno juntos…

Esther encontró a Rose sentada en la oscuridad. «¿No es bonita la música? Los estoy poniendo yo», dijo. «Sí, pero quizá no le guste que le rompan alguno, Rose». «Oh, *yo* no voy a romperlos», dijo Rose, sonriéndole en la oscuridad. De pronto Esther le pasó un brazo por encima; y luego lo apartó con la misma brusquedad, y la dejó allí con el tocadiscos.

—¿No *fue* estúpido por mi parte? Intenté suicidarme dos veces en dos semanas. La segunda vez estuve ida durante dos días. Píldoras para dormir.

—¿Cuántas tomaste?

—Veintitrés. ¿Por qué?

—Simplemente me lo preguntaba. Siempre es bueno saberlo.

Esther cerró los ojos, como aislándose del ruido, y se dirigió hacia Don Bildow, a quien veía al fondo de la habitación hablando con un hombre demacrado, con una camisa verde de lana con el cuello abierto, y con un joven rechoncho.

—Sí, casi lo he terminado ya —dijo una mujer a su lado, al editor. Se va a titular *Algunos de mis mejores amigos son gentiles.* Estoy tan harto de esas apologías dolientes de nuestras minorías sensibles. A menudo pienso lo agradable que debe de ser entre perros, un bulldog diciendo: ahí hay un galgo, ahí un basset, un pequinés, sin que a ninguno de ellos le importe lo más mínimo. Todos son perros. Aquí basta que digas una palabra como «judío» o «católico» o «negro» o «marica» para que *alguien* parezca dispuesto a hacerte pedazos…

—Perdonad que os interrumpa —dijo Esther—, pero ¿quién es ese tipo que está hablando con Don Bildow? El alto.

—Es un crítico. No recuerdo cómo se llama. Antes hacía reseñas en *Viejas masas.*

—El otro se llama a sí mismo poeta —dijo la mujer que había estado hablando—. Es un judío profesional, si entendéis lo que quiero decir.

Al lado, un hombre que fumaba algo sacado de una caja cuya etiqueta decía «Garantizado: no contiene nada de tabaco» hablaba con un tremolante joven rubio que recordaba, como alguien debió de observar finalmente, a un *oeuf-dur-mayonnaise.* La mujer alta se lo señaló a su marido, preguntándole:

—¿Y quién es esa personilla tan rematadamente rara? Lleva lo que se dice horas hablando de los sólidos en Ouchello. Dondequiera que eso esté.

—Es uno de nuestros… escritores más sensibles —soltó su marido, expeliendo el aire como si fuera agua salada.

—Sí —murmuró ella—, veo que tiene muchas razones para ser sensible. —Se lo quedó mirando, mientras el objeto de su mirada interrumpía una pirueta de despedida para decir: «Pero todos mis *queridos* amigos son exóticos, todos torcidos y retorcidos como los verbos irregulares de cualquier lengua civilizada, ¡y *todos* por exceso de uso…!». La mujer alta dijo pensativamente: «Sí, y yo intenté leer su libro. ¿No?», añadió, volviéndose hacia la otra mujer que, ahora se dio cuenta, llevaba un vestido prenatal de pliegues colapsados, frustado el embarazo. Entonces, como sacándose un tema de la manga, sonrió y dijo: «¿Quieres traerme una copa?» a su marido; «Ahora tengo que beber por dos» a ambos; y «No sé *cómo* ha podido serían descuidado» a la otra mujer.

Mientras Esther cruzaba la habitación, Herschel la cogió del brazo.

—Cariño, debes saber lo que le ha regalado Rudy a su criada por Navidad. ¡Una histerotomía! ¿No es el mejor detallito que has oído nunca?

Entretanto, la mujer alta seguía mirando hacia la puerta, donde el joven sensible se abría paso tremolando contra la corriente de los que entraban. «Al menos creo que era él, recuerdo la foto de la solapa del libro, posando con magnolias…». Se detuvo, para añadir mientras el chico desaparecía: «¿O era un libro de Edna St. Vicent Millay…?». Y se apartó para dejar pasar a

—¡Gran Anna!, pero ¿qué ha pasado, cariño? ¿Cómo has llegado *aquí*?

—Mis *boy scouts*, no volveré a hablarles jamás…

—Pero estoy muy preocupado por Rudy —siguió Herschel—, *ése* llamó y ha tenido un accidente de coche en algún sitio.

—Tengo que encontrar un médico…

—Y estás tan guapo esta noche, y tu nariz, ya sabes lo que dicen de las narices. Ahora bébete esto y te encontraremos el doctorcito más mono que… ¡Oh!, tan guapo para la Nochebuena, todo rojo y reluciente como un bastoncito de caramelo.

En la entrada, Maude se paró con aire indeciso. «Arny, ¿crees que podríamos ir sin más a por el bebé y vivir en Suecia?». «Aquello es lo mismo», dijo él. «Te traeré una copa. ¿Se nota que llevo puesta la camisa del revés?».

Alguien decía: «Igual que Píramo y Tisbe, si entendéis lo que quiero decir, y por supuesto todo el mundo sabe que él era tan delicado que la primera vez ella tuvo que poner algodón en los muelles de la cama para que no se sintiera violento…». Aquella persona se calló, señalando con la cabeza a la que entraba por la puerta. Otros se volvieron a mirar a Agnes Deigh, que inmediatamente dijo:

—La verdad es que es un horror, ¿quiere alguien traerme una copa? ¿Está aquí Stanley?

—¿Quién es Stanley?

—Un chico gracioso con bigote.

Se sentó, mirando a su alrededor; pero Stanley no había llegado, y enseguida se vio cercada por una cortina de fondillos de pantalones.

—Realmente prefiero los libros. Por muy malo que sea un libro, es único, pero la gente es siempre tan ordinaria.

—Creo que en realidad nos gustan los libros que nos hacen *odiamos* a nosotros mismos…

—Pero… por qué no escribe alguien simplemente un libro *feliz*… —Esto lo había dicho Maude, pero nadie la oyó—. Si tuvieras un juez que se pareciera a *tu* papá, ¿no te fiarías *tú* de él? —preguntó a un joven, que se volvió hacia ella diciendo—: ¿Fiarme de ese viejo cabrón? Crissto, si ni siquiera se fía de sí mismo. ¿Quieres comprar un acorazado?

Lo único que pudo decir Maude, paseando la vista por la habitación, fue:

—¿Cómo se conoce toda esa gente entre sí?

—Sólo Crissto lo sabe. ¿Te gusta la fiesta?

—Es un poco… Chavenet. ¿No te parece?

—Crissto, sí.

Esther había recuperado su gatito, y estaba de pie abrazándolo con demasiada fuerza. Alguien dijo junto a ella: «Bueno, Ruskin fechó su vida desde la primera vez que las vio». «Bueno, por supuesto, Ruskin», dijo el otro. «Estuvo en la ciudad la semana pasada, ¿no?», dijo la mujer alta. «Oí a mi marido hablar de él. Comieron juntos, creo… Está escribiendo un libro sobre piedras, ¿no?».

Al fondo de la habitación, Ellery estaba vuelto hacia ella. Hablaba con la chica rubia, riendo, escuchándola; ella estaba casi entre ambos. Daba la espalda cuan larga era a Esther. Los tacones eran altos, los zapatos estrechos, las piernas ligeramente arqueadas. Su entera figura hasta los hombros era tan esbelta que parecía estar esperando a que la cogieran y le dieran la vuelta, y la doblaran hacia abajo y hacia atrás: Esther, apoyada contra el quicio de la puerta, se sentía pesada, informe, y tenía la cabeza cansada, cargada, sordamente dolorida. «Lo único que quiero es alquilar una casa en el sur de Francia con cuatro sordomudos…», dijo alguien cerca de ella. La habitación que tenía delante estaba limpia; pero en su mente existía con la permanencia que sólo se atribuye a las ruinas. Inquilinos que no había conocido persistían en su vida como residentes fijos, que nunca serían desahuciados: se los habían endosado tal como estaban con sus permanentes trajes azules y trajes marrones y vestidos negros y gafas, permanentemente en pie y volviéndose, hablando unos con otros y unos de otros, alimentados y propagados por sus sonidos y el manejo de cigarrillos, dejando anticuado el acto de la vida, una necesidad del pasado, una compulsión de la ignorancia: los hombres levantaban cigarrillos con erecta amenaza; las mujeres tendían las cavidades con lengua de aceituna de copas vacías. «¿Qué es esa música?», le preguntó alguien. «No lo sé, creo que es algo de Haendel», dijo Esther, deteniéndose a escuchar los compases de celebración escritos por el hijo del barbero que había aprendido a tocar con una espineta muda, mientras sentía elevarse en ella el anacrónico malestar matinal, y se cruzaba un brazo sobre los pechos sensibles. Ellery arrojó hacia ella un anillo de humo, un misil salvaje que la rubia alcanzó con la mano y rompió en el aire.

—Será mejor que preguntes a esa señora tan maja que hay allí —dijo un hombre que agitaba con una mano un folleto titulado *Iniciación al inodoro y democracia,* llevando de la otra a una niña de siete años.

—Soy la niña del piso de abajo —dijo la cría a Esther—. Me manda mamá para que le pregunte si puede darme unas píldoras para dormir…

Esther fue con ella al cuarto de baño, donde interrumpieron a alguien que estaba registrando el botiquín. «Oh, perdón…», dijo, «sólo quería ver si había aquí alguna cuchilla de afeitar…». Se marchó con dificultad. Cuando un minuto después salía Esther, alguien la agarró con fuerza de la muñeca. «Oye, tú tienes un gatito, tengo que contarte el de Paulov y su gatito. Paulov tenía perros, ya sabes. Paulov hacía sonar una campana y qué coj…, ellos salivaban, ¿recuerdas? Me refiero a los perros. Bueno, pues esta vez Paulov tiene un gatito…». La voz y el hombre desaparecieron arrastrados por la corriente, y Don Bildow no estaba donde le había visto por última vez. Pero Ellery se acercaba a ella sonriendo. Ella levantó la cara, sonriendo; y él se detuvo en seco ante el sofá que había entre ambos, donde estaba sentado a solas un hombre cuya profesión era tan inmediatamente obvia como la de los chicos conductores de *rickshaw* de Natal, que se pintan las piernas de blanco. Una pajarita tamaño hélice asomaba por encima de los picos de un cuello de talla extra sobre una camisa de un blanco deslumbrante, protegida por los numerosos pliegues de un paño que de algún modo, pese a la solapada depravación de su corte, conservaba la graciosa dignidad de su origen transatlántico.

—¡Benny! Me alegro de que hayas venido.

—Los negocios son los negocios —dijo Benny, alzando su copa.

—¿Qué te parece la idea?

—Fabulosa.

—Lo he arreglado todo con el tipo. Vamos a pagar a su familia cuando lo haya hecho, la mitad ahora, la mitad a la entrega. Pero tiene que parecer accidental.

—Escucha esto —dijo Benny—. Se me ocurrió anoche.

—¿Qué? ¿Un enfoque?

—Bueno, no sabía si querías hacerlo chistoso o artístico o qué. Ya sabes. Podríamos haber montado un bonito número artístico alrededor de ello. Algún ballet, con un hilo argumental de fondo. También pensé que si querías hacerlo chistoso podríamos convertirlo en una especie de musical. ¿Sabes? Chicas. Puros explosivos.

—Sí, pero mira, eso no es exactamente…

—Ya sé, de todas formas no podríamos hacerlo con puros. Tenemos un par de buenos clientes de puros que pondrían el grito en el cielo. No. Cuanto más lo pienso más me convenzo de que lo que os hace falta es un drama humano en crudo. Algo auténtico. Así que escucha esto. Se me ocurrió anoche.

—Sí…

—Desde una iglesia. Lo hace desde el campanario de una iglesia.

—¡Cristo! Benny, esto te hará ganar el premio Nobel. Es genial.

—Ya he pensado cómo podemos hacer que parezca accidental. Ahí en el Bronx hay una iglesia justo enfrente de una escuela de danza. Tendremos las cámaras allí arriba haciendo un programa sobre críos que aprenden ballet, ¿entiendes? Entonces, cuando nos avisen, lo único que tenemos que hacer es cortar y hacer un barrido de cámara hasta la ventana. Un bonito enfoque.

—Pero ¿qué me dices del cura? Puede joderlo todo si está por allí.

—Estará por allí. Estará ocupado dentro, diciendo misa.

—Es fabuloso. Es lo único que puedo decir. —Ellery hablaba con los ojos bajos, con pensativa admiración. Luego los alzó—. Te mereces una copa. ¿Dónde se te ha ocurrido, a solas o en una reunión de guionistas?

—En una iglesia —dijo Benny.

—Pero Anna, cariño —llegó una voz desde el otro extremo del sofá, llenando el hueco del maravillado silencio de Ellery—, cocieron la cabeza de sir Thomas More durante veinte minutos para darle consistencia, antes de clavarla en el Puente de Londres…

—Allí mismo —dijo la mujer alta, más cerca de Esther—, delante de Dios y de todo el mundo. Así es como ocurren siempre esas cosas. ¿Creéis que llevo demasiado perfume? Tengo sinusitis y nunca estoy segura. ¿No hace *calor* aquí?

—Bueno, su estola de piel… —empezó Esther, volviéndose hacia ella.

—Ya lo sé, querida, pero la verdad es que no me atrevo a dejarla en ninguna parte.

—Estoy segura de que no correría peligro en mi dormitorio.

—Oh, entonces tú eres Esther. Lo siento, querida, no pretendía…

—No importa, probablemente tienes razón. Ni yo misma conozco a buena parte de la gente que hay aquí.

—Dime, Esther, ¿ha venido *él* ya?

—¿Quién?

—Tu invitado de honor, por supuesto…

—¿Lo conoces?

—Muy poco. Pero he visto su foto muchísimas veces. Y tengo su libro. Una vez lo oí hablar sobre la familia, quiero decir sobre tener niños y esas cosas. Yo no puedo aguantarlos. Quiero decir *aguantarlos,* literalmente, ya sabes —rio—. Útero desviado, ya sabes. Por lo visto hay muchísimos hoy día, te encuentras con un útero desviado en cuanto te das…

Ambas se volvieron esperanzadamente a mirar hacia el fondo de la habitación, donde se abría la puerta.

—Querida, probablemente *ése* es alguien famoso. Tiene que serlo, para ir por ahí con un despertador colgado del cuello…

—Mendelssohn Schmendelssohn —dijo otro—. Estoy hablando de *música.*

—Qué estúpida he sido —dijo la mujer alta, observando a Esther, que cruzaba la habitación hacia el sofá —. Decirle una cosa así cuando aquí estoy yo de dos meses. Eso demuestra lo que es la fuerza de la costumbre.

—Creo que la cuarta de Sibelius es la mejor que tiene.

—La cuarta, *schmorth;* es la *única* que tiene.

—Eso demuestra que no te puedes fiar de la naturaleza.

Al fondo de la habitación, el señor Feddle estaba ya ocupado, dedicando un ejemplar de *Moby Dick*. Trabajaba despacio y con esmero, ajeno al tráfico inmediato, como si estuviera realmente sentado en aquella granja de los Berkshires hacía un siglo.

Maude alzó la vista y dijo: «Qué curioso, qué oscuro parece aquel rincón, quiero decir donde están esos, ¿lo vuelven oscuro ellos o simplemente se han juntado allí porque estaba oscuro…?». Entonces vio que el hombre corpulento iba de uniforme, y dijo: «Oh. ¿Qué es usted?»; «Relaciones Públicas del Ejército», dijo, mirando de nuevo hacia el grupo del rincón oscuro. «Parecen sacados de una novela rusa», dijo. «Chavenet», dijo Maude, alzando la vista hacia él con ojos como platos que no parpadeaban. «Sí, él», dijo el oficial. «Que no sea un intelectual no quiere decir que no lea libros». Miraron juntos hacia el fondo de la habitación y Maude, sintiendo su mano cálida en la nuca, se relajó un poco.

Años antes, alguien que había visto una vez un grabado poco afortunado de Mozart (era de perfil, el frontispicio de una partitura encuadernada de la sinfonía *Júpiter* impresa en Viena), y que poco después vio una vez el perfil del hombre de la camisa verde de lana con el cuello abierto que ahora estaba encorvado al fondo de la habitación, observó que se parecía (el vivo retrato) a Mozart. Con la seguridad que daba siglo y medio de distancia, esto lo repetían a menudo, sobre todo los que seguían siendo amigos suyos, deseaban decir algo lisonjero de él y nunca habían visto el frontispicio de la sinfonía *Júpiter* encuadernada en Viena.

—A ese alto lo conozco —dijo Maude—. Lleva mucho tiempo por ahí.

El otro alzó la vista, como si la hubiera oído, y pareció ofendido; pero si lo hubiera visto con más frecuencia, en cualquier otra parte y circunstancia, se habría dado cuenta de que siempre parecía ofendido. Bildow, que estaba hablando, parecía ligeramente ofendido. También lo parecía el joven rechoncho cuyo beligerante interés era la poesía. Quizá estuvieran ofendidos por la conversación que tenía lugar al lado mismo de ellos, en un grupo tan poco atractivo como el suyo pero de otro modo: crepitando con frágil entusiasmo, estos invitados se perseguían entre sí del Royale Saint Germain (en la acera de enfrente) al Deux Magots; saliendo a la Place des Vosges y de vuelta al Flore; cruzando el río hasta el Boeuf sur le Toit y de vuelta a la Brasserie Lipp («Era el sitio favorito de Goering en París, ¿sabes?»); acercándose un rato al Carnavalet y de vuelta al Reine Blanche («Allí fue donde yo vi lo dura que puede ser la policía francesa…»).

—Y lavar la ropa es tan caro, ochenta francos una camisa…

—Por supuesto ninguno de *nosotros* tenía baño en la habitación, pero había un chico encantador de Virginia cuya bañera quedaba libre siempre a partir de las once de la mañana…

—Yo me las arreglaba muy bien, lavándome simplemente en el bidé…

Dondequiera que se encontrasen, parecía que su único logro había sido atravesar una vez aquel océano, y regresar para pregonar mercancías que menospreciaban pero seguían ofreciendo, todas las que tenían almacenadas de momento aunque ya habían encargado un nuevo surtido rutilante («Chipre sonaba como un lugar maravilloso, oí decir que es allí donde tienen esas trompetas, y por la noche cuando van a acostarse asoman un extremo por la ventana y el otro extremo…»).

—Esta vez no nos dio tiempo a *hacer* Italia, pero de todas formas es realmente más importante llegar a conocer *un* lugar realmente *bien,* nosotros estuvimos en París casi una semana entera…

Una melancólica costumbre los llevaba a decir «Bueno, sólo hace un par de semanas que volví, y…», o «Acabo de volver hace nada, y…», o «Bueno, sólo llevo aquí unos días, pero…», dándose cuenta en el fondo de sus mentes de que las estaciones habían cambiado desde su regreso, de que la misma estación que habían pasado allí se acercaba otra vez aquí, dándose cuenta, pese a todas aquellas imágenes vividas que conversaciones como ésta reamueblaban, de que habían vuelto y no podían vender sus mercancías, sino sólo trocarlas, y en especie.

—Creo que *era* en Corfú donde decía, en cualquier caso cuando vas por la calle al anochecer oyes esos sonidos realmente melifluos de esas trompetas…

—Bueno, *nosotros* estábamos allí cuando nuestro embajador depositó una corona en la tumba del soldado desconocido. Se puso de rodillas, y toda la multitud estaba emocionadísima por su acto reverente, y entonces cayó de cara…

—¡Estás hablando de mi marido! —chilló al pasar el que había dado las gracias a Esther por su preciossísima fiesta, que luego se detuvo a hacer una mueca a Don Bildow por encima de sus hombros, y siguió adelante.

—Jamás he visto nada como *eso,* ni siquiera en el Au Soleil Levant. ¿Quién era?

—La Duquesa de Ohio.

Bildow volvió su poco imponente espalda. «No hay una sola chica en todo el cuarto que tenga un buen polvo», dijo su rechoncho compañero, con una expresión como si recordase alguna severa crueldad que le habían infligido en privado años antes. En realidad, era una expresión que rara vez perdía. El tipo alto y encorvado se desabrochó el siguiente botón de la camisa, y dijo: «¿Y qué me decís de Esther, qué pasa con ella?».

—Es curioso que no la conozcas. Antes de casarse andaba por ahí todo el tiempo. Aquel verano en que tu mujer se pegó un tiro Esther estaba siempre en todas partes.

—Yo estaba en Yaddo —dijo el crítico. Se alisó el pelo de la coronilla, pero volvió a ponérsele de punta en cuanto bajó la mano; y el parecido con el grabado de Mozart volvió a resultar notable, no por el largo y grueso labio superior, y la prominente nariz, sino por el peso del pelo que llevaba de manera tan consciente como un hombre del siglo XVIII, pero no por esa plaga de acobardada vanidad conocida como moda, sino por su propia razón nada intimidada: le hacía más grande la cabeza, dando a entender que contenía un cerebro de las dimensiones que según nos asegura la Ciencia podríamos tener todos, si tuviéramos alas—. He oído que estáis en quiebra —dijo a Bildow.

—¿Y yo qué tengo que ver con ello? Ya sabes lo que cuesta sacar adelante una revista.

Se alisó y soltó su obediente pelo.

—¿Vas a utilizar mi artículo sobre Dostoyevski en este número?

—Ejem… no en *éste,* pero…

—Jesucristo, si lo tienes desde hace más de un año. A este paso terminaré el libro antes de que lo saques.

—Bueno, ya sabes. Hay política en la casa, como en todas partes.

—¿Quién va a por mí?

—Bueno, ya sabes, ese artículo sobre Rilke que escribiste el año pasado, mucha gente…

—Jesucristo, ¿y quién tuvo la culpa de eso? Todo el mundo sabe que escribí que las alusiones de Rilke eran a veces «obscuras», y esa estúpida chica de Radcliffe que me lo pasó a máquina puso «obscenas». Me gustaría saber quién demonios corrigió eso. Y poner una *t* en «genial…».

—Yo estaba en Yaddo —dijo Bildow.

Alguien del vecino grupo internacional trató de unírseles, ofreciendo: «¡Imaginaos que Víctor Hugo quería que volviesen a bautizar con su nombre la entera ciudad de París!». Esta credencial le valió miradas frías, aterradoras, no por su severidad, sino por el mismo aire sombrío de las caras implicadas.

—Oí que vas a cruzar el charco —dijo el amigo más bajo de Bildow, sombríamente acusador.

—Sí, dentro de uno o dos meses. Quiero verlo con mis propios ojos —dijo Bildow, manoseándose la corbata amarilla y marrón, sombríamente a la defensiva. Luego añadió—: Es curioso que no esté aquí Max.

—¿Qué tiene de curioso? Ese cabrón listillo…

—Normalmente se deja ver por estas fiestas —dijo Bildow.

—¿Qué demonios te hizo publicar ese poema suyo en el último número? Ese que hablaba de la Belleza que desdeñaba destruirlo.

—Bueno, nosotros… Era…

—¿Has visto sus cuadros? Una mierda todos ellos, aunque tenga cierto sentido de la forma.

—Esa sí que tiene un buen polvo —dijo el poeta rechoncho—. Esa rubia de ahí.

—¿Sabes quién es ésa? Es esa puñetera estúpida de Radcliffe. Edna, la que me jodió ese artículo sobre Rilke, lo único que he escrito que vale por todo lo demás junto, porque yo entendía a Rilke, lo entendía porque él entendía el sufrimiento, respetaba el sufrimiento humano, no como esos mocosos que escriben ahora…

Dejó su copa vacía, vio otra llena, y la cogió antes de que su propietario terminara de decir: «Es como en el cine porque lo tienes todo desplegado ante ti, y sólo tienes que reaccionar, como en el cine no tienes que pagar con tus *auténticas* emociones, no tienes que hacer nada…».

—¿Y quién es ésa de allí, la que está rodeada de todos esos maricas? ¿Agnes Deigh? Jesucristo, pensaba que estaría ya harta de hacer de madre con todos los puñeteros maricones de la ciudad.

Esther se había sentado en el sofá, porque era el único sitio para sentarse que había en la habitación. En cierto momento había pensado que si no se sentaba se caería; pero aun ahora, ya sentada, sentía que estaba cayendo, y apoyó con fuerza la espalda contra el respaldo del sofá, levantando la barbilla como si tratara de salir a la superficie, pues no era una sensación de ir cayendo por el aire, dando vueltas con los miembros absurdamente extendidos en posturas injustificadas, hacia el súbito impacto que tan bruscamente justificaría sus ridículos esfuerzos en un dibujo inalterable de torsiones incongruentes; sino de ir sumergiéndose en el agua donde ningún fondo esperaba para delinear la finalidad. Cada mido parecía

llegarle con la penetración característica de la distancia, aunque quizá fuera obra suya, fruto de sus esfuerzos por eludir los ruidos más próximos tratando de captar los de más allá.

—¿Inadaptado? ¿A *esto?* Bueno, gracias a Dios que lo estoy. Si no me volvería loco —dijo alguien al fondo de la habitación, mientras ella escuchaba.

—Pero tienes que entender Nueva York, es una experiencia social.

—Por eso me gusta, tiene una parte de mujer —llegó entre risitas una voz asmática, mientras otro silbaba un acompañamiento ligeramente retrasado a un pasaje de la *Música acuática* de Haendel. Se abrió la puerta, y ella levantó la cabeza con esperanzada ansiedad, sin saber aún cómo se presentaría, el escritor al que había invitado, y temiendo igualmente que no se presentara; y bajó los ojos con decepcionado alivio, pues el hombre que entró llevaba un bebé en brazos, y enseguida se reunió con la chica de las muñecas vendadas. «¿Para qué *lo* has traído?», lo saludó, y luego se volvió a decir: «Este es mi marido. Llega tarde porque ha estado haciendo funambulismo. Tiene un equipo en el piso y dice que no puede entrenarse cuando estoy allí y estoy allí casi todo el tiempo…».

En el centro de la habitación alguien saludó al chico que había estado buscando cuchillas de afeitar en el botiquín con: «Charles Dickens; Dios mío, me han dicho que has conseguido un trabajo de agente publicitario en la oficina de turismo de Hiroshima. Vengan a ver la Ciudad del Atomo y ese tipo de cosas…».

El gatito se afilaba las uñas en el brazo del sofá. Esther lo agarró y lo atrajo hacia sí. La voz de Ellery seguía siendo la más clara de la habitación. Hablaba con la rubia a unos pasos de distancia. «Hollywood está acabado, encanto. Por qué ir al quinto infierno cuando la tele está aquí mismo en la ciudad. ¿Qué te parece, Benny? ¿No te gustaría para un capítulo de *Vidas de santos* cuando sálga en vídeo…?».

Esther se dio cuenta de que la callada presencia sentada a su lado había estado comiendo todo el tiempo. Tras un huevo relleno se embuchó una salchichita caliente, luego una zanahoria cruda.

—Perdone —dijo ella. Él hizo un ruido mientras seguía comiendo—. ¿Es usted amigo de…?

—Entremeses. Lo único que consigo son entremeses. No paro de pensar en que Benny me llevará a algún sitio a comer, una invitación a cenar en alguna parte, pero lo único que consigo son cócteles, lo único que hacemos es beber por toda la ciudad.

—¿Está también en la televisión?

—No, no lo quiera Dios. Benny y yo fuimos al mismo colegio. —Tosió, y cogió otra salchichita caliente, como molesto por esta interrupción en su comida—. Benny y yo fuimos al mismo colegio —repitió—. ¿Ve este traje? Es de Benny. Me lo ha regalado.

—Es un traje precioso —dijo Esther, mirando la manga de franela gris que le llegaba a la mitad del antebrazo—. Un regalo muy bonito.

—Ahora es demasiado conservador para Benny, dice que ya no puede llevar cosas como ésta. En serio, no se puede imaginar lo diferente que era Benny cuando íbamos al mismo colegio, un tipo callado y formal de verdad. Entonces iba a hacer grandes cosas, iba a diseñar los puentes más hermosos que jamás se hubieran visto, y mírele ahora. Todavía hace un año lo vi y era auténtico, como el tipo que iba conmigo al colegio. Ahora ya no es auténtico. —De repente cogieron la bandeja, y antes de que se la llevaran agarró dos salchichitas y un huevo relleno—. Mírelos —dijo, observando manos casuales que picoteaban huevos rellenos, salchichitas y alguna que otra zanahoria—. Cualquiera diría que tienen hambre, por la forma en que comen. Mire a esa mujer con las uñas blancas, ¿tiene pinta de estar hambrienta? —Había acabado su comida, y se volvió hacia Esther por primera vez—. ¿Sabe algo sobre pianolas?

—Me temo que no, nunca he estado realmente interesada…

—He escrito una historia de la pianola. Una historia completa. He tardado dos años, lo he metido todo. ¿Qué pasa con la gente? ¿Qué es lo que quieren leer, sexo todo el tiempo? ¿Política? Bueno, ¿sabía que —siguió con un tono picante— la princesa heredera de Suecia, la reina de Noruega, el sultán de Johore, todos ellos tuvieron pianolas? Y Anna Held, Julia Marlowe, el presidente McKinley, también tuvieron pianolas. Y el papa Pío X, los hermanos Wright, los buques de la armada rusa…

—Si quiere comer algo —lo interrumpió Esther—, estoy segura de que en la cocina…

—*Cualquier* cosa —dijo, pero su avidez era cansada, pues para entonces el arte había ocupado el lugar del apetito—. Algún día lo imprimiré yo mismo en papel cebolla japonés, encuadernado en vitela… no sé. ¿Es que soy el único que tiene hambre? ¿No come nadie más en Nueva York? —Se detuvo a quitarse un poco de huevo de la manga de franela—. Vitela blanca con estampaciones de oro…

—Estoy segura de que en la cocina…

—Bueno, *¡aquí* estás! —Benny se tambaleaba ante ellos con un vaso goteante en cada mano—. ¿Estás bien? —Se inclinó hacia Esther y le habló en voz baja—: ¿Tienes a mi amigo bien abastecido? Siempre

necesita una copa, pobre hombre. Fuimos al mismo colegio. He tenido que llevarlo a todas las fiestas de la ciudad durante las últimas dos semanas. No sé lo qué hará cuando estoy en los estudios.

Esther sintió que habla recuperado las fuerzas, y se puso en pie mientras el brazo que tenía al lado se alzaba obedientemente hacia la copa. No vio a Ellery y la rubia, y acababa de echar a andar hacia Don Bildow cuando Herschel la cogió del brazo.

—Cariño, aquí hay una cocina, ¿verdad? Porque necesitamos un poquito de mante-quilla… y cariño, ¿no ha venido todavía Rudy? Conoces a Rudy, ¿verdad? Debes de conocerlo, diseñó ese nuevo vestido Doukhobor, el que se desprende con un simple toque, ¿no es terrible-mente tolstoiano? Y ahora está diseñando ropa deportiva para monjas. ¡Pues vaya, antes de terminar acabará él mismo en la Iglesia! ¿No es eso demasiado amanerado? Vaya, hasta Agnes dice…

—Batisiderodromofobia. [10] Y ése es sólo uno de sus problemas.

—Pero ¿por qué se hace todo el mundo de la Iglesia Romana? Cuando hay tantísimas otras religiones divinamente divertidas…

—Creo que la adoración del sol sería algo de lo más divinamente inspirador, simplemente imaginaos a toda esta gente yendo de un lado a otro en cueros vivos…

—Me gustaría empezar ahora mismo…

—*Yo* necesito un nuevo mesías…

—Todas lo necesitamos, cariño…

—Ese alto cargado de hombros con la camisa verde de cuello abierto, a *ese* le seguiría a *cualquier* parte…

—Y no te serviría de nada —dijo Agnes Deigh, inclinándose hacia adelante con un cigarrillo en la boca, buscando fuego—. Probablemente te rompería cada huesecito del cuerpo.

—¡Qué ferocidad! Agnes, prométeme que me lo presentarás.

De las tres llamas que le ofrecían, Agnes Deigh se inclinó sobre una y volvió a arrellanarse en su asiento, bajando el cigarrillo.

—Querido, no es en modo alguno más fuerte que tú.

—Pero tiene un aire tan *ín*-timo.

—Lo tiene —dijo Agnes, mirando hacia el fondo de la habitación—. Es porque es miope.

—Agnes, querida, lo dices de un modo tan *amar*-go. ¿Qué es *él* para Hécuba, cariño?

—Oh Dios, no hablemos de ello. Pasé más de un año escuchando sus problemas con su mujer, con su infancia, con la religión, con su trabajo, en serio, cuidándolo como una enfermera…

—¡Agnes, qué enfadadísima estás!

Ciertamente, su cara había adoptado una expresión severa que ninguno de ellos le había visto jamás; pero con la misma rapidez con que había aparecido, se suavizó en una de cansado desencanto. Luego dijo pensativamente, sin mirar a nadie: «La gente que te pide compasión te odia después por dársela. Siempre te odian después». Lo vio atravesar la habitación abriéndose paso a codazos, como si caminara con nieve hasta las rodillas.

La puerta principal se abrió y cerró tres veces en rápida sucesión: la primera ráfaga de aire rozó la flor que sustentaba Agnes Deigh para arrancar un pétalo mustio y arrastrarlo revoloteando por la habitación. «¡Buster!». «¡Sonny!». «Pero ¿cómo has llegado aquí?». El segundo era Stanley; y el tercero un hombrecillo de piel morena y unos cinco pies de altura, vestido con un elegante traje de zapa gris, que miró alegremente a su alrededor, arqueó las cejas, se encogió de hombros y aceptó una copa. (En realidad era el agregado comercial argentino, que se había equivocado de fiesta).

Maude estaba sentada con los ojos cerrados, moviendo levemente la cabeza en la mano del hombre de uniforme. «La verdad es que ya no hago cosas felices», decía. «Supongo que es porque es más fácil no hacerlas, porque cuando las haces, y luego las recuerdas, es mucho peor que si nunca las hubieras hecho; es mucho mejor no tener cosas felices que recordar, entonces no las recuerdas ni te pones triste porque ya no las haces, es más fácil no tener nada que recordar…». Él se inclinó hacia adelante y le sopló suavemente en el pelo.

—¿Quién delira ahora? —dijo alguien, mientras el señor Feddle se abría paso a lo largo de la pared, con el cuidado que pone un barco de cabotaje en no aventurarse a mar abierto; su cargamento era *Los siete pilares de la sabiduría,* y buscaba una dársena donde poder dedicarlo en paz. Benny se acercaba a la chica muy atractiva que hablaba con acento bostoniano. La mujer alta dijo: «Entonces es tu marido quien escribe. ¿Qué tipo de cosas?». «Dios lo sabe», dijo la chica de las muñecas vendadas. «Dios y la Congregación del Santo Oficio. Todo lo que escribe va directamente al *Index,* y no puedo leerlo». «Entonces, ¿eres católica?». «Dios mío, sí».

La chica muy atractiva, señalando a Benny, se volvió hacia Ed Feasley y dijo: «Dile a tu amigo que soy

un horizonte perdido, ¿quieres?». «Crissto», dijo Feasley, «no lo conozco. Con ese traje parece un vendedor de cepillos. Quizá pueda venderle un traje». Ella arqueó las cejas. «Bueno, Crissto, tengo que hacer algo. Desde que estrellé el último coche he estado viviendo del almuerzo gratis en el Club de Harvard, y buscando entre los cojines de esos sillones grandes que tienen allí las monedas que se les caen de los bolsillos a esos viejos cabrones. Crissto».

Benny se volvió con aire inseguro hacia Agnes Deigh; pero ella se había levantado y acercado a rodear con un brazo a Stanley, que se apartó encogiéndose.

—Stanley, ha ocurrido algo horrible… —empezó, y al mirar por encima de su hombro se encontró con la cara sombría del crítico.

—Hola —dijo él—. ¿Qué tal va todo, Agnes?

—Bastante bien, supongo —contestó ella, y apartó el brazo de los hombros de Stanley—. No sabía que conocías a Esther.

—Acabo de conocerla —dijo él. Su tono era apagado.

—¿Qué tal va tu novela? —preguntó ella con aire impaciente.

—Bueno, todavía no la he terminado, pero…

—¿Y la autobiografía de Dostoyevski?

—Mira, Agnes, no empieces con eso esta noche, esa mierda de la autobiografía.

—Relájate —dijo Agnes Deigh—. Tómate otra copa.

—De acuerdo. Pero no empieces…

—No estoy empezando nada. Ahora relájate.

—Debes estar pasándolo bien aquí. Nunca he visto tantos maricas en una habitación, maricas y escoria de los barrios altos y publicistas baratos…

Agnes Deigh le volvió la espalda. «Stanley, hay algo de lo que quiero hablarte», dijo, y le llevó de vuelta a su sillón. Benny se dirigía hacia el fondo de la habitación, donde estaba Ellery con la rubia arrinconada contra un aparador y la mano en sombra, moviéndose apenas. A Benny le temblaba el labio.

—Señora… señora… —Esther sintió que le tiraban de la falda, y al bajar la vista vio a la niñita del piso de abajo. «Me manda mamá a que le pida más píldoras para dormir…». «Espera un momento», dijo, mirando, y puso la mano en la cabeza de la niña. «Tiene usted *montones* de amigos, ¿verdad?», dijo la niña, alzando la vista hacia ella. «Mamá también tenía, pero ya no…».

—Tienes que conocer al señor Crotcher —dijo alguien a Esther, a su lado. Era Buster Brown (a quien tampoco conocía). La pareja se le había acercado como una depravada versión de cuerpo y alma, el uno andando con piececitos de gato (como él mismo observó), y el otro con un traje marrón de paño grueso, más próximo al suelo a cada paso, como si empujara una carretilla cargada de cemento. Estrechó la mano de Esther con aire de gran fatiga—. Pero no nos ha dicho lo que *hace* —le dijo Buster.

—Soy escritor —respondió.

—Oh. ¿Qué tipo de cosas hace? —preguntó Esther, dejando caer el peso de su mano, y bajando la vista como si esperase verla caer al suelo.

—Escribo.

—Sí, pero… ah… ¿ficción?

—Mi libro ha sido traducido a diecinueve idiomas.

—Debo conocerlo —dijo Esther—. Debo haber *oído* hablar de él.

—Lo dudo —dijo el modesto autor—. Todavía no se ha publicado.

—Pero usted ha dicho…

—Lo he traducido yo mismo. A diecinueve idiomas. Sólo me quedan sesenta y seis, sin contar los dialectos. Ahora estoy con el celta. Hermosa lengua, el celta. Sólo tardé ocho meses en aprender celta. Debería salir en celta.

—¿Quiere decir publicarse?

—Sí, publicarse en celta. Tarde o temprano daré con una lengua en la que lo publiquen. Entonces podré retirarme al campo. Es lo único que quiero, retirarme al campo. El próximo es el gaélico.

—Debe de ser un libro terriblemente sucio —dijo Buster.

El señor Grotcher le echó una mirada de severo odio académico que ninguna cantidad de amor, en ninguna lengua, podría esperar borrar.

—Es una novela sobre la vida de las hormigas —dijo.

—Señora, ¿puede llevarme al cuarto de baño…?

—Tendrán que perdonarme —dijo Esther, tomando de la mano a la niña.

—Vaya, señora —dijo la niña mientras cruzaban la habitación—, debería cuidar a su bebé.

—*¿Qué?*

—Debería cambiarle el pañal —dijo señalando. Esther vio al bebé en el suelo, tratando de trepar por la pierna de un hombrecillo de piel morena vestido de gris claro.

Al otro lado de la habitación la chica de las muñecas vendadas decía a su marido:

—¿Qué has hecho con él?

—Se lo ha llevado una chica —dijo él—. La reconocerás enseguida, tiene la lengua verde.

—El crío está bien, si es eso de lo que estáis hablando —dijo la mujer alta—. Un hombre con muy buena pinta parece estar jugando con él a algún tipo de juego. —Se volvió hacia su marido y dijo—: ¿Quién crees que será ese sudaquilla tan vistoso?

—Pero eso es lo maravilloso de Francia —dijo alguien—. Absolutamente *to*-do está en venta.

—Hemos descubierto un restaurante francés de lo más delicioso —dijo una chica—. Todo está cocinado con ajo, así es como puedes distinguir…

Lo interrumpió la Duquesa de Ohio, que le preguntó si se llamaba Maude.

—Pues no. ¿Por qué?

—Me han dicho que alguien llamado Maude sabe dónde se pueden conseguir bebés ¡enviados por correo desde No-ruega!

—¿Quieres uno *tú*?

—Cariño, me siento como si fuera a tener uno.

La chica se le quedó mirando.

—No he visto nada como esto desde el Morro Castle —dijo la mujer alta, mirando a su alrededor—. Parece que en cualquier momento se van a poner todos a cantar «Más cerca de Ti, Dios mío».

—Crissto, qué fiesta —dijo un joven a Esther, deteniéndola cuando salía del cuarto de baño, mientras la niña corría hacia la puerta esquivando obstáculos—. ¿Te traigo una copa?

—Es mi fiesta, y muchísimas gracias —dijo Esther, sintiéndose mal de nuevo.

—Oh, Crissto, lo siento. —Ed Feasley estaba doblando cuatro sucios billetes de dólar. Se los metió en el bolsillo—. Maldito negociejo de mierda.

—¿Qué?

—¿Ves a ese tipo de aspecto andrajoso con la camisa verde?

—Oh sí, lo conozco, es…

—Acabo de venderle un traje.

—Pero… no parece que tus trajes… vayan a sentarle bien —siguió Esther, charlando automáticamente.

—Jamás le vendería uno de los míos —dijo Feasley—. Le he dicho que fuera a comprarse un traje en Brooks. Puede cargarlo en la cuenta de mi viejo. ¿Qué puedo hacer si no? ¿Vender un acorazado?

Se quedaron mirando la habitación.

—¿Cómo puedes conocer a toda esta gente?

—En realidad no la conozco, para ser sincera —dijo Esther, buscando a alguien que pudiera identificar. Estaba James Leak, que decía que había publicado un libro titulado *Con cámara y fusil en Flatbush y Greenpoint,* aunque nadie había visto nunca un ejemplar, y que ahora se dedicaba a desenmascarar la conspiración suiza para dominar el mundo. Estaba Arthur, uno con barba que estaba escribiendo una nueva vida de Cristo para publicarla bajo seudónimo, el mismo seudónimo que había utilizado cuando hizo la crítica de su primer libro, publicado con su verdadero nombre, una sátira de la Biblia tan mal recibida que se unió al coro de sus detractores y se desquitó consigo mismo citando a Charles Reade y a George Borrow, calificándola de excrecencia de hiperafectación. «Sí», decía a una chica llamada Izarra (había sacado aquello de una botella de licor; su verdadero nombre era Minna Vesendorf). «Por supuesto que va a ser autobiográfico. Todos los libros lo son».

Otro decía: «Cuando acabe esta crítica psicoanalítica de Madre Oca voy a meterme de lleno con la Revelación de san Juan el Divino…».

Otro dijo: «Esa se corrió de gusto anoche hablando de Ischia…». Cerca, alguien preguntó por un hombre delgado de mediana edad que estaba justo fuera del alcance del oído, a quien habían contratado como instructor en uno de los mejores internados de chicos de la Costa Este. «Bueno, no sé si se da cuenta realmente de lo que está haciendo, se tumba a su lado y los besa…».

—No pasa nada mientras no les dé la vuelta…

—¿Y de dónde has sacado esas cejas? —preguntó alguien en aquel rincón a la Duquesa de Ohio, que se estaba abanicando con una vieja revista. «Si no llevara estas cejas no podría tener un aspecto tan feroscísimo». La revista era *Días de perros,* abierta por la foto del campeón Dictador von Ehebruch.

—Por supuesto que creo en el Arte —dijo cerca de ellos una chica con la lengua verde—. Pero no para

mirarlo sin más.

—Crissto, quiero decir, ¿sabes? Quiero decir, Crissto, ¿no te intriga qué intentan hacer todos ellos? Quiero decir, mira a ese tipo con ojos de loco que acaba de entrar…

—¡Dios! —dijo Esther, que lo agarró del brazo y por un instante lo hizo estremecer, dejándolo mudo.

Esther cruzó la habitación con la cara sonrojada, como si aquel súbito desafío suspendiera temporalmente el extenuante terror que había llegado a ser el tejido de su vida, igual que el rubor de sus mejillas ocupaba el lugar de la transparente palidez que había bañado su cara hacía sólo unas horas.

—Oye, ¿dónde está tu gatito? Sólo quien ama a los gatitos puede entender…

—Por favor, suéltame.

—Pero tienes que oír esto. El gatito… quiero decir que Paulov tenía un experimento con luces, y cuando hacía sonar una campana… qucjnsss.

—Esther…

—Querido, ¿no has bebido ya bastante…?

—Esther, querida —la detuvo la mujer alta—, esa música parece terriblemente alta, incluso para Bach… Querida, ¿adónde vas?, ¿qué pasa?

La música era la *Gran fuga;* una trompa la levantó, la hizo girar por el aire y la mantuvo en alto un momento; luego la dejó caer, y descendió apaciblemente sobre cuerdas.

—Está aquí… —dijo Esther, perdiendo ya el rubor—. Ha venido… aquí.

—¿Sí…? Pues yo no veo a nadie —dijo la mujer alta, paseando la vista por la habitación con la cabeza echada hacia atrás, dejando caer los párpados a la altura de sus pestañas inmóviles con un gesto bastante desdeñoso—, nadie que parezca cuáquero, desde luego… desde luego nadie cuya foto haya visto en la solapa de un libro… —Luego bajó la cara con tanta rapidez que los tersos y orgulloso huecos donde tenía los ojos se surcaron de arrugas, fruncidos por las cejas, y—: ¿Quién crees *tú* que…? —murmuró, observando cómo Esther se abalanzaba hacia la puerta y agarraba del brazo a una figura sin sombrero ni abrigo ni corbata, que inmediatamente quedó oculta por su espalda.

—¿Has vuelto… aquí? —dijo Esther casi con un susurro.

—No sabía que tenías una fiesta. Yo… no quiero molestar.

—Pero tú… ven… —Esther atrajo hacía sí con un gesto convulsivo el brazo que tenía agarrado, y luego, como sobresaltada por esto, estuvo a punto de soltarlo, pero no lo soltó, volviéndose hacia el pasillo del dormitorio, atrapada por un instante en los ojos castaños del crítico fijos en ella, una mirada que se sacudió y siguió adelante, conteniendo la tensión de la música en la muñeca que se había puesto rígida bajo su mano—. Entra, entra… en el dormitorio. Toda esta gente no es… no… ¿dónde has estado? —preguntó cuando alcanzaron el refugio del pasillo.

—En un baño turco —contestó al momento.

—Oh no, tú… quiero decir… cierra la puerta. —Se sentó en el borde de la cama, agarrándola con una mano a cada lado, y lo miró. Él se dirigió hacia el armario. Entonces ella dijo—: Tú… —y le tembló la voz, por lo que se detuvo e hizo un esfuerzo por tragar saliva, tratando de llenar el gran hueco que tenía tras la lengua—. Casi como si supiera que ibas a venir —dijo, y luego añadió—, y te esperase. —Al oír esto se volvió hacia ella, y Esther se estremeció, pues su cara reflejaba la leve sorpresa que tan bien conocía su memoria, pues también ahora, como entonces, lo había interrumpido. Allí estaba él, en su memoria, generalmente sentado pero a veces de pie ante una ventana dándole la espalda, ajeno a su acercamiento, por lo que fueran cuales fueran las circunstancias o sus intenciones ella volvía sigilosos sus pasos, y a veces trataba incluso de retirarse y dejarle allí; pero él siempre se volvía, como ahora, interrumpido, transformando en expectación su gesto de sorpresa, mirándola, esperando.

Pero todo esto ocurría muy deprisa, y a veces, antes de darse cuenta, le prendía fuego al pelo, o lo veía así, ¿qué diferencia había?, o lo veía con sangre chorreándole por un lado de la cara (como había aparecido aquella mañana cuando recibieron la noticia de que el almacén donde tenía guardados sus primeros cuadros se había quemado, y él salió con un corte de navaja en la mejilla), y aquella misma leve expectación, esperando a que se lo dijera.

Pero ahora le volvió la espalda.

—Sólo he venido a recoger unas cosas —dijo, y se quedó allí parado, agarrándose una mano con la otra ante sí, mirando al suelo. Ella observó cómo los rasgos de su cara volvían a adoptar una expresión confusa, y sentada aún en el borde de la cama le preguntó:

—¿Qué cosas?

—Bueno, la… debe haber algo de ropa. Algo de ropa. Porque esto…

Volvió a detenerse, agarrándose la raída solapa negra, y la miró.

—Ha pasado tanto tiempo —dijo ella, empezando a levantarse. Pero luego se limitó a agarrarse una rodilla con las manos, y se quedó sentada—. ¿Te vas a ir? —le preguntó, y enseguida lo sintió, pues pareció desconcertado y no la miró—. ¿No te vas a quedar? —añadió bruscamente.

—¿A quedar? —repitió, y la miró.

—¿No has vuelto para… para quedarte…? ¿Conmigo?

Se le escapó la rodilla de entre las manos apretadas.

—Bueno, no, sólo he venido a… recoger unas cosas, yo… tengo que ir a un sitio esta noche, tengo que… hacer algo. —Pronunciaba cada palabra como si pretendiese decir otra, deformándolas con los labios, y se quedó allí parado con aire indeciso—. Entiendes, yo… —empezó de nuevo, pero ella lo interrumpió secamente mientras se levantaba.

—Está bien, simplemente me lo preguntaba. A una mujer le gusta saber esas cosas.

—Pero tú…

—Pero tienes mejor aspecto que cuando estuviste aquí hace unos días, ¿no? —siguió ella con voz cortante.

—Sí, estoy cansado.

—¿Dónde has estado?

—En un baño turco.

—¿Todo este tiempo?

—No, yo… sí.

—¿Por qué? ¿Por qué? ¿Por qué?

—Oh, allí te… hacen todo tipo de cosas. Calor y frío, y vapor… y agua fría, y te aporrean, y tú… y ellos… te hacen todo tipo de cosas para hacerte… para que sientas…

Se volvió otra vez hacia el armario, dio un paso y luego un respingo al ver su imagen brevemente en el espejo.

—Oh, pero eso… lo siento —dijo ella, riendo, mientras se le acercaba rodeando el pie de la cama.

—Bueno, no… pensé que fuera mía —dijo, otra vez confuso, quitándose la chaqueta que había descolgado de una percha. Sus atrevidas mangas a cuadros le llegaban a los nudillos, y los faldones le cubrían holgadamente los muslos.

—Lo siento —dijo Esther, y dejó de reír—. Es… alguien la dejó ahí.

—Pero son todas iguales —dijo él desde el armario.

—Tus cosas están aquí dentro, en estos cajones. —Dejó de acercarse a él, y abrió un cajón bajo. Cuando se enderezó había recuperado ya la impaciencia—. Cuando alguien lleva fuera tanto tiempo como tú has estado —empezó. Se estaba poniendo otra vez la arrugada chaqueta negra que había dejado caer al suelo—. Pero toma —dijo Esther, sacando ropa doblada del cajón—, seguramente habrá aquí algo que te vaya mejor que… eso.

Pero él se abrochó la chaqueta, utilizando ambas manos para cada botón.

—Esto —dijo ella.

Cogió el traje que le tendía, uno gris liso de urdimbre diagonal.

—Bueno, ¿es que no te lo vas a poner?

Él lo dobló y lo dejó sobre la cama, comprobando al mismo tiempo la firmeza de los botones de la chaqueta que llevaba puesta, como si de repente temiera perderla.

—¿No te vas a poner esto?

—Me… lo voy a llevar, y una camisa. También unas camisas.

Entonces dio un paso hacia ella, y luego otro; y se detuvo, levantando la cabeza, con las manos abiertas ante sí, abiertas como para agarrar aunque ya había retrocedido medio paso; y ella, irguiéndose con unas camisas en las palmas de las manos, alzó la cara hacia la suya, uniendo sus fuerzas con las del espejo a su espalda.

—¿Qué es?

Pero con aquel medio paso se retiró una imagen, y manteniendo sus ojos verdes fijos en ella se recuperó, medio paso y luego otro, con lo que Esther se dejó caer contra la cómoda, sosteniendo las camisas entre ambos con los brazos más extendidos aún, y repitió:

—¿Qué es?

La puerta se abrió de golpe. La música entró en tromba.

—¿Qué es lo que…?

—Perdón.

Formas dislocadas, Glen Urquhart gris mitigado por pelo rubio en un brioso tupé, acribillaron la pared;

un dibujo periférico que se borró al instante cuando la puerta se cerró de golpe.

—¿Qué era?

—Purcell.

—No.

Tenía las manos sobre las suyas, bajo la blanca masa cuadrada de las camisas, uñas frías y suaves nudillos arrugados contra sus duras palmas.

—¿La música?

—No. —Los pulgares hacia fuera, las palmas hacia arriba bajo el peso que sostenían, sus hombros se relajaron, y abrió un poco más las manos, para contraerías al momento al no encontrar apoyo cuando él apartó las suyas, primero limpiamente la derecha, y luego con un paroxismo fugaz la izquierda.

Y entonces le fue arrebatado el peso de aquellas camisas, y sus manos se alzaron vacías, con dedos redondos, romos y separados.

La masa de las camisas se deshizo sobre la cama cuando él las dejó caer, y se agarró la mano izquierda con la derecha, donde las venas se destacaban en hinchados afluentes que sobresalían entre los ásperos bultos de los nudillos, ramificándose minuciosamente en los dedos cuya severidad articulaban.

—Aquella noche… —dijo Esther mirándole las manos, las suyas retiradas para proteger las cuencas, carne sobre hueso y las puntas redondeadas de sus dedos apuntando hacia aquella suave elevación que se alzaba sobre ellos hasta que los pulgares no pudieron tocarse sobre su cintura—. Aquella noche —repitió, doblando las puntas de los dedos sobre la blanda elevación, y las yemas de los pulgares se tocaron—. Cuando quise… ¿hacerte la manicura? —Levantó la vista hacia su cara, y sonrió con el esfuerzo hasta que dijo—: Y tú… te apartaste igual que ahora… —cada palabra drenando la sonrisa de su cara, y bajó los ojos, y las manos vacías cayeron a sus costados.

Esperó, y no oyó ninguna respuesta, pero observándolo vio que los labios se le ponían tirantes.

—¿Qué has estado haciendo durante todo este tiempo? —le preguntó perentoriamente, y se sentó en la cama.

Él se volvió hacia las camisas, que acababa de dejar desigualmente apiladas sobre la cama, y empezó a ordenarlas en un cuidadoso montón.

—Nada —contestó automáticamente.

—¡Nada! —repitió ella, y se enderezó.

—Unas cuantas cosas… trabajando, algo así como… cosas experimentales.

—¿Pintura? ¿Y qué tipo de cosas?

—Sí, algo así… ese tipo de cosas.

—¿Pintura?

Alzó la vista hacia ella, rápidamente y volviéndola enseguida a lo que estaba haciendo, cuadrando el montón entre sus manos.

—Cuando uno mira hoy a su alrededor —dijo con esfuerzo— no parece haber… mucho que valga la pena hacer.

—Bueno, ¿entonces de qué sirve…? —le espetó—. ¿Seguir adelante sólo para descubrir lo que no vale la pena hacer?

—Encuentras… —musitó—, si puedes encontrar, de ese modo…

—¿Estás muy enfermo? —dijo Esther.

—¿Enfermo? —Levantó la vista, pálido y sorprendido.

—Todo está igual que estaba, ¿no? Sólo que peor. —Empezó a hablar rápidamente de nuevo, mientras se ponía en pie—. Lo único que has hecho es enredarlo todo más y más, ¿no? Vaya, la forma en que has apartado de mí las manos ahora mismo, como si fueran algo…

—Esther…

—Y tus complejos de culpabilidad y todo lo demás, seguro que no ha hecho más que empeorar, todo ello. Y la forma en que has apartado de mí las manos ahora mismo, igual que cuando acabábamos de casarnos y apenas te conocía, y cuanto más tiempo llevábamos casados menos… me hablabas, y ni siquiera ahora, ¿no quieres hablar conmigo?

—De verdad, Esther, yo… no he venido a discutir contigo.

Lo dijo como aquel que ella recordaba, y ella insistió:

—No quieres discutir, dices cosas como ésa pero no quieres discutir, no quieres hablar… conmigo…

—Maldita sea, yo… Esther, sólo he venido a recoger unas cosas.

—¡Pues recógelas! ¡Llévatelas! ¡Llévatelas!

Empezó a doblar las camisas junto con el traje gris, apretando los labios contra los sonidos que brotaban

de ella.

—Porque no hay otra, ¿no? Estás solo ahora, ¿no? ¿Estás solo ahora?

—Esther, Dios santo… por favor…

—Ignorancia y deseo, me dijiste… Oh, me has dicho tantas cosas, ¿no? Todas nuestras metas más elevadas son inhumanas, me dijiste, ¿te acuerdas? Yo no lo olvido. Pero el remordimiento nos tiene aquí atados a la ignorancia y el deseo, y… y… no lágrimas saladas entonces, sino…

De nuevo jadeaba, se estremecía, pero no estaba dispuesta a dejarlo.

—Y qué es ahora, esa realidad de la que hablabas —siguió con más calma—. Como si pudieras negar algo sin tener nada para sustituir lo que rechazas, como si… Oh sí, el cero no existe, me dijiste. ¡El cero no existe! Y yo… te vi convertirte en nadie aquí mismo, delante de mí, y una simple… pose se transformó en una vida, hasta que empezaste a intentar que las cosas negativas funcionasen como positivas. Y tu familia y tu infancia, y luego tu enfermedad y tus estudios para el sacerdocio, y… cuando me casé contigo hablábamos de todo eso de forma inteligente, y creí que lo habías superado, y que lo entendías, pero no, no lo has superado, y no lo superarás, nunca lo superarás, y nunca… nunca te permitirás ser feliz. —Esther hablaba de nuevo rápidamente, y se detuvo como para dar efecto a la suavidad de su voz cuando siguió, aunque su memoria la agobiaba con detalles que eran lo que intentaba rechazar—. En este mundo hay cosas como la alegría, las hay, hay cosas maravillosas, y hay bondad y buena voluntad, y tú te encoges de hombros. Y yo pensaba que era divertido, que entendías muy bien las cosas cuando hacías eso, pero al final resulta que es lo único que sabes hacer, ¿no? ¿No?

Estaba al otro lado de la cama sosteniendo su lío de ropa ante sí, manteniéndole la mirada, irritado, y sonrió, listo para hablar.

—Y tu sonrisa —siguió ella—, ni siquiera tu sonrisa está viva, porque has renunciado, te has apartado de la vida, y te…

—Pero el pasado —le interrumpió—, cada instante del pasado se rehace constantemente, se agita y quiebra y cambia, y a cada minuto descubrimos que uno tenía razón… que estaba equivocado, hasta que…

Esther entraba a saco en los fragmentos que su memoria le bombeaba, los cogía de cualquier modo, agarrándolos según afloraban y aferrándose a cada uno de ellos hasta que los arrojaba entre ambos.

—Las fronteras entre el bien y el mal deben ser definidas de nuevo, deben ser fijadas de nuevo, eso es lo que debe hacer un hombre hoy día, ¿no? ¡Un hombre! ¿No era así…? —Se detuvo, reteniendo aquello un momento más, llevándose de hecho la mano a la frente como si lo hiciera, examinando sus detalles y bajando la voz—. Sí, no podías aceptar un mundo en el que el problema del mal se resolviera con un poco de astucia —añadió palabra a palabra, sordamente—, y tú… Oh sí, mediante la confesión, restablecer de nuevo el orden entre tú y el mundo… —Y la voz de Esther se fue apagando mientras miraba fijamente la cama entre ambos.

—Sí, sigue, sigue hablando —dijo él ávidamente cuando se detuvo, mirándola.

Pues el caso es que aquello procedía de una obra de teatro que ella había leído poco después de que Otto se embarcara para Centroamérica, una obra de Silone titulada *Y él se escondió:* pero aun ahora, al alzar la vista, Esther vio aquellas palabras en los labios que tenía delante, levemente separados con expectación. Y empezó otra vez:

—Me gustaría…

—Sí, lo entiendes —prorrumpió él—, lo entiendes, es por eso por lo que esto es crucial, ¿lo entiendes, no? Cómo va a expiar esto…

—¡Expiar! —Volvió a aceptarle, allí parado con la mano extendida.

—Y no es sólo expiación, sino… por eso es crucial, porque ésta es la única forma de saber que somos reales, esta acción moral, ¿lo entiendes, no?, la única forma de saber que los demás son reales…

Una oleada de náusea le traspasó el cuerpo, y Esther se agarró a la esquina de la mesita de noche que tenía a la espalda, tambaleándose un poco, tragando saliva de nuevo.

—Si hubiéramos tenido un niño… —murmuró—. Sí, si hubiéramos…

—Y tú lo entiendes —le seguía llegando su voz—, que esta acción moral no es sólo hablar y… palabras, que la moral no es sólo teorías e ideas, que la única forma de llegar a la realidad es este sentido moral…

—¡Para ya! —gritó ella—. ¡Para ya…! —Se contuvo y volvió a alzar rápidamente el pañuelo, pues la saliva, temiendo ser tragada, se le escapaba por la comisura de la boca—. ¡Sentido moral! —le espetó con fuerza—. ¿Crees que las mujeres tienen… alguna moral?, ¿que… que las mujeres pueden permitírselo?

—Esther… —Se acercó a ella rodeando el pie de la cama.

—¡Oh, no! —dijo ella—. ¡No! ¿Sabes cuánto tiene que proteger?, ¿y cada minuto más? Y vosotros os inventáis esas cosas, y la obligáis a aceptarlas, los hombres cogen su propia culpa y la llaman sentido moral

y la oprimen con ella en el nombre de… —Retrocedió mientras se acercaba—. En el nombre de Cristo por qué no sigues adelante y… perseveras en lo que empezaste, y te haces cura, que es lo tuyo, en vez de… venir aquí donde yo… —se estremeció cuando la agarró del brazo— tengo tanto que proteger.

—Esther —le dijo él, muy cerca.

—Pero ahora… estás aquí —le dijo ella con un susurro. La náusea había cesado tan bruscamente como había empezado, dejándola agarrada por él con los dientes castañeteando mientras hablaba, y sus lágrimas no cayeron sino que se esparcieron uniformemente por la humedad de sus mejillas. Le buscó la muñeca con dos dedos, e intentó cogerla—. Tú… —articuló con un jadeo frenético contra su cara—, ahora estás aquí para… quedarte y protegerme…

Se quedaron allí parados, con tres sentidos encerrados en el eco del cuarto, y ella se lamió el labio.

—Perdón…

La puerta golpeó contra la pared.

—Siguen ahí simplemente hablando…

La puerta se cerró de golpe.

—Esther… ¿no lo entiendes? —Su mano se abrió.

—No te… vas a…

—Todavía no, porque esta noche, cuando haya hecho lo que tengo que hacer…

—¡Todavía no!

Se apartó como si se hubiera arrancado de él. El lío de ropa cayó al suelo. Él extendió una mano, y luego la retiró lentamente, y se agachó a recoger la ropa.

Esther se quedó mirando sólo un momento el negro arrugado de su inestable figura agachada. Luego desplegó el pañuelo, que había tenido apretado todo el tiempo en la mano, y se sonó la nariz mientras cruzaba la habitación hasta el espejo, y él retrocedía hacia la puerta.

—Será mejor que me vaya —dijo desde allí.

Ella no contestó. Había cogido un lápiz de labios, y fruncía la boca ante el espejo, dibujándose unos labios generosos. Entonces rompió sobre ella una oleada de ruido, y alzó rápidamente la vista mientras la puerta se abría tras él, y él se quedó allí parado en el curso de las olas que entraban en tromba a su alrededor, dándoles la espalda, no erguido sino inmóvil como una roca firme contra la pleamar, segura hasta el cambio de la marea.

—Porque esa… cosa que tengo que hacer es… crucial, Esther.

—*¿Crucial?* —repitió con calma, sin apartar aún la vista del espejo—. Y crees que saldrá bien, bueno, pues no. Sea lo que sea no saldrá bien.

Mientras hablaba se miraba los labios, se detuvo a apretarlos, los frunció, los entreabrió enseñando sus grandes dientes y se los retocó metiendo entre ellos el pañuelo. Luego se quedó quieta, seca y callada, mientras la puerta se cerraba tras él, apoyado contra la hoja.

—¿Qué vas a hacer? —le preguntó—. No me refiero a esa… cosa que te traes entre manos, esa cosa crucial, sea lo que sea, me da igual lo que sea, pero después de todo eso, ¿qué vas a hacer? ¿Qué vas a hacer?

—No lo sé, pero creo… —empezó precipitadamente, y cuando siguió su voz sonó tensa pero por primera vez no había en ella ninguna duda, y ningún esfuerzo por dominar la excitación—, si seguimos adelante… si seguimos adelante al final nos vemos obligados a hacer lo que hay que hacer, pero… y cómo puedo saber ahora dónde, o con quién… o qué será.

Entonces perdió el equilibrio y estuvo a punto de caer mientras la puerta se abría a su espalda empujada por otra mano.

—¡Rose!

—Te vi aquí.

—Mi navaja, me la olvidé —dijo entre ambas, volviéndose—. Una navaja de afeitar con cachas negras, ¿está en el cuarto de baño?

Rose lo siguió hasta allí. Mientras la buscaba se detuvo un momento, vuelto a medias hacia ella, como ligeramente confuso por el aroma de lavanda que arrastraba consigo.

—Rose…

—He oído un poema —dijo Rose—. «Un imán colgado en una ferretería…».

—No está aquí.

—Rose —dijo Esther—, esa música está demasiado alta, Rose.

A su alrededor los ruidos de voces alcanzaban crestas separadas, rompían en rociadas y quedaban flotando como espuma a flor de agua en la superficie del oleaje, mientras la música se elevaba y caía, y las

mismas caras parecían destacarse en una prominencia momentánea, inmediatamente sumida en la hondonada que la seguía. Así se elevó la cara de Benny, y sobresalió hinchada por el esfuerzo, y volvió a caer perdiéndose de vista.

—Para descubrir lo que es el sexo no tienes más que extenderlo y *soplar*.

Al bajar la vista Esther vio al gatito, despatarrado boca abajo entre unos grandes pulgares. «Trae, dámelo, dámelo», dijo, rescatándolo. Por un momento volvieron a asaltarle las náuseas.

—Es la peor sensación del mundo —dijo a su lado la mujer alta.

—¿Qué? —preguntó Esther, atrayendo hacia sí al gatito.

—Saber que has dejado un cigarrillo en alguna parte.

La niñita le tiró de la falda. «Me manda otra vez mamá…». La mujer alta le puso una mano en la muñeca. «No me dijiste que *él* iba a venir esta noche». Esther se volvió rápidamente, sobresaltada.

—¿Lo conoces?

—No, querida, y no sabía que tú lo conocieras.

—Pero… Oh —dijo Esther. Al mirar en torno hacia donde había estado, se dio cuenta de que la mujer alta hablaba de otro.

—¿Te gustó su libro?

—¿Qué libro? —preguntó Esther, mirando hacia donde miraba la mujer alta, hacia un hombre con un traje color canela que acababa de caerse tras tropezar con uno de los lados del sofá.

—¿No me dirás que no has oído hablar de *Los árboles del hogar?* ¿O es que eres uno de esos esnobs que no leen éxitos de ventas?

—No, yo…

—Mi marido dice que le robó el argumento al Holandés Errante, quienquiera que sea. Mi marido conoce a todo tipo de gente.

El hombre del traje canela, de nuevo en pie, estaba diciendo: «¿Por qué iba a molestarme en escribir esa mierda de discursos? Tengo la suerte de poder levantarme ante el Rotaiy Club y soltarlos. Me los escribe un maricón».

Cerca de él, alguien empezó obsequiosamente a derivar *faggot*[11] del griego *phagein.* «Phag-, phago-, -phagous, -phagy, -phagia…», gimió la voz. «Quiere decir comer».

Arny Munk, apoyado contra una pared y rodeado por el brazo de Sonny Byron, dijo:

—La verdad es que debería decir a Maude, debería decirle… uhh… que la Universidad de Rochester ha descubierto uhhhh cómo hacer morfina sintética uhhhhp con tintes de alquitrán de hulla…

—Creo que eres un encanto —dijo sobriamente Sonny Byron.

El señor Feddle estaba de pie sobre una silla, tratando de alcanzar un libro de un estante alto. El oscilante despertador golpeó a una chica en la coronilla, y la chica dejó de cantar «No puedo darte más que amor».

Esther, escuchando atentamente para oír algo que no fuera la voz de la mujer alta, para escapar de ella, sólo oyó un gemido, «la decadencia del significado, y no se puede decir una frase que no la refleje. Te entusiasman los faros herméticos antiniebla. *Enthousiazein:* hace sólo dos mil años significaba estar lleno del espíritu de Dios…».

Habría ido directamente a sentarse en el sofá si Benny no la hubiera cogido de las dos manos y le hubiera dado la vuelta para encararla con él.

—¿Adónde ha ido? ¿Dónde está? ¿Quién era ese?

—Pues… mi marido. ¿Lo conoces?

—¿Dónde está? ¿Qué hacía aquí?

—Sólo ha venido a recoger… unas cosas… —Dos o tres personas se volvieron, curiosas por el tono de sus voces, la de Benny excitadamente alta, mientras que Esther hablaba con titubeante intensidad, como obligada a afirmar, y a repetir la afirmación ante aquella pregunta perentoria, circunstancial e impersonal que era Benny—. Me estás haciendo daño en las muñecas —dijo.

—Pero… creía que no volvería a verlo nunca. No es eso… no es eso… No quería volver a verlo nunca, y ahora está aquí y quiero verlo, tengo que verlo, ¿dónde está?

—No puedo creer que se haya ido de verdad —murmuró ella mientras ambos apartaban los ojos del otro y miraban hacia la puerta, donde solo vieron a aquel joven cuyo pesado bigote parecía vencer su redonda cabeza hacia adelante, mirándolos con aire inocente, inquieto por aquel súbito escrutinio.

—Ellery, ¿lo has visto? Porque estaba aquí hace un momento, ¿lo has visto salir, Ellery?

—Lo siento, vieja. Se rompió una pata. Tuvimos que pegarle un tiro.

—En serio, Ellery, por favor. Tengo que encontrarlo, ¿sigue aquí?

Ella había cogido a Benny del brazo; y quién era él, o qué quería, dejó de interesarle mientras lo llevaba así agarrado hacia adelante, un prodigio mudo que daba fe de que el asunto no era de su incumbencia, sino sólo fruto de la necesidad.

—Una pena pegarle un tiro, un pura sangre como ése…

Era difícil saber si la rubia que tenía Ellery al lado estaba tratando de sonreír, pero no podía, o reprimiendo esa sonrisa que es el saludo cordial de la estupidez a las cuestiones cuya propia naturaleza la exime de intentar comprender: así miraba, no a Esther, sino al silencioso fenómeno de la evidencia de Esther, como si pudiera ponerse inmediatamente de manifiesto no solo la evidencia, sino la propia naturaleza del caso mismo, cuya índole no invitaba a la comprensión, sino al rechazo.

—Ellery…

—Acaba de llegar el camión del Club de Caza Futtybrook, lo han desollado, lo han descuartizado, se lo han llevado de vuelta a las perreras. Carne para perros…

Benny se soltó bruscamente de Esther, y dando un paso hacia adelante dijo:

—Ellery, qué demonios te pasa, Dios santo, Ellery, ¿quieres…?

—Qué fin tan miserable para un pura sangre.

—*Para* ya, quieres decirnos… —empezó Benny, levantando las manos.

—Vamos, Benny. Estás borracho —dijo Ellery, sonriendo burlonamente y mirándolo, y la rubia miró a Esther, no ya demandante sino testigo ella misma del hecho obvio y aliviador de que a fin de cuentas no había realmente nada de qué preocuparse—. Se ha ido —dijo Ellery tranquilamente—. Lo vi salir hace uno o dos minutos. —Puso una mano en el hombro de Benny—. Vamos, Benny, Cristo. Ponte derecho. Te dije que te merecías una copa, no una botella entera…

Benny se apartó de él, sin mirarlo siquiera a la cara; y Ellery se encogió de hombros y dio una profunda calada a su cigarrillo, guiñando un ojo a la rubia mientras se volvía. Esther y Benny se quedaron callados, como esperando oír un desmentido de Ellery, o una explicación entre ambos.

—Esa chica tan rara de la lengua verde me ha estado contando que en realidad fueron los judíos quienes descubrieron América —dijo la mujer alta, de espaldas a ellos—. Las *joyas* de Isabel no tuvieron nada que ver con ello, quiero decir financiar a Colón, parece ser que fueron los *judíos* [12] de Isabel…

Ambos alzaron la vista, y empezaron a hablar al mismo tiempo. Pero Esther se detuvo.

—Era delineante, ¿verdad? ¿Estabas casada con él entonces? Era solo un delineante, y yo era proyectista. Trabajamos juntos. Nunca me mencionó, ¿verdad? Bueno por qué, por qué habría, por qué habría de haberme mencionado a nadie, por qué…

Por encima de su hombro, Esther se encontró con los ojos castaños del crítico; luego se volvió a hacia Benny con una expresión diferente en la cara.

—¿No quieres sentarte en algún sitio? —dijo.

—Nunca te habló de mí, claro. Y por qué te iba a hablar, ¿qué te hubiera importado? Y por qué iba importarme ahora, por qué iba a querer verlo, porque en cualquier caso todo es diferente ahora. Y todo es diferente para él también, claro. Por qué iba a querer verlo ahora, más que… incluso por qué tuvimos que trabajar juntos entonces, qué… porque todo es diferente ahora, ahora estoy bien, me van bien las cosas, ¿y a él? ¿Qué hace ahora? ¿Es feliz ahora? ¿Le van bien las cosas, como a mí? ¿Ha cambiado todo también para él, de modo que…? ¿Está haciendo ahora lo que quería hacer?, o está haciendo lo que puede, como yo, lo que tiene que hacer…

—¿Por qué no te sientas aquí? —dijo Esther cuando alcanzaron el sofá—. ¿Te traigo un poco de café?

Vaciló, y volviendo la espalda se alejó.

—Es curioso. Es curioso —dijo Benny, sentándose lentamente—. Pero no me has dicho lo que hace ahora. Es curioso. Dios. —Benny se sonó la nariz, y miró a su alrededor. Vio la espalda de su traje de franela, y oyó la voz del hombre que lo llevaba diciendo: «En realidad no es mi linea de trabajo, en realidad soy una especie de historiador, un musicólogo, podríamos decir, pero he estado intentando conseguir un permiso de las autoridades municipales para hacerme cargo de unos urinarios públicos en Nueva York… ¿Podéis pasarme esas galletas saladas?».

La mujer del vestido prenatal colapsado dijo a alguien: «¿Y ves a esa persona de la camisa verde, ves esa cicatriz que tiene en la nariz? Bueno, tengo entendido que le operaron la nariz, se lo hizo un cirujano plástico carísimo y se lo pagó una chica, no le dejaron ni una señal, y luego, una noche, cuando estaba en la *cama* le cayó encima una radio de la estantería y le hizo esa cicatriz, eso es justicia poética… je, je je je…».

—¿Cómo se llama?

—¿Él? Pues… no me acuerdo, pero es uno de esos nombres bonitos, ya sabes los nombres que se ponen, como White; White es un buen nombre de negro.

Cerca, el señor Crotcher se había instalado en una butaca, y se puso a acompañar con gemidos unos compases de clavicémbalo de *El herrero armónico*. Se detuvo para mirar hacia abajo, y dijo: «Cielo santo, cielo santo, ¿de dónde has salido *tú?* Lárgate. Vas a tener un accidente, lárgate ya, lárgate lárgate lárgate…». El bebé, con un incipiente chichón en la frente, había empezado a trepar por su pierna. En otro lugar, la chica de las muñecas vendadas estaba diciendo: «Después de todo, hoy es su primer cumpleaños, así que también es una especie de fiesta de cumpleaños para él…».

—Empezó a hacerse llamar Jacques
San-jay
cuando se metió en decoración de interiores —dijo alguien—. Cuando yo lo conocí se llamaba Jack Singer.

—Así que después de eso el viejo no me ha dejado más que cincuenta toneladas de azúcar que no veo forma de colocar, y me están metiendo prisa para que me haga cargo de la remesa. ¿Crees que a Esther le importaría que la guardase aquí?

—Sí —dijo el hombre moreno del traje de zapa—, me habían dicho que el mercado bursátil de Nueva York era un asunto complejo.

—Quizá debería tirarla en la puerta de la casa del viejo, Crissto, después de una jugada como ésa. Ahora lo único que tengo que hacer es vender uno de sus malditos acorazados.

—¿Ah? Qué suerte —dijo el argentino enzapado—. Por un momento pensé que me había equivocado de fiesta.

—Dios santo, *no* —decía la mujer alta—, mi marido no tiene ningún amigo. No tiene tiempo.

—Bueno, mira, resulta obvio para cualquier persona que piense. Los suizos tienen bancos en todo el mundo. ¿Qué es más necesario que los bancos para una guerra victoriosa?

El señor Feddle, que estaba concentrado ante un libro abierto (era el *Aratos* de Frothingham), se vio apartado de un empujón por alguien que buscaba una enciclopedia. «Tengo que encontrar a un imbécil que se llama Chavenay. Suena francés».

—Realmente tienes que vivir allí para entender por qué Francia ha dado al mundo tantos pensadores y artistas —dijo una chica—. Basta con pasar allí una temporada y recibir una ración de todo contra lo que tienen que rebelarse, así cualquiera puede ser grande.

El chico que había recibido un anticipo por su novela dijo: «Quería celebrarlo de algún modo, pero qué demonios. ¿Dónde hay un sitio agradable? Todos son restaurantes de negocios, ¿sabéis a lo que me refiero? Cuentas de gastos. Todos sobreviven gracias a las cuentas de gastos. Es más deprimente que el infierno».

—Pero mi querido muchacho, ¿por qué habría de molestarte eso? —dijo la mujer alta, que acababa de aparecer—. *Tú* no tienes que comer en esos sitios todos los días. Mira a mi marido, *él* sí tiene que hacerlo.

—Ya lo sé. Pero es más deprimente que el infierno, ¿dónde se puede celebrar algo?

—Yo sugeriría Nedick's —dijo la mujer alta.

—Yo sugeriría Murti-Bing —dijo el joven que no tenía novela alguna por la que recibir anticipos.

—Oh, ¿dónde está eso? —dijo la mujer alta—. No creo haber comido ahí nunca.

—Cincuenta millones de toneladas de comida consumidos anualmente en Nueva York, ¿qué significa eso?

—Ha ocurrido algo terrible, Stanley —dijo Agnes, poniendo la mano sobre la suya.

—Lo siento —dijo Stanley—. Si no te importa darme las gafas…

—No, querido, no estoy hablando de eso, y eso fue hace tanto tiempo, aquella noche… —Estaba buscando en su bolso—. Aquí está —dijo—, tendrás que leerla tú mismo. ¿Qué voy a hacer, Stanley? —Cuando sacó la carta del bolso le temblaba la mano—. Fue una cosa terrible la que hice, una cosa imperdonable para ese pobre hombre, pero tiene que perdonarme, ¿y cómo puedo… qué puedo hacer para que… me perdone?

Stanley desdobló la carta del Departamento de Policía; y Agnes sintió un leve toque en el hombro, y se volvió.

—¿Ha visto un gatito pequeñito por aquí, señora?

—Bueno, había un gatito por algún sitio —dijo Agnes, mirando a su alrededor—, pero supongo que el gatito pequeñito se habrá ido a la cama. ¿Qué haces levantada tan tarde?

—Me ha mandado mamá por más píldoras para dormir, pero no encuentro a la señora que…

—No hace falta que molestes a esa señora tan maja —dijo Agnes, revolviendo en el fondo de su gran bolso, y sacó una dedalera francesa esmaltada—. Tengo algunas aquí mismo. ¿Te vale con tres? Pues tómalas y llévaselas enseguida a mamá. Y ya le he escrito —añadió, alzando la vista hacia Stanley.

—Gracias, señora. ¿Dónde ha comprado ese reloj tan gracioso?

—Bueno, Mickey Mouse es mi amigo más fiel —dijo Agnes—. Siempre puedo confiar en *él*.

—¿Y por qué lleva esas cosas tan graciosas pegadas en la cara?

—Dónde… —Agnes se llevó la mano a la sien, y encontró una de las tiras de esparadrapo que se había pegado allí para desanimar a las arrugas mientras descansaba—. Oh, Dios mío, y han estado ahí… por qué no me ha dicho nadie…

—¿Para qué sirven, señora? —preguntó la cría mientras Agnes se las arrancaba y abría su polvera.

—Lárgate de una vez con tu mamá, por el amor de Dios.

—Si fueras a verlo lo entendería —dijo Stanley, devolviéndole la carta—. Si fueras a verlo y…

—No podría encararme con él. Pedir perdón…

—Es una sublime prueba de humildad…

—Y en realidad pienso que es una persona horrible…

—Y una prueba aún mayor cuando uno se lo pide a sus inferiores.

—Necesito hacer algo, y… pero ¿no crees que podría simplemente *mandarle* algo? Quizá algún regalo bonito… sí, ya sabes, algo bonito y carísimo para su hija, ¿no?

—Creo —empezó Stanley sobriamente— que en realidad, por tu propio bien…

—Oh, dejemos de hablar de ello durante un rato —le interrumpió—. Es que acabo tan… harta de las cosas espantosas que me mandan por correo. —Le sonrió vivazmente, y apretó la mano sobre la suya—. Habíame de tu música, Stanley, esa cosa tan larga en la que llevas trabajando desde hace tanto tiempo. Oh, ¿y tu muela? Perdona, olvidé preguntarte.

—Creo que me ha desaparecido, el dolor, no ha durado mucho, pero mi trabajo, es un concierto para órgano y todavía no está terminado.

—Pero si llevas meses trabajando en ello.

—Años —dijo él—. Y ¿sabes?, cuando miro el papel en blanco que he estado ahorrando para escribir la partitura final, y luego miro el montón de… lo que he estado haciendo, y bueno, puedo verlo allí perfectamente, terminado. Y, sin embargo, bueno… sabes, nunca he leído a Nietzsche, pero he encontrado algo que dijo en algún sitio, algún sitio donde mencionaba «la melancolía de las cosas acabadas». Sabes… bueno, se refería a eso. No sé, pero de algún modo uno se acostumbra a vivir entre palimpsestos. De algún modo es eso lo que ocurre, palimpsestos dobles y triples amontonados y uno sigue borrando, y cambiando, y añadiendo, siempre tratando de justificar esa acumulación, de ordenarla, de colocar cada partícula en su lugar en un conjunto…

—Pero Stanley, ¿no podrías simplemente…? No sé qué es un palimpsesto, pero ¿no podrías simplemente terminar esa cosa en la que estás trabajando ahora, y luego seguir adelante y escribir otra?

Le pasó la mano por la suya, apoyada en el brazo del sillón; y Stanley la llamó por primera vez por su nombre de pila.

—No, ése es… ¿ves?, ése es el problema, Agnes —dijo—. Es como si esta cosa debiera incluirlo todo, todo en una obra, porque… bueno, es como si al terminarla la matases, ¿entiendes? Y eso es espantoso, es muy fácil entender por qué, matar lo único que… amas. Yo lo entiendo, y te lo voy a explicar, pero eso, ¿ves?, eso es lo espantoso, y lo adivinas, lo sientes durante todo el tiempo mientras trabajas, y por eso se amontonan los palimpsestos, porque todavía puedes hacer cambios y todavía hay ahí una posibilidad de perfección, pero la primera nota que escribes en la partitura final es… bueno, eso es lo que Nietzsche…

—Lo único que sé de Nietzsche es que era decadente, según dicen.

Stanley retiró la mano, que quedó colgando en el aire un momento, como un objeto de repente desconocido, con el que no sabía qué hacer.

—Lo era, a causa de… bueno, por esa misma razón, a causa de la negación. Esa es la obra del Anticristo. Ésa es la palabra de Satán, No, el No Eterno —dijo Stanley, y se metió la mano en el bolsillo.

Agnes se quedó mirando su mano en el brazo del sillón. Dos de los dedos bronceados se levantaron, y volvieron a caer; y al mirar hacia el sofá, donde el crítico se había sentado junto a Benny, alisándose el pelo de la coronilla, su cara adoptó la expresión del hombre al que miraba, una expresión de indulgencia desdeñosa, casi divertida, aunque ella no tenía aquellas cuencas oscuras en la cara, ni el entrecejo y la frente marcados por aquella expresión hasta el punto que pareciese natural en ella; más bien parecía incómoda cuando dijo:

—Esos dos tienen pinta de estar discutiendo lo mismo que nosotros, y él debería saber, ése…

—¿Sabes de lo que me he acordado ahora mismo, al levantar la vista y verlos? —dijo Stanley con la mayor seriedad—. Me he acordado de El Greco ante la Inquisición, discutiendo las dimensiones de las alas de los ángeles. Ese tipo moreno parece un inquisidor. La gente se ríe ahora de disputas como ésa, o la de cuántos ángeles pueden bailar en la punta de un alfiler. Pero no es nada gracioso, es absolutamente maravilloso. La ciencia no lo ha explicado, y sabes por qué, porque la ciencia ni siquiera entiende la

cuestión, no más de lo que la ciencia entiende… Sabes, Agnes, ese concierto en el que estoy trabajando, si hubiera vivido hace trescientos años, bueno… entonces habría sido una misa. Una misa de réquiem.

—Einstein… —dijo alguien.

—Epstein… —dijo otro.

—Gertrude…

—Por supuesto conoces el principio de incertidumbre de Heisenberg. ¿Has observado alguna vez las moscas de arena? Bueno, estoy trabajando en una película que no solo lo demuestra sino que ilustra perfectamente la metáfora de la situación teórica y real. Y a fin de cuentas, ¿qué más *hay* ahí?

—¿Quién *fue* el que dijo «un poco inferior a los ángeles»?

—¿Eso? Es de ese poema que dice «Qué es el hombre, para que tengas de él memoria». Fue Pope.

—¿Cuál de ellos? [13]

En aquel momento apareció en la puerta Anselm con una camisa desgarrada por el hombro, el pelo alborotado y de punta, sin afeitar, y con una revista y dos libros en la mano. Nadie pareció reparar en él; y se quedó allí callado durante un rato.

La música estaba muy alta. «Eso es, ¿ves?», dijo alguien en voz más alta. «Te lo dije. Es Haendel. *Los dioses van pidiendo limosna*, ¡eso es!».

La cara de Benny era carnosa. Además, aunque no estaba hinchada, parecía ser carne recientemente adquirida, y sus expresiones, si tal cosa era posible, parecían tener dificultades para alcanzar la superficie, o una vez llegadas allí, para representar con convicción los sentimientos que habían brotado de dentro. Eso parecía; aunque podía ser que esta falta de precisión impregnase hasta la misma fuente, y que su amorfa fachada expresase fielmente un mobiliario confuso, escalones rotos remontando profundos huecos de escalera, habitaciones con ventanas entabladas, en desuso, y habitaciones con carácter propio que se utilizaban para fines nuevos y oportunos en el castillo interior, cuyas defensas no estaban todavía adaptadas al nuevo inquilinato sino que se modificaban constante y apresuradamente en medio de las escaramuzas, antes de aquella batalla que sería la última.

—Dios es amor, decirle eso a un corgi galés mientras echa el bofe, ¿no es divino? —rio la chica con acento bostoniano, y Benny, que había oído su comentario sobre un horizonte perdido, se apartó de donde ella se dejó caer cerca de su extremo del sofá, acercándose el libro mientras lo hacía. Era un libro sobre diseño de puentes, en su mayor parte obra de Robert Maillart, y su dedo señalaba una foto, diagrama y descripción del puente de Schwandbach. Lo había cogido tras sus palabras con Esther, e intentaba parecer absorto en él mientras se recuperaba. Pero se vio interrumpido por la figura de la camisa verde de lana, que se sentó a su lado en el sofá diciendo: «Me han dicho que está usted en la televisión». Sonriendo con esfuerzo, y sudando ya copiosamente, Benny contestó: «Es verdad, ¿qué puedo hacer por usted…?», ofreciendo un cigarrillo, que el otro aceptó sin darle las gracias.

Estaban siendo observados por los dos que seguían apostados junto a la puerta, donde serían los primeros en saludar, y en enredar, al invitado de honor. Don Bildow, al que aparentemente mantenía derecho el vigoroso dibujo de su corbata, observaba a través de aros de plástico. «¿Por qué estará hablando con ese tipo de la televisión?». «Sólo le está dando la tabarra», contestó su compañero, con la misma satisfacción maligna reluciendo bajo sus cejas, esa poética mirada de contemplación interior, acariciante, punteada de haces de luz donde algunos, su espejo entre ellos, veían un brillo carismático: todo muy bien para la sobrecubierta de algún fino volumen (aunque ninguno así había aparecido), o para el propio momento de inspiración, reflejada en los ojos de la mujer de otro, pero muy poco práctica para momentos como éste, pues no veía nada con claridad a unos pasos de distancia. «Ha dicho que iba a pedirle un trabajo como guionista de televisión».

Era evidente que a Benny le estaban dando la tabarra. Acababa de dar un violento meneo al vaso que tenía en la mano, e hizo ademán de levantarse, pero le detuvo la mano del crítico, extendida con un gesto de fastidio como para apaciguar lo que su voz irritante seguía enconando, ora hablando de la televisión como una tragedia corruptora, ora de la integridad del escritor, del sufrimiento humano…

Benny apenas había mirado la cara del hombre que le hablaba: en contraste con la suya era una fortificación minuciosa, cada baluarte erigido con un propósito concreto, sus parapetos calculados para resistir asaltos repetidos desde cualquier dirección, probados en innumerables escaramuzas donde muchos habían logrado acercarse lo suficiente para caer tambaleándose entre escarpa y contraescarpa, una disposición tan arraigada en el edificio que, aunque cada una de sus partes se había erigido para la defensa, en su cumplida totalidad asumía proporciones agresivas; aunque invitara a la estrategia, sólo podía tomarse por asalto.

Durante todo este tiempo, la sonrisa de Benny no se había desvanecido. Su sonrisa era su primera línea

de defensa. Pero desde el momento en que había hecho ademán de levantarse, esta defensa estaba siendo abandonada, y así permanecía, desguarnecida, tan vacía como parapetos abiertos cedidos ante una embestida inesperada.

—Así que dígame la verdad —seguía la voz hostigadora, mientras su propietario se alejaba más y más de sus murallas, asediando abiertamente—. ¿Realmente se endilgan unos a otros la misma mierda que me está endilgando a mí, pretendiendo que es un medio cultural?, ¿o simplemente admiten que están todos metidos en ello sólo por el dinero, que están todos vendidos?

La sonrisa de Benny había desaparecido. Se quedó callado un momento, estudiando las características de aquel ataque. Luego dijo:

—¿Por qué me odia usted? ¿Le he hecho alguna vez algún favor?

El crítico se enderezó, desprevenido ante esta salida, y como no le daba tiempo a ganar de nuevo sus murallas se retiró de momento tras contravalaciones de recelo.

—Dígame la verdad, ¿qué quiere de mí, hijoputa de pelo bonito? —le dijo Benny sin levantar la voz.

—Vale, por el amor de Dios…

—¿Qué se cree que es, un hombre honrado sólo porque no lleva corbata?

—Cálmese, cálmese…

—Y una mierda voy a calmarme. ¿Quién es usted, a todo esto?

—Ahora escuche…

—Escúcheme usted. Ya he aguantado bastante de usted. Ya he aguantado bastante de gente igual que usted. Igual que usted. Es duro, ¿verdad?, *igual que usted,* que esta ciudad esté infestada de gente igual que usted, que el mundo esté plagado de gente igual que usted. Los hombres honrados que son demasiado buenos para encajar en ningún sitio. Usted es uno de ésos, ¿verdad? Mírese las manos, ¿ha tenido alguna vez callos? No le salen a uno levantando vasos. ¿Quién es usted, para estar tan amargado? ¿Ha trabajado algún día de su vida?

—Mire…

—Y ahora entiendo. Y me habla de la vida, de la vida real, de la miseria humana —siguió Benny. No hablaba en voz alta, ni deprisa, y aun así el tono frío pero vehemente y nivelado de su voz hizo que varias personas se volvieran, y escucharan y observaran. El otro mantenía su terreno con una paciente sonrisa burlona—. Le he ofrecido trabajo, pero es usted demasiado bueno para ello. Nos pasamos la vida comprando cosas a tipos como usted, cosas escritas bajo seudónimo para proteger nombres que nunca se publicarán en ninguna otra parte, pero siguen pensando que lo harán, lo que quieren hacer, aunque nunca terminan de hacerlo, y siguen haciendo aquello para lo que son demasiado buenos. Tiene gracia. Tiene gracia —repitió Benny, y fue entonces cuando su voz empezó a elevarse—. Le conozco, le conozco. Es usted la única persona seria que hay aquí, ¿verdad?, la única que *entiende,* y puede demostrarlo mediante el hecho de que jamás ha terminado una sola cosa en su vida. Es la única persona bien educada, porque no ha ido a la universidad, y le ofende la educación, le ofende la desenvoltura social, le ofenden los buenos modales, le ofende el éxito, le ofende cualquier clase de éxito, le ofende Dios, le ofende Cristo, le ofenden los billetes de mil dólares, le ofende la Navidad, por Dios, le ofende la felicidad, le ofende la felicidad misma, porque nada de eso es *real.* ¿Y qué es real, entonces? Para usted no existe nada real que no forme parte de su pasado, la *vida real,* un marasmo de fracasos, de fracaso social, sexual, financiero, personal… y espiritual. La vida real. Pobre cabrón. Usted no sabe lo que es la vida real, nunca se ha acercado a ella. Lo único que tiene son mil ideas intelectualizadas sobre la vida. Pero ¿la *vida?* ¿Se ha medido alguna vez con otro rasero que no sea su piojoso pasado? ¿Ha encarado alguna vez algo exterior a usted? ¡La *vida*! Pobre cabrón.

Benny se echó a reír. Derribó una copa vacía del brazo del sofá, y Ellery le puso una mano en el hombro. El poeta rechoncho se había acercado al hombre sentado al otro extremo del sofá, que estaba callado, mirando a Benny, con la sonrisa burlona casi exprimida de la cara. La mayoría de los presentes se había dado cuenta de que pasaba algo, y se habían vuelto a medias, concediéndole la mitad de su atención, esperando a ver si la merecía toda. Benny empezó a levantarse. «Vamos, tomemos una copa», le dijo Ellery, pasándole un brazo por los hombros. «De acuerdo», dijo Benny. Luego, de repente, se volvió en redondo otra vez.

—Lárgate, borracho —dijo el poeta rechoncho; pero Benny no lo miró. Se plantó ante el hombre, que con la misma rapidez recuperó su sonrisa burlona para alzar la vista.

—¿Cómo se gana la vida? —preguntó perentoriamente Benny.

—Vamos, Benny. Deja en paz al pobre cabrón.

—Sólo le he preguntado cómo se gana la vida.

—Que se vaya al infierno. Vamos —dijo Ellery.

—Solo quiero saber cómo se gana la vida, ¿hay algo malo en ello?

—Es un crítico. Escribe sobre libros o no sé qué puñetas. Ahora vamos.

Pero Benny se sacudió del hombro el brazo de Ellery.

—¿Cuánto hace que vio salir el sol por última vez? —preguntó. Luego siguió—: Cómo lo habría hecho usted. Así es como es todo, ¿verdad? Cómo lo habría hecho usted. No cómo debería haberse hecho, sino cómo lo habría hecho usted. Así es como trabaja cuando critica un libro, ¿verdad? Cómo lo habría hecho usted, porque no lo hizo, porque aún tiene miedo de admitir que no puede hacerlo por sí mismo.

—Ellery, por favor… páralo —dijo Esther en voz baja junto a Ellery. Él se volvió y la miró, y justo entonces tenía una expresión muy parecida a la de Benny, de tensa impaciencia, que en aquel instante de intercambio entre ambos pareció dirigir todo lo que Benny había dicho, y estaba diciendo, hacia ella. Todo el mundo, dentro de los límites de lo que cada cual consideraba buenos modales o sofisticación, estaba observando; y la mayoría observaba al hombre sentado en el sofá. «Oh Crissto, ahora le recuerdo, es el tipo que se casó con Deedee Jaqueson, y por eso tuvieron que tacharla todos de la agenda. Crissto, qué coincidencia», comentó Ed Feasley.

Rudy consolaba a un grupo asustado en un rincón, diciendo: «Ya sabéis, es de esos que sabe de arte pero no sabe lo que le gusta».

Don Bildow observaba aprensivamente desde el fondo de la habitación, adonde se había retirado, y no veía a Anselm, que también observaba, callado y atento. El señor Feddle, con un libro en la mano, había ganado la primera fila. Unos dedos fuertes manipulaban la nuca de Maude, quizá más fuertes pero no tan vigorosos como los que estrujaban la mano de Stanley. Él miró a Agnes y desvió la vista rápidamente, como temiendo provocar que la tensión que leía en su cara estallara en confidencias.

Una voz aguda rompió el silencio cuando Benny se detuvo a respirar. «¡*Eso* es! ¡Y *también* vale para tu gato!». Era la Duquesa de Ohio, que corrió a ponerse a cubierto de nuevo.

La mujer alta dijo a alguien que ella y su marido iban a ir a España en primavera, aunque había esperado estar en Hawái justo entonces; alguien dijo: «Te engatusa como quiere, ¿no?», hablando con otro de otra; Sonny Byron dijo: «Despierta, cariño, el espectáculo ha terminado», y acarició la frente de Arny Munk; el autor del éxito de ventas *Los árboles del hogar,* que había estado vuelto de espaldas a la habitación durante todo el tiempo, fingiendo charlar con el señor Crotcher, que estaba cantando, dijo a otro: «¿Cómo voy a respetar a mis lectores cuando sé que solo intentan conseguir un psicoanálisis barato a mi costa?», y le replicaron que probablemente ellos pensaban que él estaba consiguiendo uno a su costa; el hombrecillo moreno del traje de zapa dijo: «Sí, me previnieron contra este tipo de cosas en Nueva York. En cuanto a esos acorazados…».

—Horrendo crimen cometió, al mundo entero sorprendió —cantaba el señor Crotcher al bebé, cuya barbilla tenía apoyada en el zapato, que movía aun compás aproximado de 2/4—. Escarabajos negros en cáscaras de nuez…

—Ya está empezando otra vez ese estúpido cabrón.

Ellery sujetaba con fuerza a Benny de un hombro. «Vamos, cálmate, olvida a ese estúpido cabrón», dijo. «Vamos, Benny, tómate esto». Le tendió un vaso lleno, y Benny lo agarró y se lo bebió de un trago con mano firme y sumo cuidado. Luego el vaso vacío quedó colgando en su mano como un peso.

—Cuando llegue adonde estoy yo podrá estar amargado —musitó Benny, mirando hacia uno de los pocos espacios vacíos de la habitación—. ¿Cree que me gusta esta ropa? ¿Cree que me gustan los trajes cruzados a la moda, como…? ¿Cree que me gusta esta horrible corbata de la puñeta, puede llamar corbata a esto? ¿Y estas gafas? —Intentó agarrarlas dos veces, y la segunda enganchó con un dedo una de las anchas patillas y cayeron al suelo—. Soy un triunfador, y por eso tengo derecho a estar amargado. Maldita sea. Maldita sea. ¿Cuánto cree que hace que vi *yo* salir el sol por última vez?

Aunque el señor Feddle se movió despacio, Benny levantó la cara como si el espacio que tenía delante se hubiera materializado en una aparición.

—Siga —dijo ávidamente el señor Feddle—. Siga. Le entiendo. Siga.

—¿No es verdad? —le dijo Benny, tendiendo hacia él un brazo que describió un arco irregular y cayó entre ambos.

—Vamos, olvida a ese imbécil, te sentirás mejor —dijo Ellery, sosteniendo a Benny—. Estás haciendo el ridículo.

—¿Por qué? *¿Porqué?*

—Siga. Le entiendo.

—Por eso tengo derecho a estarlo. ¿Tengo derecho o no? ¿O no? ¿No es por eso por lo que he trabajado,

y trabajado, y…?

—Siga…

—*¿Por qué?*

El señor Feddle se abalanzó sobre él y lo abrazó.

—¿Recuerda a Fedya, *en Redención?, ¿en Redención,* de Tolstoi? —dijo, con el despertador oscilando entre ambos—. «Y sabes… —bajó la voz, y habló más despacio— es curioso, pero amamos a la gente por el bien que le hacemos, y la odiamos por el mal…». ¿Recuerda?

Benny se lo quedó mirando a la cara, mientras se separaban y el señor Feddle se crecía con la emoción.

—¡Siga…!

—Pero… deshonesto… entonces, pero ¿ahora? ¿Ahora? Me metí en esto y descubrí que todo el mundo creía en lo que hacía. Todo el mundo se lo cree, y al cabo de un tiempo tú también te lo crees. Vives con ello durante un tiempo y también te lo crees. Amigos. ¿Cree que tengo algún amigo? Toda la gente que conozco… me… quieren algo de mí o yo quiero algo de ellos. Alguien me ha preguntado si estaba aquí mi mujer. ¿Mi mujer? Llego a casa y nos sentamos y nos quedamos mirándonos. ¿Casa? Mi casa parece una coctelería. Leo todos los libros. Leo todos los libros sobre autosuperación, autodominio, desarrolle su personalidad, sea un buen puñetero cristiano y consiga algo a cambio de nada…

—Siga…

—Olvida…

—Si está haciendo algo que odia, déjelo mientras todavía lo odie…

—Siga…

—Cálmate…

—Porque tenía razón la primera vez…

—Ellery, *por favor,* páralo.

Ellery bajó la vista hacia Esther, colgada de su brazo.

—¿Qué puedo hacer? Está…

—Y tú… —Benny se volvió hacia ella—. Era tu marido, ¿verdad? Y lo sabes, ¿no? *¿No?* Sabes quién diseñó el puente del Desfiladero del Arca Caída… y el viaducto de Cooper City…

—Bueno, yo… Ellery, por favor. Debe haber un error.

—Siga…

—Eso es lo que yo quería hacer, es lo que siempre quise hacer. De dónde salía, allí sentado ante una mesa de delineante, y lo diseñaba como si estuviera haciendo un boceto, pero cada tensión era perfecta, el equilibrio era perfecto, miras a esos puentes con mi nombre debajo y los ves saltar para encontrarse consigo mismos, los ves moverse en perfecta quietud, ves la perfecta tensión delicada del movimiento en quietud, ves la sensibilidad en suspensión… con mi nombre debajo, yo los diseñé. Y un cuerno los diseñé. ¿Sabéis por qué? —Benny les miró a la cara, y de repente cogió del brazo al señor Feddle—. Era como una parte de mí trabajando, como parte de mí mismo trabajando allí. ¿Entendéis?

—Sí. Siga…

—Y yo no sabía hacerlo. Él sabía hacerlo y yo no sabía hacerlo. ¿Entendéis?

—Sí, sí…

—Yo no sabía hacerlo —dijo Benny; y por un momento el único ruido que se oyó fue el tictac del despertador del señor Feddle. Y varias personas, no atraídas por ningún timbre sino por aquel silencio insistente y preciso, se volvieron para oír decir al señor Feddle: «Sí, sí, ¿le recuerda? ¿A Fedya? ¿En *Redención* de Tolstoi? "Había algo terriblemente desproporcionado entre lo que yo sentía y lo que podía hacer… ¿Recuerda?». El señor Feddle tenía ambas manos en los hombros de Benny, pero Ellery se las apartó de golpe. «Vamos, Benny, te pondrás bien».

Benny se había quedado sin fuerzas. Tenía el libro sobre diseño de puentes abierto; pasó una página y se quedó mirando una foto del puente de Maillart en Salginatobel con una vidriosa distancia en los ojos, como si estuviera realmente contemplando los noventa metros de caída a pico que había hasta el pie del valle. Luego su mirada se fijó en algo garrapateado en el margen: «El arco nunca duerme».

—¡Mirad…! —dijo, y lo leyó en voz alta, se lo quedó mirando en silencio y volvió a leerlo en voz alta—. Lo escribió él, claro, recuerdo haberlo oído decir eso, él… sí… —De pronto se volvió hacia Esther—. ¿Te puedo pedir una cosa?, ¿un favor?, ¿un regalo? —Las páginas del libro temblaban en sus manos. Y aunque el tono de ella decía «Sí, cualquier cosa con tal de que te calles, con tal de que te largues…», él no lo advirtió—. Porque este libro… este libro…

—Sí —dijo ella—. Sí.

—Sí —repitió él, mirándolo, y susurró—, el arco nunca duerme.

—Cálmate, Benny. Sólo necesitas una copa —dijo Ellery—. Te reanimarás.

—Ellery, déjalo…

Benny se detuvo, y alzó la vista hacia Ellery.

—Ya lo sé —dijo—. Eso es lo que no soporto. Sé que me reanimaré, y eso es lo que no soporto. —Miró a los tres—. No os preocupéis —dijo—. Esto solo ocurre una vez. Es el mundo en el que vivo. Haces un espectáculo, y cuando termina lo tiras a la basura. Das todo lo que tienes para hacer un espectáculo, dura veinte minutos y ya no puedes volver a emitirlo, así que lo tiras a la basura. Esto sólo ocurre una vez…

—Mira, Benny…

—Pero ¿puedo quedarme con esto? —siguió diciendo en el mismo tono elevado, sosteniendo en alto el libro—. ¿Entendéis? Porque soy un sentimental. Por eso tengo el trabajo que tengo, porque siento lo que sienten otros pero más, las mismas cosas pero más, pero no demasiado, no demasiado como hacía él…

—Benny…

—No demasiado. —Se apoyó contra Ellery, relajándose.

—Estás bien, Benny. Sólo necesitas una copa.

Benny alzó la vista hacia él.

—¿Tú no te cansas?

—Sí, los dos necesitamos una buena noche de sueño.

—Quiero decir si no te cansas de todo.

Ellery se lo quedó mirando. «Te traeré una copa», dijo, y tropezó con la mujer alta, que se había apartado de esta escena para decir a su marido: «¿Entiendes ahora lo que quería decir cuando hablaba de Hawái?».

La interrumpieron. «¿Entiende lo que quería decir?». Pero el hombre que hizo esta pregunta se apartó de ella para mirar a Esther, y mirando a Benny, con el antebrazo sobresaliendo cuan largo era de la manga de franela gris que Benny miraba con vidriosa familiaridad, dijo a Esther: «¿Entiende lo que quería decir? ¿Entiende lo que quería decir?».

—Eso es lo que odio. Eso es lo que odio. Eso es lo que odio.

—¿Entiende lo que quería decir?

—Feliz Navidad —dijo alguien, levantando una copa—. Si me perdonáis la expresión.

—Dios santo. ¿Qué te ha hecho pensar en *eso?*

La chica con acento bostoniano miró a Benny y dijo: «¿Con qué se ha colocao este tipo?».

El hombre corpulento con uniforme del Ejército miró al crítico, todavía sentado en el sofá, y al decir «Un tipo como ése es peligroso», como de costumbre acertó por razones equivocadas.

—¿Y la Guardia Suiza del Vaticano? Supongo que sabrás que el papa les ha dado permiso para practicar el tiro al blanco, ¿no? Y vestidos de paisano.

—Y dicen que la comida en España es incomible, si estás acostumbrada a comer como una persona civilizada, así que voy a llevarme un *montón* de esas maravillosas pastillas para adelgazar que sencillamente te quitan el apetito.

—Por fin me compré ese nuevo Cadillac —dijo el autor de *Los árboles del hogar,* llenando de whisky una jeringuilla—. Siempre he querido tener un coche nuevo, hay algo en el modo en que huele por dentro un coche nuevo, ese olor a nuevo. Es algo que siempre he querido, era una auténtica fobia mía.

La persona a la que se dirigía estaba sazonando un intempestivo martini con Pernod de una petaca, mientras murmuraba: «Sólo una gotita en cada uno, provoca una reacción química. Pero ¿qué es eso?», añadió, viendo cómo el otro colocaba la aguja en la jeringuilla.

—Tomándolo de este modo te emborrachas igual y no tienes resaca —dijo el autor del éxito de ventas—. Me lo dijo mi psicoanalista. —Se subió una manga—. ¿Te he contado lo de ese nuevo Cadillac que me he comprado? Era una auténtica fobia que tenía…

Esther estaba de pie mirando nerviosamente a su alrededor, como buscando algo que reclamara su atención y la excusara de ir adonde su atención se veía reclamada: desde la entrada, Don Bildow emitía una llamada entre aros de plástico por encima del hombro de un hombre barrigudo cuya cara familiar había sido fotografiada tantas veces y, como ella advirtió ahora, de modo tan poco fiel. Cerca de ella, el cuello de la camisa verde de lana y la cabeza morena que la remataba asomaban por encima del respaldo del sofá. El crítico y su rechoncho compañero miraban en la misma dirección. «Cristo…». Resultaba difícil adivinar, desde detrás, cuál de ellos estaba murmurando. «El invitado de honor. ¿Por qué no puede quedarse en casa para emborracharse?».

Al fondo de la habitación, Stanley había levantado la vista y se interrumpió para decir:

—Mira, debe haber llegado ahora mismo, ¿no es…?

—Alguien dijo que iba a venir —dijo Agnes Deigh—. Oh Dios, no estoy dispuesta a escuchar lo de su examen de conciencia…

—Pero si nosotros…

—No de boca suya. No esta noche —dijo ella, mirando a Stanley.

—Escarabajos negros en cáscaras de nuez, brincan en torno a los ojos de su bebé —cantó el señor Crotcher—. ¿Te gusta ésa?

—El Boeuf sobre el Tejado…

—A ésa no la he visto desde Ischia…

—Está en el Vaticano, si puedes llamar arte a *eso*…

—Y no te dejes engañar por esos trajes medievales, se pueden llevar quince cartuchos en una buena portañuela, y hasta una granada si estás poco dotado…

—*Ella* dice que ocurrió en la mismísima Cappella Sistina, pero ya *la* conoces, lo mismo pudo ser en la Cappella Paolina…

—Me pregunto qué habrá sido de la vieja Deedee —dijo para sí Ed Feasley, y luego, dirigiéndose al argentino enzapado—: ¿Qué me decía de unos acorazados?

Don Bildow alzó los hombros con un sesgo esperanzado al ver acercarse a Esther, pero los dejó caer de nuevo cuando sus ojos y su sonrisa pasaron a su lado para ir a abrazar a un joven ojeroso, de ojos enrojecidos y aspecto temerario, que acababa de entrar.

Los dos del sofá la observaron, aunque el más bajo no dejó de hablar. «He echado un vistazo al original», decía. «Se titula *La caza del gamusino silvestre,* y te juro que te ha metido en él. Un personaje llamado Hawthorn, y te juro que eres tú, por la época en que estabas liado con esa misma rubia, sólo que ella aparece haciéndote analizar *a ti,* igual que lo hizo analizar a él cuando estaba intentando librarse de ella y no podía porque ella le estaba pagando el análisis, de modo que saca a ese personaje que te juro que eres tú clavado, igual de jodido con ella. Podrías demandar a ese cabrón listillo».

—Sí. Pásame esa copa, ¿quieres?

—¿Quién es ese al que está sobando Esther ahora?

—Un crío estúpido que se llama Otto.

—Parece que lo ha atropellado un camión.

Benny estaba hablando con el hombre que llevaba su viejo traje. «Me vuelvo a casa mañana», decía. «Llevo once años sin ir a casa. Es mucho tiempo para volver y tratar de empezar donde lo dejaste. Llevo once años sin ver crecer nada. Te olvidas de que las cosas crecen. La verdura que te dan en los restaurantes, no puedes creer que haya crecido de verdad alguna vez en algún sitio, y las flores, nunca te las imaginas creciendo, las ves de una forma, cortadas, y no puedes imaginártelas de otra forma que no sea expuestas, muertas. Aquí los árboles no crecen, están hechos en serie, como los muebles, y les ponen fundas nuevas en primavera. Dios mío, te olvidas, te olvidas…».

—Benny…

—Vaya, estaré allí mañana por la mañana. Estaré en el porche lateral viendo salir el sol la mañana de Navidad, ya verás si no estoy…

Benny levantó la cabeza y paseó la vista por la habitación. Entonces, de pie junto a la puerta del pasillo que llevaba al dormitorio, vio a Ellery hablando con la rubia; y cuando el hombre que tenía delante, en el mismo tono que había utilizado él un momento antes, dijo: «Benny, ¿me llevarás contigo…?», Benny no dijo nada.

A su espalda, una chica dijo a alguien: «Así que empecé ese curso de personalidad donde te hacen ponerte delante de un espejo y repetir una y otra vez tu nombre con tono dulce y afable… y ahora soy la secretaria personal del señor Wipe…».

—Así que le dije: «Tú sigue adelante y *sé* patológica…».

—Así que cuando volvimos a Florencia les dije: «Desde luego no viviría en otro sitio que no fuera Siena si tuviera allí conmigo a mi psicoanalista…».

—Así que me dijo: «Oh, Safo, ése también era marica, ¿no?».

No ya el jardín, sino, como había dicho Benny, flores cortadas y expuestas, muertas, sin pasado ni futuro, en una variedad tal de identidades celosas como las reunidas en el escaparate de una floristería cara, desprovistas de la grandeza descuidada de las plantas indígenas, ordenadas en cambio con esa simetría ligeramente frenética que los aturdidos transeúntes llaman artística, y pasan de largo, sin aventurar nunca sus sentidos por la violación del alambre y la impostura de los pétalos de papel. Aún ahora, peligrosamente erguido, Herschel se exhibía en plena floración. «Por supuesto, cariño, nunca me he sentido mejor en la vida… pero *no,* no puedo *enseñarte* el tatuaje. Como debes saber, los dos amigos que conocí aquella noche

me jugaron una *mala* pasada, al menos me lo pareció cuando lo vi en el espejo, quiero decir el tatuaje que me hicieron, y no he vuelto a *verlos*. Pero ahora que llevo una temporada con él le he tomado mucho cariño. Soy *yo*. ¿Te gustan los zorros? Ni siquiera puedo describírtelo, es tan escabroso, pero es bastante mono, ¿te gustaría verlo? Ven al cuarto de baño…».

Anselm observaba todo esto en silencio. De vez en cuando sus labios se movían formando sílabas aisladas que eran de suyo palabras, casi siempre una que le fruncía el labio inferior bajo los incisivos, y lo soltaba formando una áspera fe. La gente se apartaba a su paso, volviendo la espalda, mientras deambulaba por la habitación en pos de objetivos exclusivamente inmediatos, los vasos medio vacíos abandonados a la ligera y alzados luego con sorpresa, vacíos, cuando había pasado. Alguien, que se volvió hacia él demasiado pronto, lo reprendió afablemente: «¿Por qué no pides uno lleno?». Anselm le tendió el vaso que acababa de vaciar y dijo: «¿Por qué no pides ocho pulgadas más?, seguirías teniendo un agujero en la tripa…», y siguió adelante, con la revista enrollada en la mano mostrando un anuncio de bragueros en la contraportada.

—No sé, Stanley, pero es como si mire adonde mire viese algo, o alguien… a quien he fallado… —Agnes Deigh se detuvo, mirando a su alrededor—. Sin querer quizá, incluso traicionado…

—Es porque hoy día nos han inducido a creer que somos autosuficientes —empezó Stanley—, que ningún juicio trascendente es…

—Allí, también allí, ¿lo ves? —dijo ella, dando un pequeño respingo en su asiento—. ¿El chico que acaba de entrar? Me trajo una obra de teatro que había escrito, y no tuve la menor oportunidad de leerla, pero le dije…

—Agnes, tú…

—Stanley, yo…

—*Esther*…

—Escúcheme, usted es la señora del gatito, ¿no…?

—Esther, ¿has visto?, ¿mariquitas en el fondo de tu jardín? Jejeje.

—Pero esta vez no estaba intentando enseñar al gatito a salivar…

—*Otto*… Me alegro tanto de que estés aquí.

—Pero no sabía que tuvieras una fiesta, sólo he subido…

—Pero estás aquí —dijo ella, y lo agarró del brazo—. Sabía que habías vuelto —dijo, llevándolo lentamente por la habitación, pero sin detenerse—. Pero tienes una pinta… Hasta oí decir que llevabas el brazo en cabestrillo. ¿Dónde has estado?

—Acabo de salir de la cárcel —dijo él con bastante desenvoltura.

—¿De dónde?, ¿de la cárcel? —Entonces se detuvo y le miró.

—No ha sido nada —le dijo él—. Una multa de quince dólares por… ya sabes, por andar por ahí tonteando. Estaba celebrando algo. He tenido suerte, sólo llevaba dieciséis dólares encima… —Con un sobresalto de inquietud, se llevó la mano al bolsillo del pecho, encontró dentro la dura esquina confirmadora del paquete, y la dejó caer—. He tenido suerte, había dejado todo el dinero que me quedaba en un cajón de una habitación de hotel, me daba pánico que hubiera desaparecido cuando volviera, me… —Esther se había quedado mirándolo, como si no escuchara, simplemente esperando a que terminase—. ¿Qué pasa? —preguntó con aire inseguro.

—No has dicho que te alegras de verme.

—Oh pero, quiero decir, por supuesto que me alegro, sólo que todo ha sido tan… ya sabes, y yo, y puede que… ¿te lo ha mencionado alguien?, quiero decir, ¿lo de mi obra? —soltó bruscamente. Ella meneó la cabeza—. Bueno, quiero decir, no es nada, nada en realidad, pero… —Pero ella no lo interrumpió, o si lo hizo fue sólo con la expresión de sus ojos, esperando a que le preguntara lo que nunca se le ocurrió preguntarle: por ella, cómo le había ido durante todo aquel tiempo, qué tal estaba; lo que, de habérsele ocurrido, le habría dado a él lo que buscaba, la oportunidad de frenar aquella disculpa desbocada, que ella no le exigía, aquella peligrosa insistencia, que no se atrevía a frenar en aquella carrera consigo mismo. Su desenvoltura se estaba desmoronando, dando paso al agotamiento y a una creciente ansiedad—. Y además he conocido por fin a mi padre. Cené con él. Quiero decir, ¿recuerdas cuando me preguntabas por qué no iba a verlo? Y él… Así que lo hice.

La mano de Esther seguía apoyada en su brazo; parecía haber decaído un poco ante él, y preguntó en voz baja: «¿Cómo es?».

—Bueno, es agradable, un poco severo, pero quiero decir que en realidad es muy majo, y… bueno, un poco severo y brusco. Y es católico, no quiero decir que eso cambie nada, pero me sorprendió un poco, y… bueno, no sé, la verdad es que estoy un poco confuso… —Otto estaba revolviendo en uno de sus bolsillos, y sacó una nota—. Cuando al fin logré volver al hotel, encontré esta nota suya esperándome. Es un poco

patética, me pide que lo llame en cuanto pueda, y luego dice que espera que no haya estado preocupado por él, cuando acababa de verlo por primera vez poco antes, quizá se refiera a sus ojos, no… no ve muy bien, y… no sé, quiero decir que cuando pienso en él es eso lo que recuerdo, sus gafas, el polvo de sus gafas —insistió Otto. Y ahora, a medida que la apelación se hacía más patente en la cara de ella, retrocediendo aún más por intimidades inconexas hasta el último abrazo que habían dejado atrás, más se batía él en retirada, escurriendo el bulto entre imágenes irrelevantes de sí mismo—. Y no lo he llamado, esta mañana le mandé una bata de lujo por Navidad, parecía lo mínimo… quiero decir que pensé que debía hacer algo así, ya sabes, por Navidad —terminó, pasándose un dedo de su mano pálida por su labio terso.

—Esther —los interrumpió Don Bildow, lanzando a Otto una escueta mirada, suficiente sólo para excluirlo—. Creo que deberías venir a saludar a tu invitado…

—Ese hombre que está junto a la puerta —empezó Otto, recuperándose un poco—, ¿no es…?

—Enseguida voy —dijo Esther a Don Bildow, que se retiró educadamente un paso y se quedó esperando —. ¿Quieres venir a conocerlo? —preguntó a Otto.

—Bueno, quiero decir, no sé…

—¿Te acuerdas? —preguntó ella, ahora con ambas manos sobre su brazo—, ¿cuando me dejaste su libro? ¿Cuando acabábamos de conocernos, el primer día que comimos juntos?

—Sí, sí, me acuerdo, claro que me acuerdo —dijo Otto rápidamente, y luego se detuvo con aire indeciso —. Pero ahora…

—Después de todo —se recobró Don Bildow de su momentáneo lapso de educación—, es la única persona medianamente interesante que hay aquí esta noche, Esther —e hizo ademán de volverles su poco imponente espalda.

—Espera —dijo Esther, y luego, a Otto—: ¿No quieres conocerlo?

—Creo que no —dijo Otto, mirando por encima de ella hacia la figura barriguda cercana a la puerta, que acababa de taparse la boca con un pañuelo y parecía a punto de vomitar en él; y la mujer alta, que acababa de decir: «¡Ateísmo…! Esa palabra tan encantadora, hacía años que no la oía», se volvió en busca de su marido, murmurando: «Oh, querido…, ¿he vuelto a decir algo indebido…?»—. Creo que no, gracias, Esther, quiero decir, ¿qué podríamos decirnos? —siguió, mientras Esther se volvía arrastrada por el brazo apremiante de Bildow—. Antes… quería siempre conocer al poeta, o al pintor, o al escritor o al funámbulo del momento, como si uno pudiera sacarles algo con un apretón de manos…

Otto había bajado los ojos hacia los muslos de Esther, y también bajó la voz hasta que, habiendo hecho un descubrimiento en sus propias palabras, se vio hablando solo. Entonces levantó la cara, y con la valiente repulsa con que uno rechaza la revelación por miedo a examinar los motivos que conspiraron para engendrarla, fue a buscar una copa.

—Crissto, creía que te habías ido al Perú.

Al alzar la vista, Otto se encontró con Ed Feasley.

—Pero si te vi hace nada, hace uno o dos días.

—Ya lo sé. Crissto, ¿qué has hecho, volar ida y vuelta? Quiero decir, ¿qué estás haciendo aquí?

—Acabo de enterarme de que había una fiesta —contestó Otto, y añadió—: No sé —cogiendo un vaso.

—Ya sé, quiero decir Crissto, ¿sabes? Ese sudaca chiflado lleva persiguiéndome toda la noche. Y a todo esto, ¿qué es esa música? —Ladeó tiesamente la cabeza para escuchar un fragmento de la *Música para los reales fuegos artificiales,* de Haendel, a la que acompañaba el señor Crotcher cantando «Adiós, mirlo» desde su butaca—. Quiero decir que me gustaría que pusieran «En el lado soleado de la calle», ¿sabes? He tenido a un tipo pegado a mí todo el día, ese corredor de maratón, lo conocí en un bar. Cuarenta millas al día, empiezas a las cuatro de la mañana y llegas allí a las tres de la tarde y comes. «Sólo te hace falta un destino», me dijo. Un corredor de maratón, quiero decir Crissto, qué innecesario. Y ahora ese sudaca. Oí decir que habías vendido tu novela.

—Mi obra de teatro, yo… —empezó Otto.

—Sí, Crissto, deberías intentar vender un acorazado.

Y los dos jóvenes terminaron sus copas y se quedaron callados, mirando con ojos distraídos la habitación, vagamente agitados por las palabras que salpicaban a su alrededor.

—El de esa señora de la Primera Iglesia Unitaria de Kennebunkport, M. E., que encarga servilletas con monograma para una comida en la iglesia y… Oh, ya lo he estropeado.

—Y hace poco más de cien años no había ni diez cuartos de baño en todas las casas particulares de París…

—En cien años, la población de Europa se ha triplicado, ¿qué significa eso?

—¿Y habéis oído la historia de los vestuarios de Far Rockaway?

—Le dije: «Si creyeras de verdad lo que has escrito ahí, estarías moralmente obligado a saltarte la tapa de los sesos».

—Bueno, el whisky está bien —dijo la chica de las muñecas vendadas—, pero por Dios no le des ginebra, la ginebra impide el crecimiento, lo probamos con un gatito.

A su lado, la mujer del vestido prenatal colapsado dijo: «Los bizcos me traen mala suerte».

—No sólo bizco —siguió la mujer alta—, sino con una mano seca, con muletas, e idiota. ¿Podéis imaginaros *una* persona con todas esas cosas? ¿*Y* con un traje con la espalda plisada y con cinturón?

—Un embarras des richesses, o lo serían para ese memo de la pelambrera que está ahí sentado en el sofá. Su principal problema es que nunca terminó su análisis, por supuesto se lo estaba pagando una chica… —Sintió un tirón en la falda—. ¿Y *tú* qué quieres?

—Me manda mamá por más píldoras para dormir.

—¿Qué *estás* leyendo…?

—Oh, no estoy leyendo esto —dijo la niña, sosteniendo en alto *Iniciación al inodoro y democracia*—. Un hombre…

—Toma —dijo la mujer alta, abriendo su bolso—. Tengo algunas aquí mismo. —Sacó un palillero chino, y se debatió con su intrincado cierre—. Oh, espera un momento… Dios mío, he estado a punto de darte mi Seconal. Un amigo de mi marido lo trae de México —siguió, revolviendo en el bolso—. Aquí tienes, querida…

—Ahora será mejor que te largues pitando y…

—No hieras los sentimientos de la pobre cría.

—¿Otra minoría sensible, los niños? Si vuelvo a oír otra vez…

—Quiero decir Crissto, minorías sensibles, ¿sabes? —saltó Ed Feasley, volviéndose hacia Otto—. Quiero decir que es realmente la gente como nosotros, como tú y yo, nosotros somos la minoría perseguida. Blanco, protestante, varón, más de veintiún años, quiero decir que no pertenecemos a ninguna parte, ¿sabes? Y al final no somos más que parodias unos de otros. Quiero decir Crissto, a veces me gustaría haber estudiado algo en la universidad. ¿Qué pasa? —se interrumpió, viendo la expresión de Otto.

—Nada. Esa chica, esa chica rubia, por un momento he creído… nada.

—¿Esa? La conozco de algún sitio. ¿Quieres que te la presente? —Otto murmuró algo, y alargó la mano hacia una copa llena que había cerca—. ¿No? Te entiendo muy bien, Crissto, ¿por qué empezar otra vez con lo mismo? Quiero decir, es exactamente igual que ese corredor de maratón, ¿sabes? ¿Qué haces cuando llegas allí? Comes y te vas a la cama.

—Ya sé —dijo Otto sombríamente, mirando al suelo—. Es curioso, antes pensaba que acostarme con una chica mayor que yo o más grande que yo estaba bien. Luego, ¿sabes?, cuando estuve en Centroamérica, era curioso, pensaba que si pagabas a una chica estaba bien, pero si pagabas mucho era más pecaminoso que si pagabas poco, pero parecía más honesto pagar con dinero que… que fingiendo que tú… que pagar… contigo mismo —terminó imprecisamente, mirando todavía al suelo.

—Ya sé, ¿sabes? Quiero decir, imagínate sentar ahora la cabeza. Mi viejo dice que no eres un hombre hasta que no eres cabeza de familia. Está acabado —siguió Ed Feasley, con la misma imprecisión, mirándose las puntas de los zapatos—. Tienen esa gran casa antigua en el Valle del Río Hudson. Cornwallis tuvo allí su cuartel general, o quizá fuera Lafayette o el general Sherman, no sé, pero no puedes entrar en ese lugar sin pensar en las fiestas que hicieron allí, embajadores y presidentes, ya sabes, quiero decir que es la hostia de histórico. Y ahora mi madre se pasa la vida allí abriendo paquetes, es lo único en lo que piensa, cada vez que llega un paquete para quien sea se emociona tanto. Quiero decir aunque sea de la lavandería. Aunque sea del supermercado. ¿Sabes? Y ahora han construido ese hospital público a tres millas de distancia; está lleno de débiles mentales, y unos negros están montando ese absurdo campamento religioso justo al otro lado del río. No quiero decir que tenga nada contra los negros, pero Crissto, ¿sabes? —Ed Feasley terminó su copa—. Cada vez que voy a casa es como si todo se estuviera desgastando. Quiero decir imagínate que fueras ahora el cabeza de familia en ese lugar. Que sentaras ahora la cabeza. Quiero decir Crissto que todo se desgasta, ¿sabes? La gente se desgasta, los amigos se desgastan, los coches se desgastan, a veces es más fácil estrellarlos cuando todavía están nuevos, así no tienes que ver cómo se desgastan.

Se les acercaba una baja figura lustrosa, vestida con un traje de zapa gris, que se veía a su vez acosada por alguien que le decía: «¿Es usted el tipo que va diciendo a la gente que nuestra compañía pone drogas en su comida para perros para que los perros se hagan adictos a nuestra marca…?».

—Oh, *coño*… me previnieron contra este tipo de cosas —dijo el argentino, huyendo hacia Ed Feasley—. Perdóneme, ¿molesto? Nos separaron cuando estábamos hablando de…

—Acorazados —dijo Ed Feasley con hastío, y así reclamado, dejó a Otto contemplando un vaso vacío. Ni

siquiera alzó los ojos cuando alguien dijo a su lado: «Me dijo que había comida en la cocina, pero entré y hay dos lunáticos ahí dentro, uno está casi desnudo y el otro le está untando de mantequilla».

La voz de Stanley zumbaba sin parar como una lejana corriente subterránea: «Sí, pero déjame terminar…», decía a Agnes Deigh. «No quiero decir que a mí no me afecte esta enfermedad moderna», siguió, con una insistencia que le impedía darse cuenta de que ella estaba más que cansada, en realidad exhausta en un sentido tan estricto que solo era físico en su temblorosa expresión. «Eso es lo que es, una enfermedad, no se puede vivir como vivimos sin cogerla. Porque el tiempo se nos da en fragmentos, sólo así lo percibimos. Al final ni siquiera podemos concebir un continuo de tiempo. Cada fragmento existe por sí solo, y por eso vivimos entre palimpsestos, porque al final toda la obra debería encajar en un conjunto, y expresar una acción cumplida y perfecta, como dice Aristóteles, y eso es imposible ahora, es imposible, debido a la ruptura, hay piezas por todas partes…».

De repente la mano de Otto salió disparada hacia el bolsillo interior de su chaqueta: se habría dicho que le había picado algo, tan involuntario había llegado a ser aquel reflejo.

—Una nación de relojeros, ¿puedes imaginar algún país mejor capacitado para hacer bombas atómicas?

—Oh, Dios, estar en Europa, en cualquier parte de Europa, aunque sea en Francia…

—Maude, ¿esto es tuyo? Lo llevaba la Gran Anna bajo la camisa.

—Aunque sea en Mauberge, aunque sea en una mina de carbón.

La cara de Otto no expresaba nada; como nadie le miraba, sus rasgos no tenían ninguna razón aparente para componerse de un modo u otro. Su frente estaba lisa y sin arrugas, sus labios juntos y rectos. Pero leves señales de agitación asomaron en torno a sus ojos cuando los alzó hacia la puerta, donde estaba Esther con una mujer que llevaba una orquídea boca abajo, y otros dos o tres apiñados alrededor del invitado de la noche, que ofrecía un espectáculo de descuido indumentario y dilapidación corporal consecuente con la humildad que, en su éxito de ventas escrutador del alma, se brindaba a compartir con otros. En aquel momento Esther atrajo su mirada con una expresión quejumbrosa que torció la cara de Otto con inmediata confusión, y agrandó sus ojos inyectados en sangre; aunque difícilmente habría podido decir por qué, mientras se volvía y fingía estar hablando con la mujer del vestido prenatal colapsado, que acababa de decir: «Los monasterios son algo bueno para América, ayudan a mantener a los homosexuales apartados de las calles».

Entonces Otto vio a Anselm, que estaba silbando entre dientes con suave aspereza, y observando a Stanley. Otto desvió la vista rápidamente, como temiendo que le reconocieran y le acusaran de algo; pero Anselm siguió silbando, y observando a Stanley.

—Esta autosuficiencia de los fragmentos, ahí es donde está la maldición, fragmentos que no pertenecen a nada. Por separado no significan nada, pero es casi imposible reunirlos en un todo. Y ahora es imposible realizar una obra global sin un sentido continuo del tiempo, así que en vez de ello intentas juntar todas las partes en una obra que se tenga en pie por sí sola y sirva de lo mismo que sirve toda una vida de obras independientes, algo superior a sí mismo, y yo… esta obra mía habría sido una misa hace trescientos años, porque la Iglesia…

—Pero querido… —llegó del fondo de la habitación la voz de la mujer de la orquídea boca abajo.

—Y ya estaría terminada, porque la Iglesia…

—Pero mi querido señor… ¿Pott, no? —siguió llegando la voz, mientras la mujer le derramaba parte de su copa en el zapato y quemaba con su cigarrillo la manga de Don Bildow—. *Yo* soy cuáquera por derecho de nacimiento.

Mientras Anselm se le acercaba por detrás, Stanley oyó el áspero silbido distraído, se volvió a medias, y luego siguió hablando con mayor rapidez y más directamente a Agnes Deigh, que lo escuchaba con forzada atención. Anselm avanzaba con lenta indiferencia descuidada, apartando a empellones a la gente como si fueran muebles acolchados. «Vamos cariño, una copita más de rica ginebrita y te encontraremos un médico monísimo, vaya, ¡si estás para comerte…! Ouuu…». Anselm apartó de un empujón a la chica de las muñecas vendadas, que siguió diciendo: «Hemos estado pensando en cambiarlo por un perezoso de dos dedos, se pasan todo el día colgados de la barra de la cortina de la ducha y no tienes que hacer nada».

—Eh, Stanley, ¿dónde está tu instrumento? —preguntó Anselm acercándosele por la espalda. Había sacado un sucio peine de bolsillo al que le faltaban varios dientes—. Le falta el do menor, pero si encuentras un poco de papel higiénico te acompañaré en «Avanzamos con paso débil pero diligente…», ¿no te has traído el instrumento?

—Y yo no leo a Voltaire, por supuesto —siguió atropelladamente Stanley, temblándole la voz con el esfuerzo—, pero en alguna parte he encontrado unas palabras suyas, «Si no hubiera Dios, sería necesario inventarlo». Eso puede sonar irreverente, pero…

—Suena claramente herético, qué puñetas —dijo Anselm a su espalda.

—Pero… hasta Voltaire entendía que es necesario algún juicio trascendente, porque nada es autosuficiente, ni siquiera el arte, y cuando el arte no es una expresión de algo más elevado, cuando no está investido, podría decirse incluso, se rompe en fragmentos que no significan nada y que no tienen…

—Me recuerdas a Simón el Mago, *investido,* por el amor de Cristo —dijo Anselm, poniendo una mano sucia en el hombro de Stanley—. Por qué no vas a ver su corazón, lo tienen en la Bibliotèque Nationale. Puede que le entendieras. Por osmosis.

—¿A Simón el Mago? —dijo Stanley, volviéndose con aire confuso.

—A Voltaire, por el amor de Cristo. —Dio una palmadita a Stanley en el hombro—. ¿Cómo está tu grieta, Stanley? —le preguntó. Se volvieron dos personas, alzando las cejas con escandalizado interés. [14] Agnes Deigh fingió que estaba buscando algo en su gran bolso.

—Cómo, qué…

—La grieta de tu techo, ¿de qué crees que hablo?

—Oh, no sabía que tú… está un poco más larga, tres octavos de pulgada más larga, me…

—¿Qué demonios tienes en el bolsillo? —dijo Anselm, señalando con la cabeza el bolsillo lateral de la chaqueta de Stanley, donde algo hacia bulto y la vencía hacia aquel lado—. Que me aspen —dijo Anselm, metiendo la mano en el bolsillo antes de que Stanley pudiera apartarse—, un cincel. Había oído esto, pero no podía creerlo.

—Bueno, he venido en metro, y…

—¡Batisiderodromofobia! ¡Qué te dije! —dijo un mirón. Anselm levantó la vista, con los ojos entornados —. ¿Y qué es eso que llevas *tú* en el bolsillo?

—Un estetoscopio —dijo Anselm—, qué va a ser.

—¡Anselm! ¿Qué haces aquí? —Al alzar la vista se encontraron con Don Bildow—. Dónde está… deberías estar cuidando a…

—La llevé a ver una película, y la dejé allí hasta que vuelva.

—¡A ver una película! Pero… qué película, dónde, dónde está, cómo has podido…

—Vale, te diré la verdad… bueno, no te preocupes por ella. Es un buen espectáculo, le vendrá bien.

—Pero no puedes… no has podido hacer una cosa así…

—Don —le interrumpió un joven excitado, agarrándole del brazo y señalando con la cabeza a alguien que estaba al fondo de la habitación, mirando la pequeña revista de tapas duras—. Ese poema, ese poema de Max, dice que no es de Max ni mucho menos, dice… bueno, ven a ver, rápido.

Anselm dijo: «¿Qué poema?», y los siguió hacia el fondo de la habitación, enrollando con una mano su revista, ahora con la portada hacia fuera *(Chicas cañón),* sosteniendo un vaso con la otra, y enseñando ya los bordes amarillentos de sus dientes con una sonrisa burlona.

Stanley miró con aire desconcertado cómo se alejaban; luego vio a Esther, a quien no conocía, acercándose a Otto, e intentó hacer una seña indecisa, diciendo: «Ahí está Otto, todavía tengo los veinte dólares que me prestó, no los he necesitado…». Su seña pasó inadvertida; escuchó unos compases de música, y se volvió hacia Agnes Deigh, que tenía los ojos cerrados. «¿Y sabes lo que tenía escrito Haendel dentro de la tapa de su clavicémbalo? *Musica Donum Dei…* todavía se conserva», terminó con desolado consuelo, alzando la vista, azorado por el panorama que tenía ante sí, la carne abandonada por las luces de la voluntad discriminadora.

Muy cerca de él, la mujer alta acababa de coger a tiempo a su marido para impedir que confesara (a un «perfecto desconocido», como le diría a la mañana siguiente) que tenía dos psicoanalistas, que no se conocían entre sí, a quienes refutaba siempre con los argumentos del otro, logrando siempre ganarles la partida. «Nuestro bene… uno de nuestros queridos amigos», lo interrumpió, mientras Stanley atendía con fugaz interés, «tiene un sofá reina Ana de lo más exquisito que según ha insinuado estaría dispuesto a vender, por supuesto por un *precio.* Por supuesto no hay nada que nos haga menos falta que un sofá reina Ana», siguió afablemente, dirigiéndose al perfecto desconocido y, con una sonrisa glacialmente cordial, al pasmado Stanley, y luego se volvió hacia su marido con un gesto apenado, «pero podría mejorar un poco las cosas que compraras algo a tu empleador esta noche, ¿no?».

El perfecto desconocido murmuró algo sobre un Cadillac que olía a fobia por dentro; y Stanley, de nuevo confuso por el rechazo cordial de la sonrisa de la mujer alta, y por la cansada arrogancia de la sombra superciliar de su expresión, buscó refugio en un terreno más inmediato, esperando encontrarlo tan apagado como lo había dejado, y doblemente sobresaltado, por tanto, al verse tan bruscamente expuesto a la iluminación de los dos ojos clavados en él.

Más allá, alguien estaba ocupado en escribir una crítica de una obra que tenía cuarenta y nueve palabras

de una sílaba por siete de dos sílabas; treinta y una palabras de origen anglosajón por cinco de latín y la decimoctava parte de griego. Era *honesta,* dijo aquella persona.

Y más allá, Otto huyó de un ojo de Esther al otro, y se encontró en ambos.

—No tienes buen aspecto —le dijo ella—. Ven adonde podamos hablar… —Llevándolo por la habitación hacia la puerta del dormitorio—. Es como si supiera que ibas a venir… —La puerta del dormitorio estaba cerrada. Se volvió hacia la otra puerta, llevándolo aún del brazo—. Oh, Herschel, perdona… —Cerró la puerta del cuarto de baño y volvieron sobre sus pasos—. ¿Qué has dicho?

—Como una jungla —repitió Otto, mirando por encima de ella hacia la habitación—. Como una jungla en la que has vivido durante la estación seca, y a la que vuelves durante una estación húmeda…

Su voz se extinguió, y se quedó allí parado, tratando de no adoptar ninguna expresión, mientras los ojos de ella exploraban su cara sin encontrar más signo de delación que una ceja crispada que empezaba a arquearse, pero no lo hizo.

—¿Qué te ha pasado? —le preguntó.

—Nada, me… estoy cansado.

—¡Nada! —Tomó aliento—. Estás diferente. Has cambiado.

—Supongo que sólo estoy cansado —repitió.

—¿Quieres quedarte aquí esta noche?

—¿Aquí? —dijo, mirándola como si no entendiera.

—Aquí. Conmigo.

—Pero Esther, yo… no creo que fuese…

—De acuerdo.

—Quiero decir que creo que quizá sería…

—De acuerdo, he dicho.

—Pero…

—Por favor. Si no quieres no hables de ello.

—Oh maldita sea, Esther, no he venido a discutir contigo —dijo con un ronco susurro—. ¿Por qué me miras de ese modo?

—¿Dónde has estado durante todo este tiempo?

Se lo preguntó amablemente, como sugiriéndole la pregunta que debería haberle hecho él a ella: pues tenía la respuesta bien preparada, como podría haber adivinado él si en vez de mirarse las uñas de los pulgares la hubiera mirado a los ojos, donde habría podido leerla.

—Pues… por ahí —musitó.

—Pero ¿qué has estado haciendo? —insistió ella, forzada a recuperar el momento.

—Nada en realidad, muy poca cosa, yo… —Alzó la vista hacia ella con un intento de sonrisa—. Mirando por ahí no parecía haber mucho que valiera la pena hacer.

—¿Y vale la pena seguir así, solo?, ¿sólo para descubrir lo que no vale la pena hacer? —preguntó con involuntaria brusquedad, y mientras él bajaba la vista de nuevo—: Ni siquiera tu sonrisa está viva… —Y se detuvo, bajando también los ojos como si hubiera hablado otro. Luego los levantó rápidamente, como para asegurarse de que estaba allí, antes de seguir—: Y tú, supongo que tú también tienes algo… crucial, algo crucial que hacer antes de… —Pero Esther se interrumpió de nuevo, pues vio en su cara que no lo tenía.

El lugar presentaba ciertos visos de follaje, movedizo, húmedo y malsano, quizá el escaparate de la floristería inundado, sus ocupantes flotando en ondulante similitud; o la jungla: pues en aquel instante atravesó la habitación un grito rapaz, como de ave de presa lanzándose en picado.

—¿Ese?, ¿ese es el poema de Max? —rio Anselm, y luego exclamó: «Wer, wenn ich schriee…», ¿ése?

Miraron hacia la puerta, sólo vieron al barrigudo invitado de la noche avanzando hacia ella con oscilante porte gallináceo, como siguiendo un rastro de migajas hacia el gran mundo exterior. El señor Feddle se acercó con aire bastante temerario, aferrando *El ojo vertebrado y su radiación adaptativa.*

La mano de Otto dio una sacudida, y luego se deslizó furtivamente hacia el bolsillo interior de su chaqueta, mientras retrocedía medio paso mirando abiertamente la figura de Esther. Sus ojos le hicieron alzar los suyos al momento.

—Acabo de… acordarme, ¿y tú?, ¿estás bien? Quiero decir, oí…

—¿Qué?

—No sé. Nada. Se oyen cosas.

—¿De qué estás hablando?

—Bueno, que tú… ¿que necesitabas un médico?

—Esta tarde vino un médico, y… le vi.

—Pero, y entonces ¿estás bien?

—Preferiría no hablar de ello.

—Pero… vale, lo siento, no pretendía…

Había empezado a apartarse de ella pero Esther le estaba hablando, su voz seguía sonando como si no hubiera parado:

—Porque tú has hecho lo mismo, también has desperdiciado todo tu tiempo, has gastado toda tu energía enfrentándote a cosas que no estaban ahí, tú mismo las ponías ahí para tener algo contra lo que luchar…

—Esther…

—Para no tener que luchar contra las cosas reales. —Le hablaba con gran rapidez—. ¿Y ahora dices que estás cansado? A tu edad, porque has estado intentando hacer que las cosas negativas funcionasen como positivas…

—¡Me gustaría ser un viejo! —le espetó él, y luego bajó otra vez los ojos, con la mano pálida dentro de la chaqueta, apretando el grueso paquete—. Porque… maldita sea, esto de ser joven es como él dijo que era, es como una tumba, esto de la juventud, la juventud, esta cosa en América, este acento en la juventud, en que todo pertenece a los jóvenes, y nosotros, míranos, en esta tumba, como él me dijo que podía ser, como él dijo que era… —Y Otto alzó los ojos, y no vio la más mínima agitación en su cara.

—Sí, has venido aquí por él, ¿verdad? —dijo ella serenamente—. Sólo querías verle a él, ¿verdad? ¿Y viniste aquí esperando encontrarle? Pues no está aquí. Ha estado aquí. Pero ya no está aquí.

—¿Dónde ha estado?, ¿aquí?

—He dicho que ha estado, pero ya no está aquí —contestó pausadamente, observando cómo Otto registraba con la mirada toda la habitación, esperando con calma a que volviera a posar en ella sus ojos inyectados en sangre, para decir—: Se ha ido.

—¿Adónde, sabes adónde?

—No —contestó, y se quedó mirándolo unos segundos, antes de decir—: Sí, sabía que habías venido por él, porque desde el principio fue así, me utilizaste para acercarte a él, para coger lo que creías que era lo que más quería, y tú… confiabas en él, claro…

—¿Crees que es de ti de quien desconfío? —dijo él de repente, mirándola a la cara; pero luego apartó la vista lentamente, como quien la aparta de la luz de una vela tras conocer la luz de un sol indestructible que se consume a sí mismo, con cuidado, como temiendo apagar esa vela, aunque brille inmolándose resueltamente, pidiendo que la salven de sí misma—. Si lo hice entonces —siguió, intentando hablar con claridad—, si no confié en ti entonces, quiero decir si no hubiera desconfiado de ti, entonces, no habría aprendido a desconfiar ahora de mí mismo y de todo lo demás. Y esto, este lío, revolviendo en este lío en busca de tus sentimientos y tratando de rescatarlos pero es demasiado tarde, ni siquiera puedes reconocerlos cuando salen a la superficie porque se han gastado por todas partes, y vulgarizado y explotado y desperdiciado y gastado donde podíamos, siguen pidiendo y tú sigues pagando y no puedes… y de pronto alguien te pide que le pagues en oro y no puedes. Sí, no puedes, no lo tienes, y no puedes.

—¿Dónde te han pedido que pagases en oro? —preguntó ella en voz baja cuando terminó su arrebato, que le dejó sin aliento, mirando al suelo, como si no estuviera seguro de lo que había dicho y lo buscara a sus pies para recuperarlo—. ¿Otto? —Alzó la vista y se la quedó mirando—. Dime, ¿quién te ha hecho esto?

—Yo… —musitó, desviando la vista de nuevo—, supongo que me lo he hecho yo solo —contestó con un susurro, mientras el señor Feddle lo apartaba de un empujón, pasando en sentido contrario con las manos vacías.

Y aunque era consciente de que había alguien a su lado reclamando su atención, ella esperó, mirándolo, esperando a que sus ojos volvieran a posarse en ella.

—Esther, ¿tienes las *Elegías de Diuno? ¿Diuno,* de Rilkey…? [15]

—«Wer, wenn ich schriee, hörte mich denn aus der Engel Ordnungen? —repitió Anselm, en un éxtasis de placer—. Und gesetzt selbst, es nähme einer mich plötzlich ans Herz…».

—Cállate, Anselm.

—No puede ser —repitió Don Bildow, mirando de hito en hito la página por la que tenía abierta en la mano la pequeña revista de tapas duras, mientras las palabras del primer verso bajo el nombre de Max se formaban en sus labios: «Quién, si grito, me oiría entre los órdenes…»—. No se hubiera atrevido.

—«Ich verginge von seinem stärkeren Dasein…». Jajaja, ¿ése es el poema de Max? «Die erste…», jaja, jajajajajaja, de las *Duineser Elegien* von Max Rilke, jajajaja.

—Esther, ¿tienes ese libro de Rilke?, ¿esas… elegías?

—Lo tengo —titubeó (pues no era verdad)—, pero lo he prestado.

—Pero no Rilke, no se habría atrevido —repitió Don Bildow, como si fuera una cuestión de opinión, o

un rumor que, rastreando su origen, pudiera aún desmentirse.

—Pídele que te enseñe su *Sonette an Orpheus,* te encantará.

—Cállate, Anselm —dijo sombríamente el poeta rechoncho, haciendo señas al hombre de la camisa verde de lana.

—*Tú* deberías haberte dado cuenta —le gritó Bildow mientras se acercaba trabajosamente.

—¿De qué?

—De que esto, este… poema, esta cosa de Max, tú escribiste ese ensayo sobre Rilke la primavera pasada, tú…

—Rilke, pero eso era sobre Rilke, Rilke como persona, un ensayo sobre Rilke como persona…

—Max Rilke. «Weisst
du's
noch nicht?…» —aulló Anselm, agitando su revista en el aire, enrollándose algo al cuello—. Cristo, ¿es que todavía no conocéis a Max? Como esa camisa que recortó y enmarcó, y la llamó pintura, *¿El alma del obrero?*

—Cállate… —repitieron, pero Don Bildow miraba alelado a Anselm. Luego susurró: «¿Camisa?».

—Y esos cuadros que está exponiendo ahora, los cuadros abstractos que está vendiendo ahora, ¿no sabéis de dónde los ha sacado? Max Rilke Constable —siguió Anselm, riendo—. ¿No sabéis de dónde los ha sacado?, ¿que todos son fragmentos calcados tal cual de lienzos de Constable?

—Dios mío, perdona, querido —dijo la mujer alta—, pero ese individuo tiene mi estola de piel… —Echó a andar hacia Anselm, hendiendo numerosas conversaciones mientras atravesaba la habitación.

—¿Sabes lo que ocurrió cuando murió Caruso? La ciencia le abrió la garganta para ver qué le hacía cantar así. ¿Sabes lo que significa *eso?*

—¿Sabemos ni siquiera la mitad de lo que nos está ocurriendo?

—¿Y sabes por qué son tan sinceros los franceses?, porque su lengua tiene tan pocas palabras que están obligados a serlo.

Otto había deambulado lentamente por la habitación, distraídamente, moviéndose de lado, retrocediendo unos pasos, cogiendo un vaso medio lleno, acercándose a la puerta del estudio, como si en aquella oscuridad pudiera seguir oculta aquella figura, trabajando aún en silencio desde hacía dos años.

—Hola —dijo Rose alzando hacia él la vista con una sonrisa.

—¡Oh! —se sobresaltó, al verla allí sentada en el suelo—. ¿Y… tú?

—Sí.

—¿Y tú, entonces tú eres la hermana de Esther?

—Rose. —Y siguió sonriendo mientras él la miraba casi con una mueca de dolor como buscando algo en su cara. Luego—: Te pareces al médico —dijo—. Sólo que el médico no era tan viejo.

—¿El médico? ¿Te refieres al médico que ha venido a… a ver a Esther?

—Sí —dijo Rose, y volvió la cara bruscamente—. A matar a su hermoso bebé.

—Pero él… quiero decir, ¿te lo han contado a ti? ¿Esther, lo del… bebé?

Rose alzó la vista hacia él. Sonreía otra vez, pero era un tipo diferente de sonrisa.

—No un bebé de verdad —dijo en voz baja, confidencial—. Porque Esther se lo inventó, sólo se lo inventó.

—¿Se lo inventó? Pero quiero decir, ¿es eso lo que ha dicho?, ¿el médico?, que era un… quiero decir, cómo lo llaman, ¿un embarazo histérico? ¿Es así como lo ha llamado?

—Sí —confirmó Rose tras un momento de reflexión, moviendo los labios como para ajustar a ellos las palabras que recordaba—. Eso dijo cuando lo mató, porque así lo mató. Esos son los mejores bebés —dijo, mientras Otto apartaba la vista de ella y miraba hacia la habitación—. ¿Verdad que sí? Los mejores bebés, porque nunca crecen —siguió—, y cuando mueren van adonde no pasa nada, y se quedan allí flotando para siempre…

Su suspiro se prolongó mientras él miraba hacia la habitación, escuchando a la mujer alta, observándola atentamente como si cada una de sus palabras y ademanes fuera sumamente importante, aunque no oía nada de lo que decía: «¿No son encantadores? Caricia de niño…», sacando del bolso un pendiente de brillantes y poniéndoselo en el lóbulo de la oreja. «Me los ha regalado mi marido, dice que una mujer puede mentir de modo mucho más convincente cuando lleva joyas», siguió, poniéndose el otro. «Yo simplemente le di dinero y le dije que saliera a comprarse algo y que prometiera no mirarlo», terminó, cerrando el bolso con un chasquido. «Luego tenemos que ir a otra fiesta espantosa». Se aclaró la garganta, mirando a su alrededor, y empezó de nuevo: «¿Habéis visto a ese guía de *boy scouts* de aspecto tan… saludable? Salvo por la nariz, tal vez. Lo he oído decir que unos *boy scouts* le habían pegado con una acera».

Maude Munk no se había movido.

—Llevo horas sin ver a Arny —dijo.

—Y un cuerno tarde, está amaneciendo —dijo el hombre de uniforme.

—Siempre está amaneciendo en algún lugar… —dijo ella, mirando hacia una pared sin ventanas.

—Eso es de Longfellow. Puede que no sea un intelectual, pero conozco a mis poetas americanos.

—¿Sí? —murmuró ella, sorprendida sin interés.

—Eso ha sido «Hannah, el horror de Hampstead» —entonó el señor Grotcher desde el bastión de su butaca, sin dirigirse a nadie—. ¿Quieren que cante otra?

Y la mujer del vestido prenatal colapsado, que había estado hablando con la mujer alta, siguió sin detenerse, dirigiéndose a la chica de la lengua verde: «¿Ves a todos esos hombrecillos feos y gordos con chicas guapas? Ahora tiene dinero toda la gente que no debería, y es porque la gente fea gana dinero porque no tiene más remedio. Cuando eres feo nadie te echa a perder, ves la realidad joven y ves las cosas hermosas como algo ajeno a ti que vas a tener que comprar. De modo que empiezas enseguida a pensar en el dinero. Desde que acabó el antiguo sistema aristocrático, en el que heredabas el aspecto y los modales y el gusto junto con tu dinero…».

—Rápido, dame un trozo de papel, rápido —dijo Anselm agarrando a Otto del hombro. Llevaba la estola de piel ceñida a la cara, anudada bajo su barbilla sin afeitar—. Jajaja, ¿te has enterado de lo que ha pasado? Tengo que apuntar una cosa, rápido.

Se había metido la revista enrollada en un bolsillo lateral, junto al estetoscopio. Estaba demasiado excitado por el placer para fijarse en la cara de Otto, una expresión ansiosa, pero una ansiedad vacua, y tanto más abandonada por ser rasgos adiestrados por disposiciones conscientes donde, sólo ahora como durante el sueño, nada ocurría. La mano pálida de Otto rebuscó en el bolsillo izquierdo de su chaqueta y apareció con la nota de su padre, unos papeles…

—¡Espera…! Espera un momento, eso no…

—¡Dame esa foto…!

Anselm cambió por completo en un instante. Los papeles cayeron entre ellos. Y Otto se quedó mirando la mano izquierda pálida, temblorosa, vacía, que llevaba tanto tiempo sin usar.

—¿De dónde la has sacado? —preguntó Anselm de forma perentoria, con furia y rabia a la vez, como si nunca hubiera visto, nunca hasta aquella noche, lo que podía dejarle sin aliento: la recogió del suelo mirando la superficie satinada como si no pudiera abarcar la figura entera en su percepción, captando detalles, la silla, el papel de la pared, finalmente las manchas que delineaban sobre el blanco sombreado, en un maniático silencio de búsqueda que le llevó a la cara y dejó la suya con una desvalida expresión de furia y consternación—. ¡Te voy a…! —siseó, alzando la vista hacia Otto.

—Esther, acabo de oír un poemilla jocoso divino sobre una *ame*-ba y la reina de *Sa*-ba… —chilló una voz frágil.

—Tú… —siseó Anselm.

—Pero escucha… no puedes…

—¿Es usted la señora que quería oír lo de Pablo y su gatito? —Tú…

—Pero ¿cómo crees que me siento yo…? —le espetó Otto, y se llevó la mano a la boca para detener su tembloroso labio desnudo con un índice amarillento.

—Pablo era ese científico…

—Y murmuraba «Ich liebe, ich liebe».

Entonces Anselm se echó a reír, un ruido histérico y jadeante interrumpido momentáneamente por un gemido: «Sssúcubo…» hasta que recuperó la voz: «Y cuando la llevaron al Bellevue y se enteró de que iban a desnudarla dejó de chillar el tiempo suficiente para quitarse los pechos postizos, y luego empezó otra vez, ¡allí, allí, allí…!». Tenía la cara casi pegada a la de Otto.

—En el… ¿está en el Bellevue? —El susurro les quemó los labios a ambos. Luego, una palabra torció la boca de Anselm con un sonido convulsivo que les separó el largo de un brazo: pues ambos habían levantado las manos y se quedaron así hasta que sólo Anselm permaneció inmóvil, siguiendo sus palabras sólo con los ojos: «Ssí, encuéntrala, encuéntrala», siseó a la cara vuelta de perfil, y luego, perdida de vista, al pelo y al cuello de la camisa, y a la suave circunvolución de una oreja, «encuéntrala y condénate».

—Pero nadie ha demostrado jamás físicamente que la tierra *se* mueva.

—Einstein dice que *él* no puede creer que Dios juegue a los dados con el universo.

—Bueno, yo tengo un amigo que es físico, y se ha convertido. Ahora escribe canciones.

—Pretende ser un músico serio.

Be-bop

, si puedes llamar música a *eso*.

—Igual que ella escribe rimas, y lo llama poesía.

—Una de ellas dice: «Con el Padre, el Hijo, el Espíritu Santo y tú-tarará-tararí, Qué maravillas haríamos los cinco aquí…».

—Ella pinta como si estuviera teniendo un orgasmo, si puedes llamar arte a eso.

—Si puedes llamar vivir a *esto*…

—¿Si puedes llamar amor a eso…?

Llegaban ecos de ruidos, no desde las vibrantes extensiones de la jungla, sino desde el mismo suelo de la jungla, constricciones de la turbera, los propios especímenes en movimiento: «Me siento como si llevara aquí siglos», dijo la mujer alta. «Me siento como si hubiera nacido aquí», murmuró Maude. Pero no había queja ni duda en sus voces, y ninguna de las dos hizo el menor ademán de irse. Los que habían desaparecido se habían ido en silencio, dejando solo leves huellas o ninguna de sus insignificantes contribuciones al origen de las especies: los demás se quedaban con la tenacidad de criaturas obligadas a elaborar leyes naturales de supervivencia, y demostrar así la superioridad de sus diversas capacidades de adaptación a condiciones en las que ninguna memoria era suficientemente larga para encontrar nada que no fuera naturaleza.

El poeta moreno estiró la cabeza con vigilante gesto de reptil, apartando los ojos de la orquídea marchita para clavarlos en Herschel, que acababa de salir del cuarto de baño y posaba, floreciente, en la puerta, una flor poco común nacida del suelo de la jungla, observada atentamente por aquellos ojos resentidos, enfocados de cerca, que en aquel momento se volvieron hacia un ruido y un aleteo al fondo de la habitación, donde la Duquesa de Ohio remontaba el vuelo entre un estallido de risitas. El crítico se acercó, avanzando con el paso del que se mueve en un medio familiar, desdeñando las reclamaciones del tiempo pasado y futuro, incluidos ambos en aquel presente caliginoso.

—Y remueven la sepultura del padre… —cantaba el señor Crotcher, hundido en su butaca, indiferente como la ostra que, pese a las excursiones evolutivas que tenían lugar más arriba, no ha visto razón alguna para cambiar en doscientos millones de años. Mientras tanto, por todas partes a su alrededor, variedades menos permanentes se mantenían en movimiento, como si aquello fuera de suyo una prueba contra el tiempo. La cabeza de Arny Munk oscilaba en varias direcciones, su sistema sensorial innecesario porque le guiaba Sonny Byron, cuya tierna voz encubría la firme presión de su mano. «Vamos, cariño, sé bueno, sólo un ratito, ella no te echará en falta…». Y pasaron bajo los ojos del poeta paleozoico, que brillaban abiertos entre rasgos cuya prehistórica simplicidad oscurecía levemente la aprensión a la vista de las mutaciones oportunas que tenían lugar a su alrededor, que por su propia existencia negaban la vigencia de su atávica sabiduría, y sugerían, mientras alzaban el vuelo manipulando las baratijas tan desvalidamente evolucionadas con la pretensión de haberlas diseñado ellas mismas, que quizá, pese a su beligerante cooperación con el medio ambiente, el mismo medio ambiente estaba cambiando, y que no solo él, sino toda la especie de la que dependía para vivir, y para salvarse del anonimato, perpetuándose después, estaba destinada a ser parte del suelo empapado, y del mantillo, y finalmente sólo huellas en la misma corteza.

—Deriva «venéreo», y ya verás lo que te sale, si no llamas decadencia a *eso*… —dijo alguien cerca del crítico encorvado, que se volvió, bajó la vista hacia sus grandes manos, y se encogió de hombros.

Más allá, como un animal oportunamente dotado para afrontar situaciones que todavía no han surgido o que, en realidad, ni siquiera se han insinuado, el señor Feddle se encaramó a un estante lleno de libros, fuera del alcance de la mixina y la lamprea, y de otros progenitores sin mandíbula que parloteaban debajo con aparente contento. Desde aquella superficie lo observó el crítico, llevándose una mano al pelo para alisárselo, y delatando así por un momento el tamaño de su cabeza. Su expresión era tan simple como pueda serlo el resentimiento sin comprensión: ahora, como un plesiosaurio moviendo pesadamente sus cuatro miembros como palas que eran, levantó su pequeña cabeza para ver al pterodáctilo elevar su absurdo cuerpo batiendo sus alas aún más absurdas y con un pesado aleteo remontarse hasta el cielo, un lugar ridículo para estar, ciertamente, pero por un momento lo observó, algo desconcertante para un plesiosaurio, a quien jamás se le había ocurrido semejante extravagancia, y que no tenía la menor esperanza de realizarla ahora mediante alguna proeza de agilidad o imaginación.

—¡En cuanto a tu Emerson…! —dijo alguien: y en verdad los había capaces de complacer también a aquel ecléctico excavador, planeando no para comer, no por amor, sino sólo por planear.

Esther iba de un lado a otro escrutando las sombras, pero el gatito mudo no aparecía por ninguna parte. Luego alzó los ojos en busca de Ellery, pero su luz permaneció desocupada hasta que la vacilante imagen de Benny los llenó, preguntando con forzada jovialidad: «¿Has visto a una rubita que se llama Adeline?».

Varías personas se volvieron para ver al señor Feddle caer estruendosamente al suelo; y obedeciendo a

esa aversión a dejarse perturbar por los alborotos, que llamaban buena crianza, ninguna de ellas se ofreció a ayudarle a levantarse. Pues aun aquellos presentes que consideraban la buena crianza una presunción mantenida por una clase contra la que estaban vocacionalmente en rebeldía, sustituyéndola por una estupidez que llamaban franqueza, se lo quedaron mirando entre francas carcajadas.

—Querida, ha sido delicioso —dijo la mujer alta a Esther—. Me gustaría mucho dar fiestas como esta, pero mi marido… —Con una mano intentaba arrancar a su marido del bajío de mobiliario donde su copa algácea le tenía anclado—. Pero ¿no estarás enfadada? Tienes que aprender a tomarte esas cosas con filosofía, querida, sencillamente no pienses en ellas. Yo sí que tengo ahora un verdadero problema, fíjate si no en mi estola de piel… bueno, gracias a Dios está asegurada. Le he hablado de ello pero francamente creo que no entiende el inglés. No puedo repetir lo que me ha dicho. Hay algo casi prehistórico en él, ¿no te parece…? Algo casi atractivo… ¿no te parece?

En realidad, la estola de piel había perdido la cualidad de ser un supuesto adorno. La mano de la naturaleza (que según nos aseguran ahora tiene inclinaciones experimentales) quizá había intervenido allí para provocar una de esas mutaciones radicales que (según nos sigue asegurando la Ciencia) son oportunas, disposiciones fortuitas sin propósito concreto, incluidas en el riesgo calculado de haber nacido. Sin embargo, Anselm se limpió la nariz con una cola de visón de forma tan despreocupada como si aquello hubiera crecido allí con ese propósito. Pero su expresión conservaba una lívida incertidumbre, con el labio inferior fuertemente apretado bajo una línea desigual de dientes amarillentos. Estaba observando a Stanley. De la oscuridad de Rose brotaron voces de hombres sostenidas por la música, *Judas Macabeo*. Por un lado, Chavenet resultó ser el hombre que demostró por primera vez que el ojo que forma la imagen no podía haber funcionado hasta que estuvo completa. Sentado al otro lado, aquel instigador xenófobo del criterio monosilábico en la escritura honesta oyó decir desde arriba la palabra «algáceo», y soltó un taco. Anselm observaba a Stanley. Y a su espalda, Don Bildow se acercaba farfullando una expresión todo lo vengativa que pueden permitir unos aros de plástico.

—Debe de haber algún lugar adonde pueda ir a esconderse la gente que comete errores —dijo Agnes Deigh, apretando la mano de Stanley entre las suyas. Estaba mirando hacia allí, donde Mickey Mouse hacía la señal semafórica de anulación con guantes amarillos—. No puede ser tan pronto —murmuró.

—Pero Agnes, la Iglesia…

—Ese vaso, el que está lleno, ¿puedes pasármelo? —le pidió entonces, alzando la vista. Él lo hizo con aire vacilante.

—¿Pero no crees, por tu propio bien, que…?

—¿No es cuando cometemos errores cuando más amor necesitamos? —dijo ella bruscamente. Había levantado el vaso con una mano temblorosa, pero no bebía, esperando.

—Sí, pero —contestó él con voz vacilante, fingiendo que no veía acercarse a Anselm mientras la afianzaba—. Pero no el amor finito que es tan débil como nosotros, no sólo eso, no…

—Stanley —le interrumpió con firmeza, aunque su voz era débil—. Lo siento. Siento ahora… lo que te dije aquella noche, aquella noche que saliste corriendo, Stanley, fue culpa mía, no debería haberte dicho aquello, no… —Él esperó a que siguiera, incapaz de responder—. Es que… yo… no sabía, Stanley, no sabía que no querías oírlo, Dios sabe que no, quiero decir que… creía que todos lo queremos, creía que era lo que quiere todo el mundo, oír que te…

—Sí, pero… bueno, es… quiero decir que el amor tiene que ser algo más grande que nosotros, y cuando lo es entonces es fe, y la Iglesia…

Bildow apretó sus pequeños puños al extremo de sus largos brazos.

—Te exijo que me digas dónde está mi hija… —dijo en voz alta a Anselm.

—Cállate, esto es una conversación sobre el amor. ¿Has leído alguna vez al gran poeta Suckling? Aquí tienes un poema del caballero poeta inglés sir John Suckling, Stanley. «El amor es el pedo de todo corazón / Le duele a un hombre cuando lo encierra / Y ofende a otros cuando lo suelta». ¿Te gusta? Eh, ven aquí, ¿dónde vas?

Stanley miró desvalidamente a Agnes Deigh. «Tengo que… perdona un momento», dijo. Ella siguió mirando a Anselm, que apartó los ojos de los suyos con repentina incomodidad, y finalmente dijo con voz débil: «Yo… quiero decir que está asustado… ¿no?», y se alejó arrastrado por Bildow.

Durante todo este tiempo, una figura había estado moviéndose por la habitación como una sombra, pero una sombra pálida, como la tenue silueta que proyectaría la luz negra en la oscuridad si pudiera. De cuando en cuando Anselm había clavado en su dueño unos ojos inflamados, para apartarlos enseguida tras un intercambio ferozmente vacuo. No hablaba con nadie, casi nadie le había hablado, y muy pocos habían hablado de él basta que la mujer del vestido prenatal colapsado observó: «Sí, ese chico de la placa de plata

en la cabeza me parece una minoría sensible de uno. Y ese memo de la pelambrera está intentando convertirlo, ése es el problema con los conversos… ¿qué pasa, niña? Te manda mamá… ya sé, espera un momento, toma… Espera, he estado a punto de darte mis Pubies…».

—¿Para qué son? —preguntó la chica de la lengua verde.

—Se me ha olvidado, pero ayudan…

Y volvió la vista ávidamente hacia donde el hombre encorvado de la camisa verde de lana acababa de decir: «Da igual, deberías aprender a conocerte…», cuando una mano sucia lo agarró del hombro y lo hizo volverse en redondo. Anselm lo miró fijamente a los ojos.

—¿No te cansas de ir por ahí de aguantavelas?

—Pero, pero tú… —El hombre encorvado temblaba de pies a cabeza, como si su cuerpo fuera de pronto una entidad desconocida que no podía, en tan corto plazo, aprestar para el combate.

—Deja ya de dar la tabarra a Charles —le dijo Anselm serenamente—. Estarías muchísimo peor que él si hubieras pasado por lo que él ha pasado. He oído toda esa mierda que le estabas endilgando, tus… y no puedes argumentar de ese modo, no puedes discutir los absolutos en términos relativos. Eso es lo que os jode vivos a los puñeteros intelectuales listillos, tratar de discutir los absolutos en términos relativos.

—Los discutiré como me dé la gana —dijo el crítico con aparente firmeza, debida a la rapidez con que hablaba.

—¡No lo harás, maldita sea! —dijo desesperadamente Anselm—. No puedes, no puedes hacer eso con los absolutos, o los aceptas o los mandas a tomar por culo, pero no puedes hacer lo que estás haciendo… —Anselm se detuvo, sin aliento, pegado al hombre. A su espalda estaba Bildow, parado donde Anselm se había soltado de su mano, mirando hacía la cara pálida que tenían detrás—. Y… y deja en paz a Charles, simplemente… déjalo en paz —terminó Anselm.

El otro se encogió de hombros, agarrándose los codos verdes con sus manazas.

—Sólo estaba intentando quitarle una navaja —dijo hoscamente, y volviéndose se alejó.

—¿Una qué? —preguntó Anselm, no obtuvo respuesta, y se volvió hacia la pálida figura desvaída—. ¿Es verdad? ¿Tienes una? —Lo agarró del hombro y lo sacudió—. ¿De dónde la has sacado? Dámela. Dámela. ¡Maldito seas, he dicho que me la des! —Observó cómo desaparecía la delgada muñeca con su exagerado vendaje, y en cuanto la sacó del bolsillo arrancó de la delgada mano la navaja de cachas negras—. Tú… estúpido cabrón, tú… ¿qué intentabas hacer? —siguió Anselm, pero su voz sonó insegura mientras se la guardaba en el bolsillo, y no miró a la cara inexpresiva que tenía delante—. No tienes ningún… maldito derecho a intentar cosas como ésa, tú… estúpido cabrón… —terminó, bajando la voz hasta un susurro con el que podía dominarla. Cuando al fin alzó la mirada se la sostuvieron mutuamente, ardiente la de Anselm en aquel abrazo vacuo hasta que bruscamente la apartó, y volviéndose sorbió por la nariz y se la limpió con la mano, mientras murmuraba algo. Don Bildow le bloqueaba el paso, pero no intentó detenerlo cuando vio la orquídea, tirada en el suelo por una caricia previa, y fue a recogerla. Con ella colgando entre dos dedos, Anselm se volvió, recuperándose—: Eh, señora —dijo, pero la mujer que la llevaba no estaba a la vista—. La señora ha perdido sus bolitas —dijo Anselm sin dirigirse a nadie. Luego musitó—: En qué mundo vivimos, las señoras llevan las bolas… —Sofocándose de risa convaleciente, se dirigió hacia Stanley, que había encontrado cerrada la puerta del cuarto de baño y volvía hacia Agnes Deigh dando la vuelta entera a la habitación.

—Y Pablov tenía ese gatito…

—Pero Carruthers tenía una yegua…

—Bueno, ella dice que se quedó embarazada por bañarse inmediatamente después que su padre, pero yo digo…

—Ohcrissto, quiero decir, ¿diceenserioquequierecompraruno?

—¿Cómo?, ¿qué dice…?

—¿En serio. Quiere. Comprar. Uno?

—Ese es el propósito de mi viaje a su país, además de adquirir algo artístico para el Jockey Club de Buenos Aires.

—Oh Crissto, bueno mire, no se vaya, quiero decir que no llevo ninguno encima. Mire, mañana por la mañana iré a su hotel y vendrá usted conmigo. Quiero decir, no estará borracho, ¿verdad?

—¿Borracho? ¿Yo?

—Crissto perdone a lo mejor lo estoy yo, quiero decir lo estaba, pero quiero decir que la gente no va por ahí comprando acorazados así sin más.

Maude había estado manoseándose la garganta. «¿Qué pasa, le ha caído algo en el vestido?». La mano que le acariciaba la nuca se detuvo, el hombre se inclinó hacia adelante y miró, con ella, por el escote de su

vestido. «¿Qué pasa?». Pero ella había dejado caer la mano, y miraba fijamente un miembro trabado que tenía delante. La pierna pertenecía a una chica atractiva con acento bostoniano, que bajó también la vista. Acababa de decir:

—No es mal plan, se meten dos rayas de nieve y dos barbis y bajan allí a pelear. Es una buena pasada. —Sacudió la pierna—. ¿Es esto suyo? —acusó, alzando la vista hacia Maude.

—Bueno, yo… ya la cojo —dijo Maude, tendiendo los brazos.

Y la chica de Boston se estiró la falda por la cintura y siguió: «Si quieres pillar esta noche tengo un contacto en la parte alta que seguramente podremos encontrar».

—Sí, me la llevo ya a casa —dijo Maude, y sostuvo en alto ante sí al bebé, pasándole una mano por la cabeza, y murmuró—. Una líder de hombres.

—Ejem, ¿puedo llevarla a casa? —preguntó el uniforme, intentando aún atisbar las interioridades donde Maude había estado buscando lo que ya había olvidado.

—¿Dónde vive usted? —preguntó ella distraídamente, alzando la vista hacia su cara.

Agnes Deigh había cogido la mano de Stanley para decir: «Y cada vez que la gente se encuentra, parece alejarse un poco más entre sí».

—Esos abismos que hay en todas partes entre todo y todos —empezó Stanley inmediatamente—, es esa falacia de la originalidad, de la autosuficiencia. Y en el arte, hasta en el arte…

—¿No lo conocías? Murió en mi apartamento de París cuando yo estaba estrenando mi primer espectáculo en solitario.

—Cuando el arte intenta ser una religión en sí mismo —insistía Stanley—, una religión de forma y belleza perfectas, entonces se queda completamente solo, no une a la gente, no… como hace la Iglesia, pero fíjate en el abismo que hay entre la gente y el arte moderno…

—Cuando voy al extranjero quiero ver países, ¿quién quiere ver gente? Para ver gente basta y sobra con el metro.

—Una música puñeteramente buena, Mozart —dijo el Gran Hombre Sin Afeitar. Acababa de hacer una jarra entera de martinis, que ahora vertía en una gran petaca—. Te lo digo yo.

—Bueno, ¿no le parece a *usted* como si todo el mundo estuviera cambiando de tamaño?

Y a pesar de la orquídea rota que bajaba y oscilaba ante su cara, Stanley siguió diciendo: «No es por amor a la cosa misma por lo que trabaja un artista, sino porque a través de ella expresa su amor por algo superior, porque ésa es la única forma en que el arte es realmente libre, sirviendo a algo superior a sí mismo, como nosotros, como lo somos nosotros…».

Y oyó a su espalda un ronco susurro: «¡Oh, esto es mío!, ¡esto es mío!».

—Y ésa es la razón por la que debes dejar de estar fuera, Agnes, porque la Iglesia…

—¡Ssí, esto es mío…!

—No queda nada de beber —dijo la mujer a la que hablaba, pero mirando por encima de él hacia aquella cara enjuta y descompuesta. Y aquellos dientes amarillentos desgarráronla voz en carcajadas.

—Diles que llenen las tinajas de agua. Que las llenen hasta el borde…

—Anselm…

—Aún no es llegada mi hora —replicó Anselm, forzando a los bordes desiguales a formar palabras en la cara de Stanley, y luego tomó aliento por encima de su hombro, riendo todavía—. ¡Mujer!, qué me va a mí… —Stanley chocó con él, volviendo ahora todo el cuerpo contra los temblores que compartía, acorralado así mientras aquellos dientes amarillentos rasgaban el aire entre ambos escupiendo palabras a mordiscos—: Pues he venido a malquistar al hombre con su padre, y a la hija con su madre, y a la nuera con su suegra… y los enemigos de un hombre serán aquellos que habiten bajo su mismo techo…

Stanley se lamió los labios contra la liebre que los acosaba; y parpadeó bajo la mirada de aquellos ojos ardientes.

—Sí, ahí está tu abismo, ¡la mano de tu amantísimo Cristo!

Con atrevida ternura, la mano de Stanley agarró la cálida muñeca, donde la cresta azul de una vena seguía el curso del hueso.

—¿Por qué te lo tomas tan a pecho?

—Tú, tú… —Anselm se soltó de un tirón. Luego miró frenéticamente a su alrededor por un instante, recuperando el aliento, hasta que logró decir—: Sí, qué época más asquerosa para vivir, sí, ¿verdad? Sí, yo…, ¿y no te gustaría que fuesen los buenos tiempos de antaño, cuando el papa Urbano vendía como reliquias los recortes de las uñas de sus pies?, y los… sí, cuando podías elegir entre tres prepucios distintos de la circuncisión del Señor…

—Cuando yo me emborracho es por algo —se interpuso entre ambos la voz de Stanley, dando tiempo a

su mano para que volviera a hacer presa, una articulación bastante frágil, aunque, al cerrarse así, destacó con apretado relieve las venas de la mano de Anselm—. No sirve de nada hablar así, Anselm, ¿por qué lo haces?

—Porque tú no puedes… y yo sí… —Anselm levantó bruscamente la mano, soltándose sin esfuerzo—. Esas disculpas asquerosas, esos refugios contra el hecho de estar vivo, el arte y la religión y maldita sea tu… y la filosofía, yo… y yo nací con un velo en la cabeza.

—¿Con qué? No sé…

—Sí, como un redaño, maldita sea, lee un viejo libro de cocina, yo, sí bueno qué demonios, da igual. Yo estudié medicina. Esta tarde he echado un buen polvo —siguió inconexamente Anselm, sacándose el estetoscopio del bolsillo—. Simplemente fui al hospital y…

—Por favor, no hables de…

—No, pero escucha, tengo que contártelo, fui a ese hospital donde creen que soy un médico especial externo, las enfermeras lo creen, eso es lo que les he contado, así que puedo entrar a examinar a los pacientes que creen que tengo algo que ver con el hospital, eso es lo que les he contado, y deberías ver algunas de las chicas que me he tirado así. Pero la de esta tarde ha sido la mejor. —Blandió el estetoscopio, cuya punta pasó rozando la barbilla de Stanley—. Esa rubia, esa rubia fabulosa, le puse una inyección de tres granos y medio de amital sódico y luego me monté encima y me la trinqué bien… —Sin que nadie le interrumpiera, se quedó mirando los caduceos desacoplados del estetoscopio; luego, retorciéndolos con la mano como serpientes metálicas, murmuró—: Eso es lo que es, eso es lo único que es todo… —Pero no pudo romperlo, y alzó y apartó la mirada, y descubrió al momento a la chica rubia previamente acusada de poner una *t* en genial, maquillada, compuesta, tan bonita (nunca sería guapa), tan inanimada y ajada como una fotografía, acusada una vez de quitar la *v* de *live,* y ahora de poner una *f* en *lie*[16]*—: Arse gratia artis*[17] —murmuró—, eso lo único que es todo.

—Anselm… —Stanley volvió a alargar la mano hacia él—, si… el sufrimiento…

—Sí, maldita sea, mis cicatrices, ¿quieres verlas?, son… ¿dónde está Otto? Él te enseñará sus cicatrices. Otto, eh, Otto, ven aquí, tú, ¿dónde demonios estás? ¿Dónde demonios está? Te las enseñará, te… te montará un auténtico tutilimundi sensiblero, te… ¡sensiblero! Sí, María Magdalena llorando a moco tendido por Cristo. Eso es grande. ¿Te lo imaginas con sus ojos de loco llorando a moco tendido por Cristo…? —Anselm se estremeció—. ¿Y si no vuelves a verme nunca? —le espetó a Stanley en la cara—. Sí, qué harías, no tendrías, sí, pero Cristo no tuvo ningún amigo, ¿no? ¿Te refieres a eso? Sí, bueno, tú ni siquiera tendrías un testigo, tú… porque eso es lo único que Él tuvo, Él… dónde demonios está, te enseñará sus cicatrices, ¿es eso lo que quieres? Las Cinco Llagas Sagradas. Qué te parecería tener eso, podrías ir por ahí poniéndolo todo perdido de sangre. Hasta podrías conseguir una buena tanda de punturas con la Corona de Espinas, te… ¿y qué me dices de la Ferita?, la auténtica herida sangrante del corazón. ¿Y qué me dices de un buen sudor de sangre en Getsemaní?, podrías superar incluso a santa Lutgarda, podrías dejar en bragas a santa Catalina de Racconigi, si quieres sufrir por qué no vas a algún sitio donde pueda servir de algo a alguien en vez de ser tan puñeteramente egoísta con ello como todos esos santos chiflados. Agénciate una crucecita con espejos, eso sería la hostia si quieres sufrir a tu manera, por el amor de Cristo… ¿Dónde demonios está?, sí, con sus cicatrices…

Anselm paseó frenéticamente la mirada por la habitación, blandiendo el estetoscopio ante sí, en busca de alguna tangibilidad entre aquellas pálidas presencias.

—Si es por miedo… —le susurró Stanley en confianza.

—¡Sí, mira! —Anselm rescató con su gesto a la sombra más pálida de todas—. Mírale, mira a Charles, por el amor de Cristo, ¡mírale! ¿Amor? Te he oído hablando del amor. Él puede hablarte del amor, del amor espiritual, de tu tipo de amor. Cuéntales, vamos, por el amor de Cristo, cuéntales lo de tu madre y el pequinés al que le cayó encima ese montón de sillas plegables, ella lo recogió y le insufló aire en la boca, le mantuvo vivo insuflándole su propia vida, pero ¿por él? ¿Le daría a él un solo aliento de amor? O un montón de palabrería sobre el amor que no tiene nada que ver con ningún tipo de amor, por el amor de Cristo, por el amor de Cristo, le dejó aquí para que se cortara la garganta por el amor de Cristo…

La gente había empezado a agruparse alrededor de ellos, y Anselm perdía peso a cada palabra, apartándose con furia de cada mano, aunque ninguna se atrevía a tocarle. Intentó meterse el retorcido estetoscopio en el bolsillo, en vez de ello lo tiró al suelo junto con la revista enrollada, y se levantó con ella en la mano. «Vuestra vomitiva… Lupercalia», murmuraba, como si el peso de las palabras pudiera mantenerlos a raya. La revista se abrió por la contraportada, y le espetó a Stanley por última vez:

—Sí, toma, toma tu paz y tu salvación, «Si se le corre, si le roza, si le aprieta, ¡

A LA BASURA ESE BRAGUERO…!».

—Cállate —le dijo el crítico encorvado, muy cerca.

—«Literalmente *miles* de Herniados *han* entrado en este *Reino del Paraíso Recobrado*…».

—No sirve de nada hablar así, Anselm —le dijo Stanley.

—Sí, aquí está tu salvación, miles «han usado nuestro Aparato sin la menor molestia. Barato - Higiénico - Cómodo…».

—Anselm, no sirve de nada hablar de ese modo. ¿Por qué lo haces?

—Porque la única maldita cosa que no puedo aguantar es tu maldita… confianza. —*Chicas cañón* cayó al suelo entre ambos.

—Pero no es confianza en mí mismo —dijo rápidamente Stanley—, sino fe, no confianza sino fe en algo más grande que cualquiera de nosotros.

—¿Por qué no te callas y te largas de aquí? —dijo el crítico.

Anselm se volvió lentamente hacia él, y formó lentamente las palabras cuando habló:

—Fóllate un pato y jódete un pichón, así aprenderás religión. —Luego le escupió en la cara—. Eso es por tu conversión de barraca de feria.

—Déjale —dijo rápidamente Stanley—. Déjale en paz —y pasó un brazo a Anselm por los hombros.

Anselm se quedó allí parado un momento, o parte de un minuto, y luego se enderezó con un respingo.

—Y deja ya esa maldita… esa puñetera actitud santurrona —gritó, soltándose de un tirón, y quedaron cara a cara—. Stanley, por Dios Stanley eso es lo que es, y tú vas por ahí acusando a la gente de negarse a humillarse y a someterse al amor de Cristo y eres tú, eres tú quien rechaza el amor, eres tú todo el tiempo quien no puede afrontarlo, quien no puede afrontar el amar y ser amado aquí mismo, en este mismo mundo asqueroso, este mundo puñetero donde estás ahora mismo, ahora… ahora mismo.

Anselm jadeaba, y Stanley se había retirado un paso para apoyar su mano insensible en el brazo del sillón de Agnes Deigh. Anselm se le acercó, aplastando la orquídea con el pie, metiéndose una mano en el bolsillo sin apartar los ojos de los de Stanley.

—Te da miedo esto —siguió, bajando la voz—, este… ssúcubo —siguió, sibilante—, essta bestia con dos espaldas. —Sacó la maltrecha fotografía—. Es esto, ¿verdad?, ¿verdad…? —Se la puso a Stanley ante los ojos—. ¡Verdad…! —Y entonces se arrugó en su mano, como encogiéndose sobre sus propias manchas delatoras mientras su mano la estrujaba, contraída por los jeroglíficos veteados que surcaban de azul la carne con interesada simpatía—. ¿Y si no vuelves a verme nunca? —se quebró la voz de Anselm—. ¿Sabes lo que es? —siguió, casi inaudible, sin mirar a nadie—. *Und wir bewundem es so, weil es gelassen verschäht… uns zu zerstören…*

Se quedó parado con la orquídea aplastada bajo el pie: hasta Don Bildow pudo hacerle girar en redondo.

—¿Dónde está mi hija?

—¿Tu hija? —repitió Anselm, con una voz que preludiaba un chiste—. Está bien.

—¿Dónde *está?*

—Está en la iglesia —dijo Anselm—. La dejé en la iglesia —repitió desvalidamente. Mientras meneaba la cabeza de un lado a otro, el crítico avanzó hacia él—. Vete, estoy harto de ti, te… vete, lárgate…

Anselm se abalanzó sobre él, pero Bildow, colgándose de su brazo por miedo a soltarle, le retuvo.

—Lárgate, lárgate —gritó Anselm—. Vete a casa solo. Solo. Solo…

—Cállate, tú…

—Solo. Vete a casa con tu amante, el viejo señor cinco dedos, jaja, jaja jaja… toma —siguió, recogiendo bruscamente la revista del suelo y metiéndosela al otro por la cara—, aquí tienes unas cuantas chicas. *¡Toma!* ¿Crees que no lo sé?, crees que no lo sabemos todos, déjanos ver los callos de tu mano derecha, el viejo señor cinco dedos, jajajajajajuhhhf…

Bildow le soltó cuando se desplomó al suelo por efecto del golpe relativamente leve, un esfuerzo que, sin embargo, había dejado exhausto a su contrincante, que retrocedió un paso y durante el momento que tardó en percatarse de que Anselm había caído se rehizo con un gesto de triunfo.

La voz de Maude sonó débil, pero clara en el silencio:

—Esto no es lo que yo recordaba de la Nochebuena —dijo.

Alguien se echó a reír.

—Al Señor no le gustaría esto…

—Bueno, si esto es el centro cultural del mundo, por mí podrían devolvérselo ahora mismo a los indios…

Otro se echó a reír.

—De modo que me dijo: tú pídeselo a Dios, cariño. Ella te protegerá…

—Jeje, jejeje…

—*Nosotros* sabemos lo que es el amor, ¿verdad, cariño…?

—Stanley, por favor…

—Espera solo un minuto, quiero… tengo que ayudarle.

—Déjame en paz.

—¿Dónde está mi hija?

—Déjale en paz un minuto. No debería haberle pegado.

—Stanley por favor…

—Déjame en paz. ¡Maldito seas, déjame en paz!

—Pero Agnes…

—Stanley…

—Criss-to…

—Sí, ya me advirtieron que me esperara estas cosas en Nueva York.

—Sí pero quiero decir Crissto no se vaya, o nos iremos los dos, vámonos los dos a su hotel, me quedaré allí esta noche.

—Pero en otra habitación.

—Crissto sí.

—Me previnieron contra este tipo de cosas en Nueva York —comentó su compañero, ajustándose su perfectamente ajustada corbata.

—Oh, Rose —dijo Esther a su hermana, sentada a oscuras en el suelo con los discos—. ¿No estás cansada?

—¿Estás teniendo una fiesta bonita?

Esther se tapó la cara con las manos, y sintió el brazo de su hermana en torno al cuello. «Oh, Rose, Rose».

La mano que tenía debajo Agnes Deigh se puso rígida, la parálisis se le extendió brazo arriba, por los hombros y el cuello, amarilleándole la cara mientras la sangre se retiraba tras su lienzo bronceado. «¡Stanley…!», susurró, mirándolo inclinado sobre Anselm, con un brazo en torno a Anselm.

—Ves, todo va bien ahora —dijo Stanley agarrándole del hombro, pero sin poder levantarle del suelo. Anselm abrió los ojos.

En la mano que se sacó de debajo, las uñas blancas aferraban un cuerpo exánime color canela. «Creía… que era algo», dijo Agnes Deigh para sí con voz ahogada. Luego miró rápidamente a su alrededor, abrió su bolso y empezó a sacar puñados de cosas que se metió de cualquier modo en el bolsillo del abrigo, para cerrarlo de golpe un momento después sobre el gatito muerto. Intentó desanudar la voz: «Stanley…».

—Y ahora ya no hace falta que te lo tomes tan a pecho, te…

El brazo de Anselm le rodeó, y la cara sin afeitar de Anselm raspó la mejilla de Stanley con el beso.

—¡Stanley…!

—Tienes que escuchar atentamente porque es muy complicado —dijo alguien colgando sobre ella por detrás—. Paulov tenía perros que salivaban, pero esta vez…

—*¡Stanley!* —gritó. Stanley alzó la vista hacia ella—. Stanley, por favor ven aquí.

—Pero… —dijo Stanley, levantándose y soltando a Anselm, que volvió a desplomarse en el suelo—. No puedo dejarle ahora —dijo, dando un paso hacia ella.

—Dios me ayude, Stanley, tienes que venir. —Alargó la mano y le cogió de la muñeca—. Creo que voy a vomitar.

—Pero no puedo dejarle ahora —dijo Stanley, apelando a Don Bildow, que estaba junto a ellos.

—Stanley, no puedes dejarme *a mí.*

—Pero Agnes…

—Ayúdame a levantarme.

—¿Dónde está? —exclamó Bildow—. Se ha ido, se ha ido, y dónde está…

Miraron a su alrededor. Anselm no estaba allí. Stanley se tambaleó y se agarró para no caerse mientras Agnes Deigh se levantaba, colgada de su brazo. Se le quebró la voz cuando dijo:

—Pero estaba casi… yo casi… ¿y qué hará ahora, solo?

Maude encontró al bebé más pesado de lo que había esperado, cuando se levantó con él.

—Ayúdeme —dijo.

—¿Qué pasa?

—Nos vamos a casa.

—Pero eso, será mejor que lo deje aquí, será mejor que no se lo lleve, puede que sea de alguien.

—Por favor… abra la puerta.

—Se hace llamar Tree, ¿eh? Cuando yo le conocí se llamaba Tannenbaum —dijo alguien.

—¿España? Pero si todo el mundo lleva *años* muerto en España…

—Lo siento, me voy a casa con este caballero, va a ayudarme a escribir una novela. No sé *qué* va a decir el señor Wipe…

Había una chica vomitando tras una estantería. «Tienen que disculparla, no está acostumbrada a esto. Y la puerta del cuarto de baño está cerrada». El señor Feddle, aferrando *El filo de la navaja,* se echó a un lado.

—Ese filodendro, ese maldito filodendro de hoja aserrada, es la única cosa que he visto crecer en once años, si puedes llamar crecer a eso…

Cerca, alguien derivó obsequiosamente filántropo: «Philos, *amante,* más ánthropos, *hombre…»,* gimió la voz.

—Es de mi mujer, le hace más caso que a mí… por eso se me ocurrió lo de la guadaña, por eso no pude entenderlo, romper una guadaña… pero mañana por la mañana…

—¿Me llevarás contigo? ¿Benny?

—Ella e Ifigenia, están empezando a parecerse la una a la otra.

—¿Quién es Ifigenia?

—El filodendro.

—Qué es ese olor tan curioso, llevo oliéndolo toda la noche.

El calor, y el exceso de gente, parecían haber intensificado el aroma de lavanda que salía del umbral oscuro e impregnaba toda la habitación bien iluminada, salvo el efluvio fragante dejado por la mujer alta, el rastro de *Mi pecado* adherido aún al sillón que Agnes Deigh había dejado vacío, y un tufo acre y dulzón que brotaba de un rincón donde alguien dijo a la chica de Boston: «No fumes eso aquí, por el amor de Dios».

A estas alturas, la música se había convertido en algo inherente a la habitación; era como si se hubiera amalgamado con el humo y los olores incongruentes en una presencia tangible, el desecho del refinado sobrenadando en el atanor, donde el alquimista esperaba con la paciencia de toda una vida, contemplando su improbable compuesto de ingredientes tan dispares en naturaleza como en proporción, mezclándose pero negándose a fundirse bajo su mano, y tan ajenos a su mano como a su propia finalidad, de modo que unos se hundían y otros salían enteramente a la superficie, todo ello como si nada hubiera cambiado desde que la mano filtraba la escoria de la Edad Media en busca de lo que todas las edades han buscado, y encontrado, al descubrir que lo que buscan se ha refinado hasta consumirse, dejando solo las cenizas de la necesidad.

Esther se dirigió al umbral oscuro. Luego vio a Ellery al fondo de la habitación, saliendo del pasillo del dormitorio. Se volvió hacia él, pero él pareció no verla. Cuando llegó allí salía la rubia. Iba alisándose el vestido y sonrió a Esther al pasar. Esther empezó a hablar, pero la rubia siguió adelante, sonriendo agradablemente, sin oír, remedando mientras se alejaba al gato inmóvil que se ha tragado entero al canario huido.

Esther entró en el dormitorio con la mano apretada contra el estómago, y encendió la luz violeta junto al espejo. Se quedó mirando el polvo derramado sobre el tocador. Luego se volvió, con los pulpejos de las manos hundidos en los ojos, y se sentó un momento antes de poder mirar: habían estirado la colcha con rápido descuido, de forma que una de sus esquinas colgaba hasta el suelo, y la almohada estaba medio destapada. Se pasó la mano por el pelo, y alzó la vista para decir «¿Rose?» con un gemido sofocado. Lo único que oyó en la otra habitación fue: «He dejado un cigarrillo en algún sitio…».

—¿Rose?

—Bueno, *yo* estoy demostrando que *Einstein* no existe…

Se levantó y volvió a la habitación.

—En este país intentan desaparecer cada año un millón de personas, ¿qué significa eso?

—Potrillo, me siento lo bastante ligero como para ir hasta casa dando brincos.

—¿Ni siquiera vas a despedirte de ella?

—Dejé de tratarla hace años.

—Oh Crissto, Crissto, ¿no habéis visto a un tipo de aspecto grasiento con el pelo engominado?, porque quiero decir Crissto no he podido perderlo.

—¿De verdad te llamas Adeline? —preguntaba Herschel a la rubia despidiéndose de ella—. Porque, cariño, yo tuve una niñera que era exactamente igual que tú, la mordí… ¡ya-sabes-dónde! Pero ¿te vas a Hollywood? Yo también, cariño, quizá te vea allí y tengamos un agradable teta-a-teta sobre los viejos tiempos… —Retrocedía hacia la rosácea aflicción del sueco, que se agarraba con la mano la nariz hinchada —. Todo va bien ahora, cariño…

—Pero ¡esos boy-scouts! Jamás volveré a hablar a un boy-scout.

—No llores, cariño. Piensa en Rudy, *sé* que algo terrible le ha pasado a *ese,* pero le di esta dirección cuando llamó y dijo que había tenido un accidente de coche…

—¿Dónde está Bildow?

—Ha ido a la comisaría.

—Por qué no dirá alguien a los franceses simplemente que están acabados.

—Te gustará esta canción —dijo el señor Crotcher sin dirigirse a nadie.

—Ese tipejo de aspecto engominado con el pelo grasiento, quiero decir Crissto no he podido perderlo, Crissto.

—Por qué no vamos a ese sitio donde tienen canciones pasadas de moda en *la jukebox.* Podemos pedir café y ponemos ciegos de anfetas.

—Vamos —dijo Ellery—. Odio verte así, Jesucristo, Benny, eres mi mejor amigo, eres el mejor amigo que tengo.

—Así son las cosas —siguió Benny—. Lo que es una tragedia para ti es una anécdota para todos los demás. Somos cómicos. Todos somos cómicos. Vivimos en una época cómica. Y cuanto más empeora más cómicos somos.

—Benny, me vas a llevar contigo, ¿no? —terció la figura con las mangas de franela hasta los codos—. Te vas a ir en serio, ¿no? Nos vamos a ir en serio, ¿no?

—Somos cómicos porque no hay otra cosa que… que se pueda… otra cosa que se pueda hacer.

—Benny, cálmate, olvídalo, mira, ese truco de la iglesia, has dado en el clavo, esta es la tuya, Benny…

Ellery le estaba sosteniendo, pero se soltó de un tirón al ver al señor Feddle, que acababa de dedicar el libro que llevaba en la mano *con los mejores deseos de Benedict Arnold.*

—¿Qué le ocurrió? —preguntó Benny—. A él, a Fedya, a ese del que me hablaba. ¿Qué le ocurrió? —insistió.

—Bueno, se suicidó, por supuesto —dijo con gusto el señor Feddle—. Era ruso. —Benny tenía una mano en su muñeca—. Sí, nada más decir: «¡No hace falta preguntar! Lo hice yo solo. El plan fue mío, y el acto fue mío…». —La mano aferrada a su muñeca se aflojó y se soltó—. Nada más decir: «Cuando la pata está atrapada, el pájaro está perdido…» —siguió el señor Feddle con un murmullo, retirándose, mirándose la mano—. ¿O eso es de *El poder de las tinieblas*? ¿Nikita, en *El poder de las tinieblas*…?

—Benny, mañana por la mañana Benny…

«En Roma estaré en el Dingle». «¿El Dingle?». «El Dingleberry, cariño». «¿En qué barco vas?». «En uno de los Queens, naturalmente…».

Mientras cruzaba de vuelta la habitación, Esther parecía realmente necesitar ayuda; por eso evitaron todos mirarla. En vez de ello reanudaron sus acometidas unos contra otros.

—No puedo imaginarme cortándome las muñecas en Pokheepsie.

—¿Hemingway? Bueno, dijo que estaba en el Ritz, pero yo digo que el Ritz lo demolieron hace la tira de años…

—¿Se ha hecho de la Iglesia? Yo le conocí cuando se había hecho del Club de Yale.

—Entonces, ¿todos nos asustamos al hacernos viejos?

Esther llegó a la puerta del cuarto de baño cuando salía Arny Munk de la mano de Sonny Byron, que iba diciendo: «La encontraremos, y no tiene por qué enterarse de nada. Ahora dime la verdad, ¿no ha estado bien?», mientras el señor Crotcher cantaba: «Hoy es el día grande en el que dan bebés de balde…».

En el cuarto de baño Esther se apoyó contra la pared y humedeció un paño. Se quedó mirando su imagen en el espejo hasta que se dio cuenta de que lo único que podía hacer era devolverle la mirada, y entonces interpuso el paño entre sus ojos y su imagen; mientras se pasaba el paño húmedo por la piel, las líneas capilares del blanco de sus ojos exigieron carne a los ojos, la firmeza de los huesos se ablandó, las líneas de la vida, y la obstinación de la boca, todo ello se fundió en blanda carne inanimada. Ya le había pedido que se quedara a pasar la noche; ahora se volvió a buscarle.

En la habitación, el crítico se volvió al sentir encima la mano de la Duquesa de Ohio. «No puedo escuchar esta música tan preciosa sin ponerme a bailar, ¿quieres bailar conmigo…?». El crítico lo dejó despatarrado en el suelo, adonde le había derribado de un empujón.

—Es el chiste más raro que he oído sobre el papa, no lo entiendo en absoluto.

—Quiero decir Crissto, no he podido perderlo.

—¿Flo-flo?

—Florencia, cariño.

En realidad no le sorprendió encontrárselo en el dormitorio, tumbado en la cama con la camisa verde de

lana, y nada más. Se volvió rápidamente a cerrar la puerta y echar el cerrojo: le pareció que tardaba siglos en hacerlo.

—El presidente McKinley tenía una [18]

—Sé tocar «Barras y estrellas por siempre», o «Violetas» tirado *bajo* el piano.

—Los vestuarios de la historia de

—Y los cubos de basura

—El papa

—Los suizos

—Los hermanos Wright y los barcos de la armada rusa

—*Lo* amaba

—Esta vez era un gatito

—La *odiaba*

Una voz más aguda, al lado mismo de la puerta que acababa de cerrar, con toda seriedad: «Unas píldoras para dormir que me manda a pedir mi mamá, sé qué frasco es, si puede auparme un poquito».

Esther se apoyó en una esquina de la cómoda para quitarse los zapatos, luego la falda. Alargó la mano para apagar la luz.

—No. Déjala encendida.

La manga de lana le raspó los hombros desnudos, sus piernas cedieron, blandas contra los músculos tensos y duros donde restregaba sus concavidades.

—¿No vas a… quitarte esto?

—Sí, dentro de un… minuto.

Su fría mano le empujó con fuerza el hombro hacia abajo.

—Pero ahora, no sé… si voy a atreverme…

—No, tú sólo…

—Pero qué estás, creía que sólo los críos…

—Así está bien, yo…

—Pero ¿y yo qué hago? —exclamó ella.

—Tú sólo… mira —dijo él jadeando.

Las largas calles eran rectos túneles de viento cargado de nieve que mordía la piel de todo el que avanzaba penosamente contra ella, el pavimento endurecido por aquella nieve, su blancura manchada por millares de ruedas sucias, punteada y listada por depósitos de aceite goteantes, hundida aquí y allá por un tacón desesperado. Las luces indisciplinadas, casi todas rojas porque brillaban ante bares, taladraban la nieve, dirigidas por la incansable precisión de los semáforos que cambiaban de verde a rojo, de rojo a verde, deteniendo el tránsito precario, dándole paso.

Por las escaleras del metro bajaba una figura a cuatro patas, y los que posaban en ella la vista la apartaban enseguida, o se detenían a mirar, casi tan incapaces de mantenerse derechos como lo hubieran sido, si hubieran bajado como él, de avanzar escaleras abajo con tal enérgica facilidad, de meter la moneda en la ranura con los labios y pasar la barrera, de salir al andén y, tras esperar apenas un minuto, subirse a un tren.

—¡Arthur! ¿Qué estás haciendo? Levántate.

Volvió la cabeza, y alzó la vista para ver a una mujer menuda con un vestido de seda negra cerrado hasta la garganta, una mujer que le triplicaba en edad, que había vivido el doble de los años que le había dado desde que le dio a luz.

—Levántate, te digo. —Agarraba con fuerza el libro negro y dorado que tenía en el regazo, y solo se movían sus labios delgados mientras hablaba enérgicamente en voz baja—: Levántate ahora mismo. ¿De dónde has sacado esa estola de piel? ¡La has robado! Levántate ahora mismo. —De repente alargó la mano, y aunque estaba muy cerca de sus flacas rodillas, él la esquivó con un movimiento tan leve, y aparentemente tan despreocupado, como la evasión de un animal. Ella volvió a apretar con fuerza el libro —. Levántate ahora mismo, te lo ordeno.

El tren avanzaba con estrépito. Él la miró.

Mickey Mouse hacía la señal semafórica de anulación. «No puede ser tan tarde». Se lo llevó al oído. «Creo que se ha parado», dijo. «No puede haberse parado», dijo, deteniéndose bajo una farola.

—Espera aquí. Ahí hay un taxi.

De repente se quedó sola, y se apoyó pesadamente contra un edificio, viendo cómo corría hacia el

bordillo de la esquina, donde resbaló y cayó. Detrás de ella, una de las sombras indistintas cobró forma articulada.

—Oh, no, *¡deténgase!*

—¿Qué ha pasado? —preguntó él, sacudiéndose la nieve con una mano, sosteniéndola con la otra.

—Me ha robado el bolso…

—Pero suéltame, puedo atraparlo…

—Oh, no —dijo, colgándose de él—. Me ha robado el bolso. Me ha robado el bolso —chilló, apoyando todo su peso en él, riendo y chillando al mismo tiempo.

Él miró desesperadamente a su alrededor; entonces su expresión, y su porte, cambiaron por completo. Murmuró algo, y sin mucha dificultad la guió escalones arriba hasta la puerta de la catedral, y la arrastró dentro.

—¿Puedes arrodillarte?

Quedaron aplastados por aquel vasto silencio, que caía como un peso desde arcos de piedra fuera de todo alcance; volvieron a salir penosamente a la superficie, traspasada en aquel momento por un campanilleo que sonaba como un estoque taladrando la piedra. «No puedo respirar», dijo ella. Se recostó en el banco, estirándose el vestido por delante mientras se le abría el abrigo.

Él miraba fijamente al frente, hacia una serenidad que, transfigurada en luz, parecía acercarse a él.

—¿Puedes recibir la comunión? —le preguntó, dando forma al silencio que había entre ellos, arrancando un duro trozo para atravesarla.

—Yo… no es… ahora no —murmuró ella, tajando el silencio de él en esquirlas de pizarra, fragmentos irregulares de su peso lanzados contra él. La ayudó a levantarse, hacia la liberación del canal de la nave que fluía en una dirección desde la que el silencio pareció de pronto agruparse y caerles de nuevo encima con todo su peso.

—*Qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis*…

Se desplomó sobre él como un peso muerto.

—*Miserere nobis*…

La sostuvo mientras recobraba el uso de los pies.

—*Dona nobis pacem*…

Se volvió y la siguió, hacia donde corría huyendo del estoque que golpeaba a sus espaldas, atravesando las puertas gigantescas que los derramaron juntos a aquella noche impía.

Habría podido alcanzarla si no se hubiera caído en los escalones, algo que ella, pese a todas sus piruetas, logró evitar de algún modo. No la alcanzó hasta la manzana siguiente, donde se había detenido, jadeando con fuerza, ante una puerta iluminada de rojo. Aun entonces, antes de que pudiera agarrarla se metió en el bar, donde un hombre maltrecho se pasó la mano por su mugrienta barbilla y se les quedó mirando, y el camarero se acercó.

—Ahora me apetece un martini —dijo ella mientras se sentaba, hablando con claridad.

—Pero Agnes…

—¿Y usted, señor?

—Nada. Un vaso de agua. Agnes…

Lo miró con ojos vidriosos, sin reconocimiento.

—Agnes…

El camarero tamborileaba con los dedos en la barra, esperando.

—Agnes… —alzó la vista hacia el camarero, sorprendido—. Oh, tome —dijo entonces, y le tendió el billete de veinte dólares que se sacó del bolsillo—. Lo siento, es lo único que tengo. Agnes…

El camarero se dirigió lentamente hacia el fondo de la barra, mirando con detenimiento el billete. «¿Qué pasa, nunca has visto dinero americano?», dijo su maltrecho cliente. «Yo no paro de verlo. Soy Santy Claus».

—Agnes, por favor…

—Me voy a un hotel —dijo ella sin mover la cabeza, sin dirigirse a nadie, mientras dejaba la copa vacía —. Le escribiré una carta.

El camarero se había llevado el billete para examinarlo bajo una lámpara de mesa que encendió junto a la caja registradora.

—Agnes, espera un momento…

Ella se bajó del taburete.

—Esperen aquí un momento los dos. —Stanley se volvió. El camarero le tenía cogido del brazo por encima de la barra—. Espere un momento. Deténgala.

—*Agnes,* espera…

—Yo no puedo detenerla. Soy Santy Claus.

—Agnes, mis gafas. Te olvidaste de darme las gafas…

Pocos minutos después Stanley, bastante ciego en aquella reducción de Gaza, estaba esperando un coche patrulla. «Da el cante a un milla de distancia, por cómo está manchado el anverso», decía el camarero al policía que tenía cogido a Stanley del brazo. «Venía con una tipa, pero ella se dio el piro. Gracias, Mac». Volvió adentro, y el policía dirigió su atención hacia su prisionero, sobre el que caía la nieve cuajando en su bigote, y acumulándose en las ondas de pelo de la coronilla de su redonda cabeza; lo miraba en silencio, con la embotada curiosidad de un turista, como hubiera mirado un turista la figura picada de un santo de piedra infatigable, impasiblemente expuesta a la intemperie durante un siglo de más.

Avanzando con estrépito de luces, bajo tierra, donde nunca acababa la noche, ella dijo: «Arthur, levántate. ¿No me conoces? ¿No sabes quién soy?».

Él la miró.

El tren se detuvo. Sus puertas se abrieron, y antes de que ella pudiera moverse se cerraron tras él y la dejaron dentro, recuperándose de su momento de indecisión, sentada y mirando directamente al frente.

A cuatro patas, trotó hacia el fondo del andén vacío. Se detuvo un momento y levantó la cabeza para mirar a su alrededor; luego siguió adelante, y abrió con la cabeza la puerta del servicio de caballeros. Estaba vacío. Se enderezó sobre sus rodillas y se metió la mano en el bolsillo. Tiró a un retrete la foto estrujada. Con la otra mano se desabrochó la ropa, y abrió la navaja. Se detuvo así, mirando hacia la escasa iluminación de la débil bombilla, y solo entonces se oyó su voz, «In nomine…», aunque sus labios siguieron moviéndose, sin un temblor, mientras sus manos trabajaban rápidamente, con diestra seguridad, ocultas.

—Vaya, daba el cante a una milla de distancia.

—Y la chica que iba con él…

—La chica que iba con él…

—Ésa daba el cante a una milla de distancia. Hola, Jimmy. Feliz Navidad. Entra a tomarte una por la Navidad.

—Feliz Yom Kipper. Qué haces.

—Bebo, ¿qué te parece que hago? Pon una aquí para nuestro amigo, Barney.

—Es un país libre.

—Cozy fan tooty.

—Lo mismo para ti. ¿Qué significa eso?

—Eso es «Que te jodan» en latín.

—Eso no es latín.

—Vale, ¿y por qué tendría que significar algo? *Cozy fan tooty,* no es más que una expresión.

—Bueno, que haya suerte. Feliz Yom Kipper.

—¿Eso es lo único que sabes decir, «Feliz Yom Kipper»? El feliz Yom Kippur fue allá por Halloween.

—*¿Así que eres* meine Yiddische Sendy Claus?

—Eso no tiene gracia, no tiene gracia. Si no fuera por los judíos no habría Navidad.

—¿Así que eres judío?

—Así que soy judío. Díselo, Barney, ¿no soy judío?

—Venga, hombre, tú eres tan judío como mi polla.

—Bajad la voz ya. Bajad la voz.

—Este lleva cinco años tocándome los huevos.

—¿Sí?, pues deberías estar ya escoció.

—Bajad la voz ya.

—Vale, Barney. Gracias por la cerveza. Pero dile aquí a Santa Claus que no me toque los huevos.

—Será mejor que bajéis la voz los dos o que os larguéis. Ya ha dejado de nevar.

—¿Por fin ha dejado de nevar?

—No estás siendo un perfecto anfitrión, Barney. Se supone que eres el perfecto anfitrión.

—¿Por fin ha dejado de nevar? Bueno, que me aspen.

—Feliz Navidad.

—Y por fin ha dejado de nevar.

—Feliz Yom Kipper.

—Bueno, que me aspen.

VIII

«Entonces Adán, al ver a Enoc y Elías, dice:
"Decid, ¿qué clase de hombres sois, si humanos,
Que aquí os presentáis en carne y hueso,
Y muertos, no vinisteis con nosotros al Infierno
Cuando todos los hombres fueron condenados?
Después de mi pecado me dijo el Padre Eterno
Que este lugar tendría siempre cerrado
Para todo hombre terrenal el paso;
empero, aquí os encuentro"».

El descenso a los infiernos

Las luces indisciplinadas taladraban la noche dirigidas por la incansable precisión de las brigadas de semáforos, que cambiaban de rojo a verde, de verde a rojo, ordenando el espacio con indiferente autoridad: pues allí fuera la noche no había cambiado, con toda la historia de la noche engolfada en ella no había mejorado ni empeorado, había menos luces y estaba más oscura, menos movimiento y más vacía, más silenciosa, menos perturbada, y como las figuras porosas que seguían avanzando contra ella, más ensimismada.

El señor Inononu se apartó de la ventana y se dirigió sin propósito aparente, con el traje ondulando silenciosamente a su alrededor, hacia la chimenea, donde algo se quemaba lentamente.

—*Fas et nefas ambulant, pene passu pari…* —Ladeó la cabeza un momento y escuchó—. *Prodigus non redimit vitium avari…* —Contempló la esfera que tenía delante, mientras las palabras seguían llegando—: *Virtus temperantia quadam singulari…*

La nariz del señor Inononu no estaba a más de dos pulgadas del reloj Vulliamy sobre la repisa de la chimenea. Lo examinaba como examinaba todas las caras, un atento escrutinio de exactitud, brevedad y disposición clínicas. Luego alzó los ojos hacia el cupido dorado, sorbió silenciosamente por la nariz, los bajó hacia el fuego que ardía sin llama en el hogar, ante el cual sorbió de modo audible, y se dirigió hacia el escritorio para examinar sus útiles, delatando únicamente con los dedos de las manos dobladas que se retorcían a su espalda la agitación que la lejana voz de su anfitrión provocaba en él. La voz de Basil Valentine seguía sonando, el libro sostenido con blancas manos sobre el agua clara, leyendo en la bañera.

El señor Inononu levantaba cinco pies y cuatro pulgadas impasibles del suelo, cubiertos con un traje marrón que era una pizca más claro, o al menos más suave, que su piel. Su cara brotaba como una flor enigmática del cáliz de una afilada barba negra. Sus cejas eran espesas e igualmente negras, y hacían muy poco por ocultar o siquiera atenuar los ojos aún más negros que tenían debajo. La piel oscura conservaba su pátina hasta detrás de su coronilla, donde una pelusa negra, gradualmente nutrida de pelo distinto, recortaba su nuca y se elevaba en finos picos por encima de sus orejas. Visto de frente, como lo había tenido el reloj Vulliamy durante un minuto, había algo inequívocamente oriental en el señor Inononu.

Mientras se paseaba por la habitación, pisando silenciosamente sobre la alfombra, parecía resistir con dificultad la tentación de alargar la mano y tocar las cosas. Estaba tocando el huevo de oro que coronaba la columna junto al sofá cuando entró Basil Valentine, con un libro cerrado en una mano y sujetándose con la otra la bata azul suelta.

—¿Un huevo?

—Está dañado, obviamente —murmuró Valentine.

—Está usted muy nervioso esta noche —observó el señor Inononu, apartándose de la columna con una expresión que en otra cara habría armonizado con su tono solícito, pero que en la suya reflejaba solo una curiosidad pasiva. Su ropa tenía un corte bien holgado y, pese a la tranquila viveza de su porte, su figura parecía ondular en una abundancia de pliegues y arrugas, acercándose ahora a una estantería ante la que se paró y se puso a leer los títulos, tocando al tiempo los lomos—. Vive usted en el siglo XIX —murmuró, pasando un pulgar por *Azigazi pozittiv filozofia*—. ¿Y Móricz, al lado de Gárdonyi…?

—¿Ha venido a hablar de literatura? Ya me ha tenido esperando un rato…

El señor Inononu hizo un ruido desdeñoso con los labios.

—*A Véres költö…* ¿Le gusta mucho Kosztolányi? —preguntó, volviendo al sofá—. Yo le recomendaría a a

Bródy. No lo veo en su estantería. Su *Faust orvos*, su *Don Quixote kisasszony*…

—¿Ha mirado esos papeles? —le interrumpió impacientemente Valentine—. Ya me va a hacer llegar tarde a una importante…

—No sabía cuáles… de todas formas, todavía no está usted listo para salir.

—¡Cuáles! Están ahí mismo delante de usted, en esa mesa, si hubiera mirado simplemente, en vez de andar curioseando…

—No he tocado nada de su escritorio —dijo el señor Inononu, viendo cómo revisaba con mirada penetrante los libros y papeles desparramados allí. Cuando se volvió Valentine, poniéndose con dificultad un gemelo, el señor Inononu cogió los papeles de la mesa de mármol y dijo—: Esta información concierne a un rumano llamado Yák, ¿no?

—Entre otras cosas —contestó secamente Valentine.

—Se supone que ahora está en España, ¿no?

—Eso creen. Yo creo más bien que está aquí.

—¿Tiene alguna información que no haya comunicado?

—No tengo ninguna información —negó rápidamente Valentine, empezando a ponerse el otro gemelo—. Aunque esté, tardarán bastante en encontrarle en este… caos —alzó los ojos hacia la ventana—. Cualquiera que sea el nombre que esté usando, desde luego habrá vendido ya su pasaporte, o lo habrá quemado si tiene un poco de sentido común, cierta idea sobre… usted —soltó ásperamente Valentine, en voz baja. De repente se quedó quieto, mirando hacia el cristal sin ver a través de él, con los ojos clavados en el reflejo, la pacífica imagen de su huésped allí sentado, como absorto en un tratado académico—. Es un erudito, ¿sabe?, ese rumano, Yák, un erudito, ¿y eso no le dice nada… a usted? —siguió con voz monótona—. ¿Un erudito, un, un hombre al que nunca ha visto?

El señor Inononu se encogió de hombros, volviendo las páginas en su estrecho regazo.

—Hace usted un trabajo de desciframiento muy pulcro, muy ordenado —murmuró, sacándose una libreta del bolsillo—. Parte de la información que me han dado… —Entonces empezó a leer, atentamente y con gran rapidez, deteniéndose a tomar notas, o a leer en alto frases que le embargaban de lo que parecía ser placer—. Sí, un consumado erudito, por supuesto… copto, arameo, por supuesto… autoridad en demótico… dinastía saíta, momias… sí, algo se podrá sacar de esto…

—¿Lo hará usted mismo también? —se recuperó irritadamente Valentine—. Y podría haber recibido esta información por la vía habitual —añadió, poniéndose un cuello—. Saben que no me gusta que venga aquí.

—Yo hago lo que me han mandado.

—Es como para pensar que le han mandado que me vigile.

—Es perfectamente posible —convino serenamente el señor Inononu, sin levantar la vista de sus notas.

—¿Qué quiere decir? —la voz de Valentine era igualmente serena, pero había hablado con demasiada rapidez.

—Exactamente lo que usted ha sugerido —dijo el señor Inononu sin mirarle.

—¡Sí, es muy probable! Y si fuera verdad, estaría ahí sentado contándomelo, ¿eh?

—Nunca se sabe quién ganará.

—¡Quién ganará!, qué quiere decir, quién ganará. —Basil Valentine estaba erguido ante él, con una corbata negra tirante entre las manos—. Venga, usted ha empezado con esto. ¿Qué andan diciendo por ahí?

—Muchas cosas, como siempre —dijo el señor Inononu, cerrando la libreta y guardándosela en el bolsillo—. Historias, rumores… —Se detuvo; pero cuando Valentine le apremió no más que con los fríos ojos azules siguió—: ¿De usted? Por supuesto, siempre ha habido muchas historias, como sabe. Vaya, ¿quiere creer que una vez me contaron que cuando acababa de acercarse a nosotros no podía soportar ninguna clase de fricción? ¿Que se remojaba los pies en agua caliente y se cortaba las uñas y se ponía unos calcetines gruesos antes de acostarse? Pero hay historias sobre todos nosotros, por supuesto…

Basil Valentine se había vuelto y alejado, y hablando con calma aparente repitió:

—¿Qué andan diciendo ahora?

—Muy sencillo, que aunque la Iglesia Romana cree que usted sigue actuando a favor de sus intereses, usted vino a nosotros de los jesuitas hace algún tiempo. Y que ahora, aunque creemos que está cooperando con el régimen actual, en realidad está trabajando con los que intentan restaurar la monarquía de los Habsburgo. —Él señor Inononu dobló los papeles. Había hablado sin interés, y ni siquiera alzó la vista, como para evitar a Valentine la molestia de hacer algún gesto de indiferencia ante aquella información—. Por supuesto, historias, rumores… —añadió.

—Oh, sí —dijo entonces Valentine, cansadamente, quitándose la bata—. Primero esperan que trabaje como, ¿cómo se llamaba aquel primado del siglo XVII, Pázmány…?, convirtiendo a los nobles primero,

convencido de que el pueblo los seguiría. Ahora dicen esto. —Se encogió de hombros, pasándose la corbata por el cuello—. Vamos, también hay historias sobre usted —siguió agradablemente—. Y aquí tiene una a juego con mi aborrecimiento de toda «clase de fricción», como dice usted. Una vez me contaron que la razón de su semblante más bien oriental es que hace años le cayó encima un banco en un terremoto japonés, ¿eh? Un banco americano, por supuesto. Y que a la hora de operarle la cara sólo había cirujanos locales, que sólo conocían las caras a las que los habían acostumbrado sus espejos…

El señor Inononu se levantó. Sus pantalones, profusamente plisados en la cintura, plegaban su raya dos o tres veces sobre las puntas de sus zapatos, y tocaban casi el suelo por los tacones. Tendió los papeles a Valentine, que le señaló la chimenea, donde se inclinó ante la rejilla e intentó avivar el fuego con los papeles enrollados antes de arrojarlos.

—Y tengo entendido que debe usted ir a Roma muy pronto, ¿no? —preguntó, allí inclinado.

—Eso creo —dijo Valentine—. ¿Cómo lo sabe?

—Como digo, uno oye cosas. Creo que también a mí me espera un trabajo allí. Un cura, aunque según me han dicho mucho más importante que el simple cura que pretende ser, quizá haya oído hablar de él, ahora no me sale el nombre, es algo como… ¿Martin? O Martín…

—Sí, he oído hablar de él —lo cortó en seco Valentine, y se quedó inmóvil mirando al suelo hasta que el señor Inononu levantó la cabeza del fuego para decir:

—Es un olor muy desagradable, este olor a pintura quemada.

Basil Valentine alzó la vista hacia él y sonrió por primera vez.

—Sí, ¿verdad? —dijo, empezando a anudarse la corbata negra.

En la repisa de la chimenea, el reloj Vulliamy dio la hora suavemente detrás del señor Inononu, que se apartó de él y cogió un libro.

—*De Omni Sanguine Christi Glorificato*, ¿John Huss? Tiene usted curiosos hábitos de lectura —dijo, y volvió a dejarlo, reparando mientras lo hacía en el recorte de periódico insertado entre sus páginas como señal.

—Un asunto personal —dijo Valentine, deshaciendo el nudo para alargar ligeramente una de las puntas.

—¿Y esto? Hungría va a vender cuadros famosos, ¿del periódico local?

—Una tragedia —dijo pensativamente Valentine—, una… absurda tragedia —mientras Inononu dejaba el libro y se dirigía entre lentas ondulaciones hacia las ventanas.

—Por supuesto, decir algo como eso… —empezó.

—¡Sí, pues póngalo en su informe! —le espetó bruscamente Valentine, a su espalda—. Quien diga lo que acabo de decir, ¿eh?, debe estar trabajando contra el… régimen actual, ¿eh?

—No se incomode —dijo el señor Inononu, sin volverse ni interrumpir su lento avance hacia las ventanas—. Usted es aquí crítico de arte, y por supuesto está interesado en esas cuestiones. Dígame, ¿es agradable, su pose como crítico de arte en esta cultura?

Valentine se aclaró la garganta y levantó la barbilla, haciéndose el nudo.

—Siempre hay una masa inmensa de gente incapaz de crear nada por sí misma, que busca consuelo en los críticos para que denigren, subestimen y minimicen a los que sí son capaces. Y yo diría —añadió con leve aspereza— que no es enteramente una pose.

—Sin embargo, hay otros intereses prioritarios.

—¡Oh, sí…! ¡Sí! Y mandan a un… asesino a sueldo para que me vigile, ¡para asegurarse! Sí, como ese erudito rumano, ¿eh? ¿Un hombre al que nunca ha visto?, y lo mandan para que lo encuentre y lo mate. Sin hacer preguntas, sólo encontrarlo y matarlo. Y si yo digo… oiga, ¿le sorprende?, que hable así a… ¿un asesino a sueldo?

El señor Inononu estaba inmóvil ante las ventanas.

—¿Y puede sorprenderle que lo sea? —soltó un momento después. Se retorcía los dedos a la espalda, hasta que entrelazó las manos—. Porque yo soy ya hombre muerto —añadió en voz baja, y luego, volviéndose—: Como usted… —con una expresión casi risueña.

El nudo se deshizo en las manos de Valentine, y un temblor le atacó los labios mientras se le escapaba una de las puntas. La agarró inmediatamente, y en aquel momento sonó el timbre de la puerta. El señor Inononu se apartó de las ventanas al instante, y se llevó la mano al abultado bolsillo interior de su chaqueta.

—No es nada —dijo Valentine—. Alguien en el portal. —Estaba recogiendo apresuradamente los papeles aún esparcidos sobre su escritorio, que juntó con el libro encuadernado en rústica, y saliendo por la puerta los llevó al dormitorio—. Sólo será un momento… —Y un momento después apareció en la puerta poniéndose una chaqueta de esmoquin—. Entonces viene usted esta noche, ¿no?, para tenerme vigilado,

¿eh?

—Digamos que voy simplemente como egiptólogo. En mis ratos de ocio he desarrollado todo un monólogo sobre las profecías de la Gran Pirámide de Keops. En una fiesta así, podría incluso encontrar a alguien familiarizado con la cultura egipcia. ¿Un rumano, familiarizado con las primeras dinastías…? Yo mismo debería considerarme turco, porque es una cultura con la que estoy familiarizado, y por supuesto porque, como dice usted, tengo un aspecto más bien… ¿oriental?

Pero cuando se volvió, Basil Valentine no estaba allí. Luego oyó el agua corriendo en el cuarto de baño; y luego la voz de Valentine: «Iremos por separado, vaya usted saliendo, yo tengo que hacer un recado antes».

Con los dedos de las manos entrelazadas retorciéndose a su espalda, el señor Inononu se volvió hacia la ventana y se quedó mirando la ciudad.

—Vive usted muy bien aquí —dijo—, esto es muy civilizado. Pero la mayoría de esa gente vive en la miseria. He estado en pisos de gente muy respetable, y son pura miseria. —Se detuvo, y luego, con los dedos aún moviéndose a su espalda, dijo—: ¿Ha visto lo que han hecho con nuestro Molnár?, ¿lo que ha pasado con *Liliom? Liliom* era algo hermoso, algo hermoso y andrajoso, y lo han convertido en música que suena como toda la música que oigo aquí, una cosa aguada como todo lo demás, aquí es dolor del alma azucarado.

Volvió a sonar el timbre, un largo timbrazo, y sus manos se detuvieron y entrelazaron estrechamente a su espalda. Cuando siguió hablando, se relajaron.

—He oído la radio —dijo—. Pero desde que la entiendo, resulta muy deprimente. Es miseria espiritual. ¿Le sorprende que sepa hablar así?, si no me considera más que… eso —dijo, y sus manos se separaron para señalar a su espalda, y volvieron a unirse.

—¿Conoce la novela de Mikszáth, *Szent Peter esernyoje?* Por supuesto, si san Pedro saliera hoy a esas calles de ahí abajo encontraría todo lo que pudiera desear, voces que surgen de ninguna parte, música brotando de cajas vacías, hombres ascendiendo a alturas divinas en globos de gas, y viajando a la velocidad del sonido, apariciones como por ensalmo en la pantalla; se rescata a los enfermos de la muerte, se prolonga la vida para poder saborear hasta la última punzada de dolor, se dan ojos a los ciegos y se obliga a andar a los lisiados, y hay un artefacto que puede volar una ciudad del querido enemigo convirtiéndola en un montón de ruinas donde pueda darse cuenta cabal de sus pecados, por supuesto con tanto estruendo como las trompetas ante los muros de Jericó…

Aporrearon con fuerza la puerta. El señor Inononu se volvió en redondo como había hecho antes, la mano dentro de la chaqueta. Basil Valentine salió rápidamente del cuarto de baño, secándose las manos con una toalla de lino. Su abrigo y su sombrero estaban fuera, y los recogió. «Venga, hay una escalera de servicio», dijo. El señor Inononu tomó su abrigo y su sombrero del sillón junto a las ventanas.

Seguían aporreando la puerta principal cuando salieron por la cocina.

—¿Sabe?, hay una historia muy graciosa sobre usted que oí, dónde fue, ¿en el hospital de Székesfehérvár? Me contaron que tenía incrustado un radio transmisor en el cuerpo.

—¿Un transmisor? —preguntó el señor Inononu en lo alto de la escalera de servicio—. Un receptor quizá, pero ¿un transmisor?

Cuando apareció Basil Valentine, la cosa llevaba en marcha desde hacía algún tiempo, y las voces de los invitados flotaban en capas monótonas en el calor pestilente, elevándose a las regiones iluminadas, hundiéndose en los oscuros estratos de infestado silencio movedizo. Alguien había comentado ya que Bruckner había sido el compositor favorito de Hitler; otro, que había algo mal en una persona *joven* a quien le gustase de verdad el último Beethoven; alguien había confesado ya que el negocio del jabón en América ascendía a siete millones de dólares anuales, otro que la publicidad ascendía a siete mil millones. Alguien había encendido ya la radio, y otro la había apagado, aunque no antes de que el señor Schmuck (de Twentieth Century-Schmuck, que había venido de la costa en viaje de negocios a pasar las vacaciones) hubiera oído una pegadiza frase musical, preguntado a su ayudante el nombre del compositor, y una vez se lo hubieron dicho, «Creo que el locutor dijo Kerkel…», terminado: «Téngalo en mi despacho el lunes por la mañana». El señor Sonnenschein (que había venido de la costa a pasar las vacaciones, en viaje de negocios) había contado ya su historia de la chica que había fingido un intento de suicidio en el piso de al lado de donde le habían invitado a cenar la víspera, «para llamar mi atención hacia ella…», de hecho la había contado ya cuatro veces y estaba terminando la quinta: «Así que ni siquiera pude acabar mi tarta Alaska». M. Crémer (que había venido del continente, en viaje de negocios), con una colilla pegada al labio como

una llaga, había comentado ya la incivilizada ausencia de servicios públicos en Nueva York, y cierto número de gente había comentado ya que la mujer alta llevaba demasiado perfume. En un rincón, bajo el Patinir, la señorita Stein (venía con el señor Sonnenschein) había arreglado ya el futuro del arte americano con el ayudante del señor Schmuck, que había desarrollado ya su tartamudeo de última hora de la noche, que indicaba sinceridad; igual que el pasado del arte alemán («No hubo ninguno, hablando con propiedad, antes de Durero») había quedado ya arreglado en otro rincón, bajo el imponente árbol de Navidad, un abeto noruego, instalado ante los ojos críticos del jabalí de verrugas, que daba la impresión de que el anfitrión se hubiera avergonzado de un árbol nacido de la tierra, pues todo verde natural que pudiera delatar tan basto origen quedaba oculto bajo una formidable masa de guirnaldas de oropel, reluciente bajo las trescientas veinte lucecitas azules que Fuller había tardado nueve mareantes horas en colocar.

Y había ocurrido algo más, como todas las caras (salvo las de unos pocos que habían llegado más tarde, como la mujer alta) revelaban con tensos esfuerzos por demostrarse unos a otros que no había ocurrido. (Aunque el señor Schmuck había juzgado conveniente repetir varias veces desde entonces: «Donde hay arte hay lunáticos, allí tenemos el mismo problema»). Sin embargo, todo su desconcierto momentáneo se había acumulado y seguía sin disiparse de la cara de Fuller, como advirtió Basil Valentine nada más verlo, cuando Fuller le cogió el abrigo en el vestíbulo.

—Qué pasa, Fuller, ¿ya ha estado aquí? —preguntó rápidamente.

—Sí, señor.

—¿Y qué ha pasado?

—Ha conseguido muy poco, señor.

—Venga, ¿qué ha pasado?

—Muy poco en realidad, señor —empezó Fuller, que al principio había parecido ansioso por escapar, y ahora, a medida que hablaba, incapaz de detenerse—. Entró hace un rato y se comportó con mucha calma mientras iba de un lado a otro entre los invitados hablándoles con mucha solicitud, aunque adiviné en sus ojos que está en un gran apuro porque se pusieron muy verdes, pues los ojos de cada hombre, señor, son las ventanas de su alma…

—Venga, no divagues —lo cortó en seco Valentine, volviendo la vista desde el inmenso salón hacia Fuller, *que* estaba ante él contemplando la dura superficie que había cubierto el azul acuoso de sus ojos.

—Así que se condujo de modo muy pacífico, llevando todo el tiempo un traje encima de otro mientras iba de acá para allá dirigiéndose a los dignatarios aquí reunidos hasta que todos dejaron de hacer caso a lo que tan atentamente les estaba contando, y entonces, al cabo de un rato que se me hizo muy largo, se puso muy excitado y empezó a proclamar que podía demostrar todo aquello de lo que tan insistentemente había tratado de informarles como cierto, y saliendo con gran premura dijo que iba en busca de usted, señor.

—¿Y Brown? Brown, ¿qué hizo Brown…?

—El señor Brown, señor, el señor Brown se mostró muy contrariado, lo que no es del todo sorprendente, aunque traté de advertir al señor Brown de que iban a contrariarle…

—¿Qué quieres decir con que trataste de advertirlo? —preguntó Valentine, con la mente ya en la otra habitación. Fuller había seguido hablando como si hubiera olvidado a quién se dirigía, como probablemente había hecho.

—Traté de advertirlo… —empezó de nuevo, balbuceando— de que semejante proyecto no estaba destinado a alcanzar un gran éxito… —Se detuvo, y luego añadió a modo de revelación—: El señor Brown se está comportando de un modo que hasta la fecha no había tenido la fortuna de ver en él. Parece como si el señor Brown se sintiera inclinado esta noche a beber con sumo desenfreno, señor…

Pero Basil Valentine le había vuelto ya la espalda, y Fuller se quedó inmóvil sosteniendo su abrigo, viendo cómo se perdía de vista más allá en el inmenso salón.

Alguien había encendido la radio, y cuando empezaba a calentarse con los últimos compases de la sinfonía *Júpiter,* otro la apagó.

La mujer alta cruzó la habitación con cara ofendida de vuelta hacia su marido. «Ese tipo con pinta… oriental me ha dicho que antes de la época griega no hubo en Egipto ninguna esfinge femenina, ¡imagínate! ¿Esta copa es para mí? Cielo santo, pero qué calor hace aquí. Siempre la misma gente, o así me lo parece. ¡Mira!, ¿quién crees que *será* ese sudaquilla tan vistoso?».

—Queremos un gobierno que haga algo por los americanos —dijo el señor Schmuck, a su derecha—, y no me refiero a los indios.

Había tres hombres de pie junto a la mesa baja ante la chimenea cuando entró Basil Valentine, conteniendo con la punta de los dedos, en aquel momento, la vena que se le marcaba en la sien. Se acercó a ellos. Dos eran europeos, y el tercero era Recktall Brown.

—Aquí no hay espacio para que se acumule la historia —dijo el más alto, cogiendo un cigarrillo y deteniéndose con la cerilla encendida como para iluminar su síntesis—, y llaman a eso progreso.

—Buenas noches —dijo Basil Valentine cuando se volvieron a reconocer su llegada; y mientras se intercambiaban cortesías, clavó la mirada al otro lado de la mesa.

Había algo descuidado en el aspecto de Recktall Brown. Se había puesto y quitado las gafas numerosas veces, y aunque ahora las tenía puestas, ligeramente torcidas, las pupilas que bailaban tras aquellos gruesos cristales parecían cansadas de aquella incesante mutación, contraídas en puntos penetrantes cada vez que se quitaba las gafas, y nerviosamente alerta contra ello. Estaba sudando, y el puro que tenía en la boca se consumía sólo por un lado. En aquel momento se dio cuenta, lo extrajo de entre aquellos dientes desiguales y lo tiró a la chimenea a su espalda. No tardó nada en tener otro en la mano, desenvuelto ya, y se quedó parado, vagamente marsupial, buscándose el cortaplumas en un bolsillo del chaleco.

Sin andarse con cumplidos, Basil Valentine rodeó enseguida la mesa y se le acercó. «¿Qué ha pasado?».

Y M. Crémer les volvió educadamente la espalda, y dirigiéndose al hombre alto que tenía al lado se las ingenió para reanudar una conversación que todavía no había empezado. «Mais cette peinture-là, je veux
l'acheter
, vous savez, mais le prix…! Bien sûr que
c'est
Memlinc, alors, mais le prix
qu'il
demande, il est fou!».

—*Pas si bête*… —murmuró el otro, y juntos cruzaron la habitación para ir a examinar un cuadro recientemente colgado en las cercanías del vasto tapiz. Un joven de mandíbula prominente y frente estrecha se los quedó mirando con aire alelado cuando pasaron a su lado sin dirigirle una mirada. Estaba bastante acostumbrado a que le asediasen en público como estrella de cine. Ahora, al oír francés, murmuró: «Maricas…», y fue a por otra copa.

—¿Pasional, *ése*? —preguntó la señorita Stein.

—He dicho subnormal —dijo el ayudante del señor Schmuck—. Debemos tener siempre un tanque de oxígeno puro en el estudio para espabilarle la borrachera…

—Te he preguntado qué ha pasado.

—Nada. No ha pasado maldita la cosa. Ni la menor puñetera cosa —dijo Brown, tambaleándose.

—Tienes un aspecto espléndido esta noche. —Valentine retrocedió un paso, contemplándole—. Espléndido —dijo con aspereza.

Brown no se volvió a mirarle. Finalmente dijo:

—Quiere comprar ese Memling.

—¿Quién?

—Esa rana gabacha que estaba aquí hace un momento, quiere comprarlo por nada. Rana chiflada.

—Es un cretino, cierto —dijo Basil Valentine, y sujetándose el codo se llevó la mano a la cara, con la barbilla baja de forma que parecía besar el anillo de sello de oro, y se quedaron parados codo con codo, manteniendo entre ambos un peligroso equilibrio, y sopesando en aquella balanza la habitación que tenían delante.

Entró Fuller, con una bandeja llena de vasos suspendida a la altura de la nariz entre blancas manos, y un aspecto general de atosigamiento. Ambos observaron a Fuller hasta que llegó al bar, sin provocar la desgracia que parecía temerse; pero ni siquiera después de dejar allí a salvo la bandeja cambió su expresión: pareció incluso intensificarse por sí sola mientras miraba a su alrededor y los veía observándolo desde el fondo de la habitación, y los ruidos y el movimiento que lo rodeaban se extinguieron en la tensión de su propia parálisis, un momento intolerable en el que los tres se quedaron solos en la habitación, cercados por las sombras, esperando.

—Eh, George, ¿dónde está el retrete?

Fuller se volvió hacia la señorita Stein. «Le conduciré al cuarto de baño, señora», dijo, y salió delante de ella.

Como la flora del lecho del mar, las figuras se erguían ondulantes, arraigadas en el suelo, alguna a la deriva aquí y allá, como arrastrada por una corriente fría, sintiendo en mayor o menor grado lo que alguien expresó como «algo submarino», mientras manoteaba en el aire ante sí, y siguió: «Agnes debería estar aquí, éste es su mundo». Luego se tocó con dos dedos la barba que goteaba basta un punto de su barbilla, sonrió afectadamente a la figura impasible del fondo de la habitación cuya sombría presencia parodiaba, y gimió: «¿Dónde *está* ese Ganímedes negro…?».

Fuller estaba sentado en un taburete blanco de la cocina, bien derecho, fingiendo leer una guía de cruceros que había encontrado en un cubo de basura callejero. En el suelo, la perra lo observaba. Tragó saliva. Él no se movió. Lo observaba como para averiguar si la expresión absorta de su cara se debía a su lectura o a una tensa ansiedad, a la espera de que ella hiciera un ruido. Gruñó. Entonces, como si aquello fuera una señal para aliviar la tensión, se llevó la mano a la cara para ocultar la esquina absorta de su perfil, y la miró furtivamente entre los dedos. A veces esto duraba lo que a ambos les parecía horas; aunque aquella noche quizá estuviera justificada la vigilancia: la perra le había visto vender las botellas de licor vaciadas durante la velada, con sus costosas etiquetas intactas, a una sombra furtiva en la entrada de servicio.

La señorita Stein volvió a tiempo de oír terminar al joven de la mandíbula prominente lo que al parecer era un chiste conocido, pues se echó a reír antes de que acabase, mientras la mujer alta escuchaba con educada anticipación: «Así que una enfermera dice: "¿Y has visto que tiene tatuada en el chisme la palabra *swan?"*. Y la otra enfermera dice —aquí soltó la carcajada la señorita Stein—: "Esa palabra es Saskatchewan"».

La mujer alta esperó educadamente un momento más, y luego dijo con voz agradable: «Oh… eso está en Canadá, ¿no?». Dejaron de reír y se la quedaron mirando. «Será mejor que vaya a ocuparme de mi marido», dijo. Y volviéndose, compuso sus rasgos para devolver en especie una expresión de curiosidad vagamente sobresaltada de un hombre alto de pelo blanco vestido de gris, que la dirigía hacia todos los puntos de la habitación, aunque aparentemente estuviera conversando con la desventurada criatura que tenía delante, a la que acababa de decir:

—¿Eh?

—lo diguo, deberamuos gaurdare siempere abon recuado nostuoras pesiones na alguana sitia comoua valvua da sacuritia si sono valeusas, contelca nou ses tendian.

—Cielo santo, sí, yo diría que tiene usted razón, ¿eh? Ahora, si me permite…

—Alguana sitia aperatada dondue nou intorofiere conluo mondio civalizaduo.

—¡Cielo santo, sí! Perdóneme, tengo a un buen, ejem, amigo esperándome.

—Ouna parabola…

Cerca, alguien oyó mencionar a Tutmosis en otra conversación, y le resultó inmediatamente útil para iniciar otra más: «Esto es sólo para tus orejitas como tumbas, *ella* tiene algo contagioso que se llama…».

—Tutmosis III, ¿eh? Cielo santo, sí, lo recuerdo bien —siguió el hombre de pelo blanco, sumido ahora en la mayor confusión con «una especie de tipo oriental» de barba afilada, como diría cuando escapase—. Probablemente el más grande faraón de todos, ejem, ellos, diría yo, ¿eh? Recuerdo que tenía una frente muy estrecha, curioso, ¿eh? Se parecía un poco a ese, ejem, tipo que está por ahí, me han dicho que trabaja en el cine. Una lamentable ejem forma de vivir, ¿eh? —terminó, y levantó la vista, dando un nuevo respingo al encontrar aquellos ojos penetrantes clavados en él.

—Ah, sí… y la princesita Ink-natón, ¿le resulta quizá familiar?

—Ink… ejem… Ikhnatón, yo diría que es a ese a quien se refiere, ¿eh? Cielo santo, sí, era un tipo muy interesante, Ikhnatón. Derribó los, ejem, como-se-llamen, ya sabe. Reforma religiosa y todas esas cosas. Cielo santo, sí, los puso a todos a adorar al sol como locos. Todo muy bien, esas cosas, ya sabe, expulsar a los, ejem, viejos dioses, ¿eh? Pero sin perder de vista la política, ¿eh? Sin perder de vista la política. No como ese tipo como-se-llame del que estábamos hablando, eso de construir su templo allí lejos en medio del desierto, ¿eh? Eso de gastar todo de lo que podía echar mano allí lejos adorando, ejem, el disco visible del sol, ¿eh? No podía salir bien, no podía salir bien de ningún modo.

—¿Es éste quizá su campo de interés? Porque también es el mío.

—¿Interés? Cielo santo, no, mi querido amigo, maldito lo que me importan todos ellos.

—Y sin embargo está usted muy bien informado, ¿no?

—Oh, me entero de cosas aquí y allá, ya sabe, aquí y allá. Un antiguo compañero de colegio mío, Lord, ejem, demonios, cómo demonios se llamaba, desenterró al viejo rey Tut, ya sabe, no hace tanto tiempo. Tutankamón, ya sabe, el hijo de ese tipo, ejem, Ikhnatón, ya sabe, que construyó Akenatón allí lejos en medio del desierto para su adoración del sol, y dejó que la política se fuera al carajo. Cielo santo, sí —se detuvo aquel hombre de pelo blanco para agarrarse de las solapas y mirar al techo con aire evocador—, antes de que todo el asunto se fuera a hacer puñetas, ya sabe, la Decimonovena Dinastía, ¿eh? Demasiado oro, ése fue su problema, oro a patadas por todas partes, y vulgaridad a cada paso, ¿eh? Sí, eso es lo que pasa, así es como empieza la decadencia, ¿eh? La misma puñeta que por la pinta de las cosas está pasando hoy, ¿eh? Hace cincuenta años no era así, ¿eh? Cielo santo no, la gente que entonces tenía dinero lo había heredado, ya sabe, sabía cómo gastarlo. Tenía cierto sentido de responsabilidad con su cultura, ¿eh?

—Sin embargo, he oído decir por la radio que una cantidad de oro cotizada en trescientos cincuenta y seis mil dólares puede alcanzar un valor de un millón de dólares en el mercado negro…

—¿La radio…? Cielo santo, sí, una pérdida total en este país, ya sabe. Yo también la encendí y me encontré con un idiota descarado preguntándome cuál era la personalidad del color de mi casa, ¿eh? No sé quién puede aguantar todas esas sandeces. Una libra al año pagamos en casa, ¿sabe usted?, una libra al año para mantener limpias las ondas de radio, por así decirlo. Bastante barato, ¿eh?, por mantener limpia tu casa de esa especie de basura infernal.

—Por supuesto. Pero volviendo al campo de la egiptología, quizá se haya encontrado alguna vez con un caballero que se llama…

—Cielo santo, no es mi campo en modo alguno, ¿sabe usted? Oiga, tengo que acercarme un momento a decir algo a ese tipo, si no le importa. Ese repulsivo tipejo francés, ya sabe.

Estuvo a punto de tropezar con el agregado comercial argentino, que llevaba algún tiempo abriéndose paso con aire preocupado por el vasto salón, y que ahora se acercó al codo de un hombre al que por lo visto tomó por un compatriota.

—Con permiso, señor… ¿Conoce usted al señor Brown? [19]

—Iført den uovervinnelige rustning… *¿eh?*

—Nada… nada, gracias… [20]

Hasta los ojos del tapiz de encima le evitaban.

Al pie de aquella empresa selvática, M. Crémer sacó un paquete de basto papel azul, ofreció uno de los acres cigarrillos, y como no se lo aceptaron lo cogió él. «Oui, à vendre à
l'aimable
, vous savez, au prix
d'un
retable de… Hubert van Eyck». Se volvieron otra vez a mirar el cuadro, con las manos en los bolsillos de los pantalones plegándoles por detrás las chaquetas. Crémer arrojó un chorro de humo uniforme contra su superficie. «Memlic, bien sûr», murmuró otra vez. «La force, voyez vous, encore plus la… tendresse».

El caballero de pelo blanco se les acercó, esquivando la conversación que tenía lugar a sus espaldas más o menos en los siguientes términos:

—Aproximadamente .00 000 000 000 000 000 000 000 006 624.

—¡Aproximadamente! Se acerca más a .000 000 000 000 000 000 000 000 006 624.

—Cielo santo, ¿eh? Esta noche hay aquí un montón de tipos raros. —Crémer se enderezó y se volvió hacia él—. Acabo de conocer a una especie de tipo oriental que no ha parado de hablarme de, ejem, un montón de egipcios muertos que lleva consigo de un lado a otro. Va usted a comprar esto, ¿no?

Se inclinó sobre el hombro de Crémer para mirar de cerca el cuadro.

—Estoy interesado en él —le contestó Crémer, y luego los presentó. El hombre de pelo blanco quedó identificado con una galería londinense de cierta importancia, y Crémer tuvo cuidado de añadir un R. A. [21] a su nombre.

—Menuda escenita tuvimos antes, ¿eh? —les dijo el R. A.—. Qué tipo tan curioso ese que entró aquí en tromba, ¿eh?

Crémer se encogió de hombros.

—En todas partes hay locos.

—Y la tenía bien cogida con esto, vaya que sí, con este Memlinc de aquí, estuvo a punto de arrancarlo de la pared, ¿saben? Yo estaba aquí al lado, y por un momento pensé que iba a… atacarme, ¿saben?, sin el menor motivo imaginable.

El encogimiento de hombros de Crémer persistía aún en sus hombreras, y lo acentuó con un movimiento espasmódico, deshaciendo las líneas exactas de su pulcro traje azul, pues era un producto de esmerada manufactura francesa, y sólo caía bien cuando la figura que cubría estaba apáticamente erguida, con los brazos caídos a los costados, momento escogido en el que la chaqueta se destacaba pulcra y cuadrada como una caja, y los pantalones no se ondulaban como al andar, sino que colgaban en anchos pliegues con toda la elegancia que confieren los ángulos rectos, hasta que se desmoronaban sobre los zapatos envueltas que, por fortuna, eran casi lo bastante anchas y sobradamente largas para cubrirlos.

—Yo sólo lo vi de lejos desde el fondo de la habitación, ¿saben? Pero estos espectáculos, estos espectáculos, ¿saben…? —Crémer agitó una mano ante sí como si fuera a quitarse el cigarrillo de los labios —. No son infrecuentes en América. Y este Memlinc, ¿saben?, está fuera de toda duda. —Sacudió la cabeza hacia atrás, dejando caer la larga ceniza en la alfombra, para señalar el cuadro colgado a su espalda—. Conozco su procedencia, ya ven… *et surtout, vous savez*… no hay ninguna prueba a la que no baya sido

sometido.

—Ese, ejem, tipo tan curioso, ¿sabe lo que decía sobre este cielo, eh? Azul de Prusia, ya sabe. Y eso es lo que es.

—*Bleu de Prusse, alors.* ¿Y qué?

—Ejem, un color del siglo dieciocho, ya sabe.

—*Bien, alors* —dijo Crémer con aire cansado—, la mano de un restaurador, ya sabe. No es infrecuente.

El R.A. había estado inclinándose por encima del hombro de Crémer, y ahora se enderezó echándole una mirada que, si hubiera sido dado a la descortesía, habría sido de profunda aversión. Sin embargo, dijo:

—Sin embargo, ¿saben?, es una cosa preciosa. Supongo que debería comprarlo yo mismo. ¿Eh?

—No tengo la menor intención de pujar contra usted —dijo Crémer, mirando fijamente hacia la habitación.

—¿Eh? Ejem… nada de eso, por supuesto, quiero decir, ya sabe. ¡Cielo santo! Completamente fuera de mis posibilidades ahora mismo. Tengo, ejem, una especie de gusto personal por estas cosas flamencas. Tan pulcras, ya sabe.

Al oír esto, Crémer estuvo a punto de sonreír. Mirando todavía hacia el fondo de la habitación, murmuró:

—Quizá le agrade oír lo que decía Michel-Ange de estos pintores. *Les tableaux flamands plaisent aux femmes, surtout aux vieilles et au três jeunes, ainsi moines et aux religieuses*
qu'aux
…

—Ejem…

—*… et enfin aux gens du monde qui ne sont pas susceptibles de comprendre la vraie harmonie…*

—Ejem… —El R. A. empezó a volver la espalda—. ¿Eh? Ya no estoy muy al tanto de esas cosas. Las, ejem, actitudes modernas, ya sabe, el arte moderno y todas esas cosas, ¿eh? Intentan decir que sus cuadros son el espíritu de los tiempos, ya sabe, pero cielo santo, ¿no son ya los tiempos bastante malos sin tener sus retratos colgados por todas partes?

Pero M. Crémer, con el cigarrillo apagado y pegado al labio como una llaga, estaba mirando hacia el fondo de la habitación.

—¿Sabe? Su *monsieur* Brown es excepcional.

—No mío, viejo. Cielo santo, no mío.

—Mire sus pies detrás de la mesa, son tan pequeños cuando se mueve con ellos, es asombroso que pueda mantener el equilibrio. Cómo se tambalea esta noche. Pffft. *On va faire des zigzags,* ¿eh?

Detrás de ellos, a un lado, alguien dijo algo con el preciso cuidado de un locutor de radio pronunciando mal un término de otra lengua.

—Perdónenme —dijo su compañero, callado durante todo este tiempo, a su derecha ahora mientras atisbaban exposiciones momentáneas del equilibrio delicadamente distante *que* su anfitrión había roto, y restablecido, y que ahora mantenía de nuevo con el hombre que tenía al lado en las profundidades de la habitación—, no he llegado lo bastante pronto para presenciar ese… *contretemps?* ¿Qué ha pasado?

Y los invitados pasaban a la deriva, describiendo cursos que no dejaban más huella que el agua, con ojos vidriosos, tan carentes de propósito en apariencia como el movimiento submarino pero, como él, interrumpido por súbitos embates rapaces, y precipitadas puestas a cubierto. Con chocantes diferencias de tamaño, y de coloración protectora, exóticamente desvalidas, engañosamente embotadas, las distintas variedades se alimentaban juntas en bandadas, o tendían a moverse por separado, alzando aquí y allá ojos desmesuradamente abiertos, y chocando con las paredes del acuario.

—Ahora estamos rodando *Fausto,* una especie de versión *bop,* lo hemos convertido en un artista refugiado, y Mefistófeles es…

—Pero es divertido ver fotos tuyas por todas partes, mirándote mientras comen cosas y beben cosas y fuman cosas que jamás has probado… —decía el que no tenía más frente que un barbo; y pese a las ondas sonoras que rizaban la superficie, una calma pelágica saturaba el lugar entero.

Así, los pendientes de las orejas de la mujer alta brillaban como excrecencias de un género especial, quizá antenas, o meramente reclamos, mientras decía a su marido: «Podrías preguntarle ahora por esa mesa reina Ana, ¿o era una silla?».

—¿Y ese… individuo de allí, el de barba?

—Oh sí, acerca el arte a las masas, a las masas de mujeres, ya sabes. Un pontificador en… ¡Oh! Oh, ése, ése se hace llamar Kuvetli, es egipcio…

Y en el sitio hacia donde volvieron los ojos, aquel espécimen al acecho atrapó instantáneamente sus

miradas, aunque siguió hablando con la persona que tenía delante, y aunque hasta aquel momento no había mirado una sola vez hacia ellos.

—Por supuesto, a mí no me interesa la política, ni esos logros de la inventiva científica como sus bombas atómicas o sus bombas de hidrógeno. Todo eso lo dejo para los periódicos; resulta muy necesario para su presunción conocer todas las respuestas. Para mí, esta guerra no será más que una cuestión de interés académico, por supuesto, una confirmación de las profecías de la Gran Pirámide de Keops. Como digo, en 1936 entramos en el período… ejem, simbolizado por la Cámara Real, y tan sólo el año pasado hemos entrado al fin en el período de la aflicción final. Pero en este momento —siguió, tirando de una guirnalda de oropel del árbol y enrollándosela al dedo— estoy más interesado en esa momia de la que hablaba, la momia de Ink-natón. Por supuesto, murió cuando sólo tenía doce años, la Cuarta Dinastía… Por supuesto, sería demasiado esperar que pueda encontrar aquí a alguien capaz de ayudarme con información, ¿no…? — Y entonces volvió sus ojos negros, no hacia el hombre que tenía delante, a quien hablaba, sino más allá de él, directamente hacia el fondo de la habitación.

—¡Qué ha pasado! Qué quieres decir con eso de qué ha pasado.

—Sabes muy bienio que quiero decir —contestó Valentine tras todos aquellos minutos de silencio, que finalmente Brown fue incapaz de mantener.

—Tú lo has visto —exclamó Brown, volviéndose de repente hacia Valentine.

—Te di mi palabra, y no lo he hecho.

—¡Tu palabra! —murmuró Recktall Brown, volviéndose de frente otra vez—. Ha ido a buscarte. Salió de aquí a buscarte.

—Eso tengo entendido.

—¡Ves! Qué quieres decir con eso de que no lo has visto.

—Mi querido amigo, llevo algún tiempo sin verlo, haz el favor de meterte eso en la cabeza. Fuller mencionó que había ido a buscarme, no puedo imaginar por qué.

—¡No puedes imaginar! Puedes imaginártelo puñeteramente bien, Valentine tiene la prueba, me soltó eso en la cara, la dejé en sus manos… entonces, ¿a qué demonios se refería?

Recktall Brown volvió a alzar su gruesa cara; y Basil Valentine sonrió levemente, y con la misma levedad se encogió de hombros.

—Así que ¿esperas que vuelva?

—Cómo demonios voy a saberlo. Claro que espero que vuelva. ¿Tú no?

—¿Y no pasó nada cuando estuvo aquí antes? Nadie…

—Nadie quiso escucharle.

Brown bajó los ojos de nuevo hacia la mesa que tenía delante. En su mano izquierda, caída al costado, su puro sobresalía entre dedos del mismo grosor; y levantó la derecha para enjugarse la boca.

—Sin embargo, resulta bastante desconcertante. ¿Sabes? —dijo Basil Valentine, adoptando su acostumbrado tono cáustico—, pareces más bien decepcionado.

Recktall Brown no se movió. Ni siquiera levantó el puro, sino que se quedó allí parado, con la vista clavada en la mesa. La frente le brillaba de sudor.

—Ahora escucha, Brown, no sé qué tienes dentro esta noche, aparte de un galón de licor, pero te…

—Ese último cuadro que hizo —lo interrumpió Brown, levantando el puro y paseando la mirada por la habitación—, hay aquí alguna gente que me gustaría que le echase un vistazo.

Y entonces Brown empezó a rodear la mesa por un lado, y Basil Valentine le siguió rápidamente rodeándola por el otro.

El cigarrillo de la boca de Crémer se había apagado dejando una colilla de un pulgar de largo, que seguía allí pegada mientras hablaba de un pintor francés contemporáneo que, según dijo, era: *«Racinien, vous savez… le goût de deça. de… de, alors. Comme Corot, comme Seurat, vous savez, il est racinien. Comme je viens, suprême fleur du génie français et qui ne pouvait pousser France…».*

l'en
L'instinct
l'atticisme
d'écrire
qu'en

Entonces Crémer se detuvo, arqueó una ceja, y se quitó cuidadosamente la llaga del labio con el pulgar y el cordial, viendo acercarse a su anfitrión.

Recktall Brown hurtó el cuerpo cuando, al encontrarse al otro lado de la mesa baja ante la chimenea, Valentine le agarró del brazo.

—Espera un momento…

—¡Suelta…! Suéltame el brazo.

—¡Espera, escucha…! No puedes hacer eso…

—Maldita sea, suéltame el brazo.

Recktall Brown se paró en seco, y Valentine giró en redondo hasta plantarse casi delante de él.

—¿Qué te pasa esta noche? ¿Qué demonios te pasa?

—No me pasa absolutamente nada…

—Escucha ahora, escúchame —dijo Valentine, intentando ahora cogerle de los dos brazos—. No seas idiota, no puedes enseñar otro ahora, no puedes enseñar ése tan pronto…

—Quítate de en medio.

—¿Crees que esos hombres son tontos?, ¿crees que son unos críos? Y después de lo que acaba de pasar, crees que puedes llevarlos ahí dentro y enseñarles otro Van der Goes sin que…

Varias personas se volvieron al oír la carcajada de Recktall Brown, que se elevó a su alrededor en medio del vasto salón envuelta en un eructo de humo.

—Y enseñarles tu cara, ¿eh? Crees que se reirán de tu cara, ¿eh? Quítate de en medio.

Basil Valentine se apartó rápidamente. Abrió un pañuelo blanco y se detuvo a toser en él, mientras Recktall Brown seguía adelante. Cuando lo alcanzó, Crémer estaba diciendo: «Díganos, *monsieur* Brown, ¿cuál es el… objeto más hermoso de su colección actual?».

Recktall Brown estaba ante ellos con el puro a un lado de la boca, los dientes desiguales decolorando su sonrisa, las pupilas llenando los cristales de sus gafas. Sin pararse a pensar, disparó el brazo hacia arriba. Los que tenía delante retrocedieron con un respingo ante su gesto; pero Basil Valentine, que llegaba a su lado, no lo hizo, y recibió el golpe de lleno en la cara.

El pañuelo se enrojeció cuando se lo llevó al labio; pero Brown ni siquiera se paró a mirar los diamantes. «¡Ése!», dijo, señalando; y aunque se habían acercado enseguida a interesarse por la herida de Valentine, él se había excusado y se había ido, y antes de darse cuenta estaban todos mirando hacia arriba, hacia la galería, donde estaba la armadura.

Crémer se recuperó rápidamente. Sacó un cigarrillo torcido del maltrecho paquete azul y volvió los ojos hacia su anfitrión. «Quelle drôlerie!».

Al volver la vista, Recktall Brown se encontró con los ojos de los tres fijos en él, ligeramente burlones, sólo los de Crémer mirándolo con una penetración igual a la de Basil Valentine, a quien, de modo penosamente obvio y mal vestido, se parecía bastante.

—¿No le gusta? —exclamó Brown, dirigiéndose directamente a Crémer.

—*Ah mais oui, mais… charmant*
c'est
… —Sin embargo, Crémer retrocedió un paso, y la sonrisa se desvaneció de su cara mientras se quedaba mirando la de Brown.

Recktall Brown alzó la vista hacia los otros dos hombres en rápida sucesión, y luego se quitó bruscamente las gafas y sobresaltó a los tres con la virulencia de sus ojos, que enseguida bajó, enjugándose la frente con la punta de los dedos. Se quedaron callados y atentos, mientras se volvía a poner las gafas y decía perentoriamente: «Vengan conmigo, tengo algo que enseñarles». Se volvió, incluyendo a otras tres o cuatro personas con su gesto de cabeza, y todos lo siguieron hacia la puerta de paneles al otro extremo de la habitación. El señor Schmuck se les unió a mitad de camino, el señor Sonnenschein a los tres cuartos, y Basil Valentine los alcanzó antes de que acabaran de entrar todos por aquella puerta, y la cerró a su espalda.

—Han ido a ver películas guarras —dijo la señorita Stein, observándolos—. El jefe lo llama cine artístico. —Demasiado tarde, había dado un paso para seguirlos.

La mujer alta se vio desviada de su camino por una manaza que la golpeó en el pecho. No se paró a esperar una disculpa; y el joven barbado no la persiguió para presentársela. Siguió diciendo sin más: «No, la historia se publicó allí, y por supuesto tengo todo el derecho del mundo a demandarla, ha arruinado mi reputación en Londres».

—Pero si nunca has estado en Londres, ¿no?

—Bueno, puede que vaya… ¡y qué! No, no me toques… Me voy ahora mismo a hablar de los aguafuertes de Martin Schoongauer con esa persona que tiene una pinta tan exquisita del siglo XV.

La mujer alta interrumpió a su marido, que estaba absorto diciendo nada a nadie. «Oh, querido, siempre digo lo que no debo, me engañan como a un chino…». Entonces se detuvo su voz, y sus ojos se encontraron con los del hombre que tenía al lado, que se había presentado a ella como el señor Kuvetli. «Como a un

ciudadano chino…», balbució valientemente. «Oh, querido, lo intento de verdad…».

Y al otro extremo del inmenso salón se abrió la puerta de paneles, para desconcierto de uno apoyado en ella como si fuera parte de la pared.

—No me diga que la publicidad presta un servicio cultural reproduciendo el arte, confundiendo el arte y el producto en la mente de la gente, corrompe el arte exaltando la… ¡eepa!

—*Pardon* —dijo M. Crémer, retrocediendo mientras el orador recobraba el equilibrio y reanudaba su ataque. «Así que su brillantina reproduce la Mona Lisa, y eso es mecenazgo…».

—Una obra magnífica —siguió Crémer, saliendo—, *bien entendu, le visage de la Vierge*…

—Sí, eso por supuesto —dijo a su espalda el hombre de pelo blanco—, pero resulta obvio que eso es obra de un restaurador. Incluso podría decirse que sirve más bien para resaltar la excelencia del resto.

—Un sacrilege, ce visage-là, archaïque, dur comme la pierre, voyez vous, sans chaleur, sans coeur, sans sympathie, sans vie… en un mot, la mort, vous savez, sans espoir de Résurrection.

El señor Sonnenschein salió el último de la corta fila, diciendo: «Es un dineral. Es un dineral». Miró por encima de su hombro, y empezó a decir algo, pero le cerraron la puerta en las narices.

El hombre del pelo blanco chocó con Crémer, que se paró en seco, con un pie plantado en una rosa de Aubusson, para decir: «Su *monsieur* Brownes… ¿típico?».

En aquel momento se les acercó el argentino enzapado, y tras pedir excusas preguntó si alguno de ellos era el señor Brown.

—Está por aquí… ejem… en alguna parte —dijo el hombre de pelo blanco, mirando a su alrededor por encima de sus cabezas. El argentino siguió ansiosamente su mirada.

—¿Está usted aquí en… viaje de negocios? —le espetó Crémer.

—Mi misión oficial ha quedado ya cumplida —respondió el argentino—, pero he venido aquí con la esperanza de adquirir algo… ¿artístico…?

Crémer volvió la espalda. «II va sans dire», dijo, deteniéndose a soltar una risita, «comme tout le monde sait bien, les grands tableaux de Goya
qu'on
trouve dans le Jockey Club de Buenos Aires sont des… faux».

—Una compañía de desodorantes reproduce en un anuncio la *Virgen de las rocas,* y usted llama a eso… ¡eepa!

Recktall Brown salió por la puerta de paneles con otro puro en la boca. Se internó a grandes zancadas en la habitación y miró a su alrededor con aire expectante, agarrándose una mano con la otra ante sí, y luego la segunda con la primera, con la espalda vuelta en la dirección de la que había venido: había pasado tan deprisa junto a Crémer y los otros que no les había visto.

—Una compañía de laxantes reproduce a todo color el retrato del doctor Arnolfini y su esposa, y se supone que eso es… ¡eepa!

Basil Valentine salió por la puerta de paneles y se quedó allí parado, cerrándola lentamente a su espalda mientras paseaba la vista por la habitación, pálido, los labios apretados pero movidos por la lengua que acariciaba el diente roto.

—Mire, vamos a un rincón seguro, porque quiero explicarle que si hay un cáncer que está devorando a este país es la publicidad.

Basil Valentine juntó las manos para encender un cigarrillo, pues la que había levantado con una cerilla le temblaba demasiado.

—Pero doctor… Kuvetli, ¿no?, en la Cuarta Dinastía, el proceso de embalsamamiento y momificación…

—Le ruego me excuse un momento…

Con el cigarrillo en la boca, apretándose el labio superior con la punta de un dedo, Valentine le vio acercarse.

—¿Cuál es el problema?, ¿qué está pasando?

—Nada —contestó Valentine, también en voz baja.

—Pero pasa algo, está usted muy trastornado. ¿Cómo se ha hecho esa herida?

—Un accidente absurdo…

—Pero debe decirme qué es todo esto, esta noche está pasando aquí algo muy extraño…

—No pasa nada extraño, salvo… nada que le concierna a usted —contestó rápidamente Valentine.

—Ah, pero usted no puede…

—Puedo hacer lo que me dé la gana —dijo acaloradamente Valentine, volviendo la espalda a la habitación.

—Me preocupa mucho verle perder… verle tan trastornado —dijo el otro, apoyado contra la pared—.

Nunca es bueno.

—No he perdido el control de nada.

—¿Y espera algún problema?

—Nada que… no me resulte familiar.

—¿Va armado?

—¿Armado? Cielo santo, ¿es que espera que alguien… atente contra mi vida?

—Ah, pero no tan alto…

Valentine se apartó un paso de él. Lo miró de arriba abajo.

—¿Qué demonios es todo esto…? ¿Cree que está aquí para… tenerme vigilado? Todo esto, le aseguro —siguió—, le aseguro que sólo tiene que ver con asuntos personales, ¿me entiende? Y ese hombre de allí… —Empezó a volverse, señalando con la cabeza por encima del hombro la corpulenta espalda de Brown. Luego volvió a acercársele bruscamente—. Y usted, ¿va armado? —preguntó de forma perentoria. Sólo obtuvo una sonrisa en respuesta, una sonrisa que no se extendió más allá de los labios, pues nada más se movió desde la punta de la barba a los penetrantes ojos negros—. Démela —dijo Valentine.

—Pero si, como dice usted, esto no es más que un asunto personal…

—Le digo que me la dé.

—Pero en cuestiones de este tipo, su autoridad no se extiende…

—¡Maldito sea!, entréguemela y deje de… —La vena se destacaba, latiendo en la sien de Basil Valentine —. Mi autoridad se extiende hasta donde yo la asumo —dijo, desabrochándose la chaqueta del esmoquin y tapando a la figura que tenía delante mientras el bulto cuadrado de una pistola automática pasaba entre ellos—. Y ahora…

—Ah, sí, por supuesto, he leído el libro, una cosa encantadoramente cínica en su género. Está escrito con tal… frescura… —Se pasó un dedo por la barba, mientras Basil Valentine se recomponía rápidamente, abrochándose la chaqueta y retrocediendo un paso para permitir la intrusión de un hombre al que ninguno de los dos parecía conocer—, con tal ingenuidad, que es como para pensar que el propio autor es demasiado inocente para comprender el significado cabal del engaño implícito en la escandalosa conducta que recomienda con el fin de ganar amigos y, en consecuencia, influir en la gente. ¿No le dio a usted esta impresión, señor… señor…?

Valentine se había retirado un paso, y luego otro, a punto devolverse. Pero dijo:

—Valentine. Y ahora…

—Por supuesto… —No había apartado ni un instante sus penetrantes ojos de la cara de Valentine—. Por supuesto, tengo una fe implícita en su juicio en cuestiones de este tipo.

—Gracias —dijo Valentine, inclinándose rápidamente por la cintura y excusándose—, debo ir a ver un momento a nuestro anfitrión.

—Por supuesto…

—No demuestra más que los fines justifican los medios, y que a la postre es necesaria cierta connivencia para la realización del bien —dijo el intruso, reanudando con cierta perspicacia lo que creía que era una conversación—. Creo que su éxito en una sociedad supuestamente basada en la razón podemos considerarlo un resultado tan lógico como el enfoque pragmático del psicoanálisis americano moderno —siguió, aunque el hombre al que se dirigía, tras concederle el más breve de los escrutinios, miraba ahora por encima de su hombro hacia el centro de la habitación, donde Basil Valentine chocó con Fuller, que se retiraba de espaldas con una bandeja cargada.

—¡Idiota! ¡Idiota!

—Oh, sí señor, sí señor…

—Oye, ¿qué es eso de llamar idiota a Fuller?

—Oh señor Brown señor, señor Valentine señor…

Y si Basil Valentine estaba sorprendido, Fuller estaba atónito; si Valentine estaba desconcertado, Fuller estaba profundamente alarmado ante aquella defensa gutural por parte de la última persona de la que ambos la hubieran esperado.

Recktall Brown estaba con las manos cruzadas sobre el estómago, los diamantes ocultos bajo el grueso nudillo de un dedo. Y cuando los ojos de Valentine se volvieron hacia aquellos charcos encrespados con un reto temerario tras los gruesos cristales, Fuller aprovechó para huir.

Sobre las superficies movedizas de las voces, que se elevaban, vacilaban y rompían, retumbando gravemente y apagándose, avanzando en oleadas incesantes, destrozándose en conflicto, las figuras se movían a su alrededor, mientras Recktall Brown sacaba un puro con una mano, encontraba el cortaplumas con la otra y se quedaba allí parado, esperando.

—Sea cual sea tu juego, ya ha ido demasiado lejos —soltó por fin Valentine.

Recktall Brown se le quedó mirando sin más. Empezó a cortar la punta del puro. Finalmente dijo:

—Es mi fiesta.

—Pero no puedes… no puedes…

—No puedo qué —dijo Brown, sin apartar los ojos de lo que estaba haciendo.

—Dios santo…

Entonces, Brown alzó los ojos, para mirar la cara que tenía delante. Parecía muy cansado; esa era la única forma de explicar la expresión de su cara, que enseguida inclinó, como si sus rasgos, tan familiares a la luz diurna del triunfo, o de la cólera, o de la satisfacción, pudieran ahora traicionarlo. Terminó de cortar la punta del puro, y cerró el cortaplumas contra la palma de su mano.

—¿Por qué hiciste eso? —preguntó serenamente, mientras levantaba la cara, y con ella el puro—, lo del dinero de la cuenta. Como acabas de contarme en el cuarto de atrás… el dinero que ya le había pagado como se merecía. —Y con la última palabra mordió el puro.

—¡¿Por qué crees que lo hice?! —Valentine se le quedó mirando—. ¿Y por qué te pones tú de pronto tan…? Dios mío, ¿qué te pasa?

—¿Por qué lo hiciste?

—Para pararle un poco los pies, para hacérselo pensar dos veces antes de que siguiera adelante con esa… idea suya… Pero tú… tú…

—Y aun así lo está intentando.

Recktall Brown se volvió para alejarse. Valentine dio un rodeo para plantarse ante él, y exclamó de nuevo:

—¿Qué te pasa? Por qué te… y ese cuadro que acabas de enseñar en el cuarto de atrás, saben que hay algo mal. No van a decir nada, no van a decir nada ni siquiera entre ellos, pero saben que hay algo mal. No podías haber elegido un momento más estúpido. ¿Qué estás intentando, ver hasta dónde puedes achucharlos?

Recktall Brown encendió el puro, y luego se rió en su cara.

—Saben que hay algo mal, desde luego. ¿Quién demonios te mandó pintar esa cara? Eso les encantó, ¿verdad?

Entonces apareció un hombre ante ellos y dijo: «Feliz Navidad, Brown», tendiéndole una copa por encima de la mesa de los Siete Pecados Capitales.

—¿Qué es esto? —dijo Brown, cogiéndola.

—No lo sé. Lo que sea que estés sirviendo.

—Escucha, ve a buscar a Fuller y dile que saque unas botellas de ese coñac bueno, las del cordón azul.

Quienquiera que fuese, se fue.

Allí estaba, mirando, mientras su vista se acortaba desde el oro y la riqueza de colores y formas delicadas de Hieronymus Bosch al bulto de sus manazas. Mientras Crémer y otros se le acercaban por detrás, retrocedió un paso e hizo un gesto con la forma espatular de su pulgar.

—Eso es una cosa hermosa.

—¿Señor?

—¿Qué significa Ds videt?

—¿Señor? —vuelven a interrumpirles.

—Dios ve… o vigila —murmura Valentine con aspereza.

—¿Fuller?

—Señor, un caballero que no recuerdo ha entrado pidiéndome que abra las botellas del cordón azul que tan celosamente guarda el señor…

—Está bien, Fuller.

—Sí, señor.

Fuller se queda parado ante él, capaz al fin de mover las manos, que entrelaza ante sí, y con un ademán impulsivo vuelve y desplaza su encorvada figura.

—¡Fuller!

—¿Señor? —Fuller da un respingo, con un destello de oro. Recktall Brown se le queda mirando, con todo su labio inferior moviéndose como si detrás de él la lengua buscara algo en la superficie de la encía. Y finalmente: «Ponte derecho, Fuller», dijo Brown, y se volvió.

M. Crémer estaba terminando una conversación cuando se acercaron. «En fin, hay tan poco arte de calidad en el mundo que uno no debería preguntar con demasiado celo… ¿no? Como dijo Coulanges… la pintura es oro en barras».

Alguien había encendido la radio; pero había todavía bastante ruido en la habitación para que pasara inadvertida. Aquí y allá se marchaban algunos invitados.

En realidad, cuando se acercaron estaban hablando otra vez del cuadro que les habían mostrado en privado hacía un momento; es decir, hablando no del propio cuadro, sino de la cara de la figura central, como si en aquel fragmento hubieran encontrado un depósito mutuamente satisfactorio de dudas periféricas.

—Está hecho con cierto gusto, desde luego —musitó el R. A.

—¡Gusto! —exclamó Crémer, sonriendo a Brown y a Basil Valentine para incluirles, al menos, en la última parte de aquella conversación—. El gusto es una cosa, y el genio para crear otra muy distinta. ¿Eh…?

Alzó la vista, y la fijó en la expresión de la cara de Valentine que, como quiera que hubiera podido ser, se veía exagerada por el labio hinchado en una de infinito desprecio. Y el hombre de pelo blanco, que no estaba mirando a Basil Valentine, siguió agradablemente:

—Sí, cuando era joven, ¿saben?, recuerdo que consideraba mi trabajo… como una especie de, ejem… nostalgia disciplinada de las cosas que yo, ejem… habría podido hacer. ¿Eh? Sí. Sí… ejem —musitó, bajando la vista mientras la expresión de Basil Valentine se volvía hacia él. Después, para romper lo que más tarde describiría como un «silencio violento», siguió diciendo—: Esa cara de ahí dentro, ¿saben…?, la cara de la… ejem, la figura del Van der Goes, los toques de luz alrededor de los ojos, ¿saben? No encajan, no encajan en absoluto.

—¿No encajan? —preguntó bruscamente Valentine.

—¿Eh? Oh no, querido, no encajan en absoluto. Blanco de cinc, ¿sabe? Blanco de cinc. Creo que lo descubrirán cuando hagan un análisis de los pigmentos, ya sabe.

—¿Blanco de cinc?

—Oh sí, querido. Un color, ejem, del siglo XVIII, ya sabe.

Entonces (después de lo que Crémer describiría más tarde como un *silence de mort),* el hombre de más edad empezó a farfullar:

—Qué tipo más raro tuvieron aquí antes… ¡eh! Más raro que la puñeta, ¿eh? Algo lunático, podría decirse, ¿eh? Danzando de un lado a otro con, ejem, dos trajes encima, ¿eh? Quiero decir, ¿saben? Bastante… ejem. ¿Habían visto alguna vez a ese tipo?

—Oh, sí… —intervino Basil Valentine, con voz muy serena, ecuánime y cortante. Ofreció un cigarrillo de un paquete de Virginia—. Loco, por supuesto, como dice usted. Bebe, ya sabe…

—Oh sí, bebe, ¿eh? Ejem… no me extrañaría.

—Supongo que sería más exacto decir un carácter mórbido agravado por la bebida. Se hace toda clase de falsas ilusiones sobre sí mismo —siguió Valentine, volviéndose hacia Recktall Brown—. Ha sido un verdadero problema últimamente, ¿verdad?

—No estaba borracho ahora mismo, cuando estuvo aquí —contestó Brown, mirándolos por turno.

—No lo estaba, ¿eh? Oh, querido, entonces no me gustaría encontrármelo borracho, ¿eh? Jo, jo, ejem… Oh no, querido, esas cosas no se pueden tolerar.

—¿Y si vuelve? —dijo Valentine con tono alarmante.

—Si vuelve… —empezó Recktall Brown, mirando al suelo ante sí.

—Tienen a la policía, ¿no? —dijo Crémer, encogiéndose de hombros—. *Après tout, chargé de défendre…*

—No deberían dudar un momento… ejem, en llamarla. Podría estar a punto de volver. Esas cosas, ya saben. No se pueden tolerar, ya saben.

Basil Valentine murmuró algo, sonriendo con la leve distorsión a la que le obligaba el labio, e hizo ademán de retirarse. Recktall Brown giró en redondo hacia él y le preguntó:

—¿Adónde vas?

—Si me excusan un momento —dijo Valentine con aspereza—, pensaba ir a ponerme un poco de hielo en esta… hinchazón. —Y tocándose el labio con la punta de un dedo se fue.

—Vaya, está un poco… ejem… un tanto susceptible esta noche. ¿Eh? Ejem… sí. Todos estamos un poco… ejem… ¿eh? ¿Decía usted, señorita? ¿Eh?

—¿Es verdad que en el Museo Británico hay una peluca que Jorge III se mandó hacer con el pelo de abajo de sus amantes…?

—Yo diría… ¡ejem! ¿Cómo dice, jovencita? ¡Cielo santo! ¡Cielo santo…! —Se inclinó un momento sobre la señorita Stein y luego pasó junto a ella, aunque a juzgar por la disparidad de sus presencias y la precipitación con que huyó podría muy bien haber pasado sobre ella—. Cielo santo… ¿eh? —se dirigió a la encogida espalda de Crémer—. Qué puñetero… atrevimiento. Ejem… vamos arriba, ¿eh? Ejem. Qué cosa

tan bonita. Alemana, diría yo. ¿Eh? Madera policromada, siglo XV o así, san Juan Bautista, ¿eh? Ejem. Lástima que haya perdido un brazo. Una puñetera lástima. —Se detuvo un momento en el descansillo, pasando un dedo por la áspera médula de la rotura, y luego siguió a los tacones que le precedían escaleras arriba, diciendo—: ¿Eh…? ¿La armadura? Cielo santo, nadie quiere mirar una armadura…

La señorita Stein regresó junto a sus compañeros para decir: «Y luego dicen que los ingleses son educados, ni siquiera me contestado. De todas formas, yo creo que una cosa así tendría que rascar por fuerza. ¿No? ¿No?».

Se oyó un ruido metálico procedente de arriba, pero nadie se volvió hacia le galería para ver que le habían quitado el casco a la armadura. Es decir, nadie más que el hombre de barba afilada y mirada penetrante al fondo de la habitación que, a pesar de su atenta charla, había estado observando la actividad de allí arriba desde que había empezado.

El joven y barbado crítico de arte estaba hablando en francés, pronunciándolo de hecho con tal fineza que su amiguito (al que antes habían aplaudido por su parecido con un *oeuf-dur-mayonnaise)* le diría después, con recatado temor reverencial, que no había sido capaz de entender una palabra; lo cual no era ningún prodigio de ignominia, en realidad, porque el acosado lionés que le escuchaba tampoco entendía una palabra, e intentaba arreglar las cosas, a intervalos aspirados, con comentarios hilados por una serie de sílabas grotescas que acaso en Lyon, por defecto, habrían podido pasar por inglés.

Este impresionante combate atrajo la atención de alguien que creía estar hablando con un egiptólogo llamado Kuvetli, y que (debido quizá al revoloteo de manos gruesas que veía allí, y al porte impasible que tenía delante) se tomó la confianza de hacer un símil sobre el mimetismo de las mariposas, citando a favor de su tesis: «La hembra del *Papilio cynorta,* en Uganda…», mientras por encima de su hombro el egiptólogo buscaba una cara que no podía localizar. Durante todo este tiempo, Basil Valentine había estado apretándose un cubito de hielo envuelto en un paño contra el labio superior, levantándolo de cuando en cuando para mirar el diente astillado, y contemplando su imagen en el espejo del botiquín.

Alguien aporreó la puerta, como alguien llevaba haciendo desde hacía un rato a intervalos impacientes, un invitado al parecer incapaz de encontrar las escaleras, pues al segundo asalto se había dirigido a los de arriba con cierta irritación, y ahora exclamó: «Vale, maldito seas». Valentine dejó caer la fría compresa en el lavabo, vio que la hinchazón había bajado un poco, separó el labio para echar otro vistazo al diente, y luego lo juntó con firmeza, encontrando sus ojos en el espejo. Y como a estas alturas las intimidades de la comunión catóptrica le resultaban tan ajenas como cualesquiera otras (siempre estaba preparado para ver, y satisfecho de lo que veía en el espejo, en aquellos encuentros numerosos pero breves en los que se inclinaba hacia él, lavándose las manos, su cara una proposición establecida, su mente ocupada en otra parte en asuntos todavía mudables), ahora se quedó allí reflejando una cara más absorta que la del mirón del espejo, ese conocido nuestro tan dudoso; e hizo falta otra embestida a la puerta para arrancar a Basil Valentine de aquella conspiración de ojos y barbilla, nariz recta y pómulos altos que era su cara. Se volvió, arreglándose la ropa por detrás, bajo la chaqueta sin aberturas, y por delante, en la cintura abultada, y salió, sin mirar en ninguna dirección hasta que se hubo mezclado entre la gente.

Inmediatamente se tomó una copa de coñac, y se las arregló para evitar una conversación sobre si los nombres de refrescos escritos en el cielo eran profanaciones de la Gasa de Dios; a un hombre que dijo: «¿On estuo paeso nadia se dua contua delia houra porqués navitaz?», y a una jovencita que dijo algo sobre el rey Jorge III que confió, distraídamente, en no haber entendido bien, mientras paseaba una mirada ansiosa por la habitación.

—*Et ce vieux moricaud… où se cache-t-il…?*

—Porque el señor Schmuck quiere hacerse una igual que la de Jorge III…

Valentine se detuvo junto a un hombre moreno que apenas le llegaba al hombro, y antes de reparar en el picudo traje de zapa o en los ojos vidriosos, preguntó: «¿Dónde está Brown? ¿Ha visto al señor Brown?».

—Me temo que usted también se ha equivocado de fiesta, ¿no? Quizá…

Basil Valentine se apartó rápidamente. Tocó otro codo: «¿Ha visto a Brown? ¿Al señor Brown…?».

—*Men den himmelske rustning*… ¿eh?

Entonces Valentine se paró en seco y se quedó mirando una gruesa figura revoloteante casi al fondo de la habitación, que tiraba con una mano de la punta de una barba negra, agitaba la otra en el aire con gestos desenfrenados y, pese a todo su peso aparente, se movía de puntillas con admirable agilidad. «¡Dios santo! ¡Dios santo no!».

—Vaya, viejo, dónde se había escondido, ¿eh…? Perdiéndose toda la diversión, ¿eh?

—¿Qué?

—El viejo granuja, ¡vaya que sí!, sudando ahí arriba como un… ejem. Sólo he bajado a por un poco más

de coñac, ¿eh? Cielo santo sí, tengo que mantenerme a tono, ya sabe.

—¿Brown está… ahí arriba?

Algunos invitados se marchaban, echando una última mirada de anticipación por encima del hombro: «Odiaríamos *perdernos* algo…». Algunos se habían marchado ya. Algunos parecían haber echado raíces; y hasta los que seguían moviéndose lo hacían con flotante vaguedad, sostenidos por el flujo de calor que llenaba aquel vasto salón como un elemento natural. Así los ojos de Basil Valentine, vacuos como los del tapiz, seguían prendidos de la distante figura saltarina de la barba negra simplemente porque se movía con tal mimética extravagancia: un hechizo que podía romper en cualquier instante, como sabía bien, dirigiendo la mirada a la derecha, junto al árbol de Navidad, donde a todas luces tenía lugar una conversación sobre las profecías de Keops, o la improbabilidad de una momia de la Cuarta Dinastía («no hubo ninguna, hablando con propiedad, hasta la Decimoctava…»). Así de fija era su mirada; como ahora, de manera similar, oía ruidos procedentes de la galería, ruidos chirriantes, y el leve entrechocar del metal contra el metal, una aflicción momentáneamente peor para cuyo alivio amenazaba con traicionarle la costumbre de intervenir, pero se mantuvo firme, prestando a la voz del R. A. la misma vidriosa atención que sus ojos prestaban a la distante barba danzarina, esperando, embelesado, la sacudida que rompiera el hechizo. Para entonces, los huecos entre voces permitían que la radio penetrara con lo que sonaba como un griterío disonante. (La música era de Ravel, *et les Sortilèges*
L'Enfant
).

—Si está ahí arriba, dice. Cielo santo, sí, con toda su… ejem. Parece empeñado en ponerse esa cosa, como ese Don, ejem, ese tipo español, ya sabe. Bastante bonita en su género, supongo, pero yo, ejem… nunca he sido muy aficionado a las armaduras. Y cielo santo, ¿eh? No es precisamente algo que se vea por ahí corriendo hoy en día, ¿eh?, con las bombas atómicas y todas esas cosas estallando por todas partes, ¿eh? No mucha protección, me parece a mí, ejem… como asarse vivo en un… no sé qué, ¿eh? Oiga, ¿le queda algún Virginia de esos? Fuma usted mi marca, ¿sabe?

La mano de Basil Valentine se puso alerta, y sacó el paquete de cigarrillos sin dejar de mirar hacia el fondo de la habitación.

—Un montón de tipos raros deambulando por aquí esta noche, ¿eh? Oh sí, sí, muchas gracias.

—¿La armadura? —dijo Basil Valentine en voz baja, escuchando.

—¿Eh? Oh sí, bastante bonita en su género, diría yo, italiana, del siglo XV me parece a mí. Qué tipejos más raros, los italianos, ¿eh? Quiero decir, de pequeña estatura, ya sabe, no tienen nada de sajones, tipejos de huesos pequeños, la fina mano italiana y todas esas cosas. Algunos de los invitados más… ejem, menos decorosos están ahí arriba azuzándole. Un verdadero carnaval, ¿sabe? Cielo santo, yo diría que les está costando un horror ponérsela, ¿eh? No es lo que se dice una, ejem, figura renacentista, ¿eh? —El R. A. se detuvo a encender el cigarrillo, y luego, como obligado por haberlo aceptado a quedarse con el donante, que no mostraba ninguna inclinación a moverse, siguió—. En modo alguno… *son métier,* como dice ese odioso tipejo francés, ¿eh? Pues anda que los franceses, ¿eh? Cielo santo. Los franceses, ya se sabe. No se puede hacer nada con ellos. Quiero decir que a mí no me gustaría hacer nada con ellos, salvo, ejem… da igual, ¿eh? Ya no voy por ahí haciendo eso. Cielo santo, no. No con los tiempos que corren.

Volvió a callarse e hizo un ruido cloqueante con los labios antes de llevarse allí la copa. De arriba llegó un sordo aporreo, manotazos contra el metal intentando encajarlo, golpeando entre constricciones de risas, y Basil Valentine se llevó la punta de los dedos a la vena de la sien.

—Vaya, cielo santo, apenas pueden pasarle las, ejem, como-se-llamen por los hombros, quiero decir las hombreras, ¿eh? Hechas para algún escuálido italiano… ejem, soldado de caballería, ya sabe. Todo huesos, esos tipejos, huesos y nervio, podría decirse, ¿eh? Yo diría que es por eso por lo que es una obra de artesanía tan delicada, ya sabe… de una pieza, como dice Dryden en alguna parte. Cielo santo, sí… pero no esta armadura, no ésta. Y es una lástima, que una cosa tan bonita como ésa tenga, ejem…, no es mi campo, por supuesto, así que no tengo derecho a entrometerme con mis comentarios, ¿eh? Pero cielo santo, los escarpes, ya sabe, es un poco incongruente que tenga escarpes alemanes, ¿no le parece? Quiero decir, que tenga toda ella esa especie de delicada línea italiana, y luego acabe en un par de escarpes alemanes. Tipo zarpa de oso, ya sabe, esas cosas alemanas grandes, anchas y pesadas. No es que yo vaya por ahí con un hacha para cargarme alemanes, cielo santo, no. Mucho más sano tener un vecino con el que puedas enzarzarte y guerrear un poco de vez en cuando, ¿eh? Arreglar tus diferencias en campo abierto, ¿eh? En vez de aguantar las, ejem, poses absurdas de los franceses año tras año, ¿eh? ¿Qué pasa…?

Basil Valentine había dado un súbito respingo, cuando el cigarrillo que tenía entre los dedos terminó de consumirse y le quemó la piel. Volvió la vista hacia su interlocutor, como dándose cuenta cabal por primera

vez de que estaba allí.

—¿Eh? ¿Se encuentra bien? Estaba a punto de decir… ¿qué demonios cree que están haciendo ahí arriba…? —El entrechocar del metal contra el metal había aumentado sensiblemente, un sordo estruendo irregular; pero Basil Valentine no hizo el menor ademán de acercarse—. ¿Eh? No le parece que… cielo santo, no, vaya, ni siquiera podrían encajarle las, ejem, como-se-llamen en las pantorrillas, en los tobillos, ya sabe… quiero decir, las grebas. No es mi campo, no es mi campo en absoluto. Aunque una vez escribí una cosilla, por algún motivo, qué demonios era… cuando estaba estudiando, supongo, ¿eh? Hace tiempo, ya sabe, aunque uno nunca deja de ser estudiante, ¿eh?, como lo de guardar los cuellos de Eton, ¿eh? Cielo santo, no. Pero esa cosa, qué demonios era… ejem. Oh sí sí sí… Yo era más joven, por supuesto, ahora puede sonar un poco ingenuo, ya sabe, pero era una reflexión bastante original, eso me dijeron entonces, en todo caso, un enfoque bastante nuevo, ya sabe… pero que me aspen si recuerdo qué era…

Y ahora, aunque muy pocas caras se volvieron a uno u otro lado o hacia arriba, para mostrar que los habían oído, llegó de arriba la distracción de unos pasos regulares y metálicos, y Basil Valentine volvió lentamente la cabeza hacia la izquierda, aunque no levantó la cara.

—Uf —siguió diciendo el R. A. por encima de su copa—, sí, sí, eso es. El diablo con pantorrillas postizas, ¿recuerda? Mefistófeles, ya sabe, en, ejem, esa cosa tan pesada de Goethe. Cielo santo, sí, con pantorrillas postizas, ya sabe, para ocultar sus pies hendidos y sus, ejem, pantorrillas, sí. Bueno, pues mi tesis, ¿entiende?, era que esas cosas no eran sólo un disfraz para engañar a la gente y todo eso, sino una especie de, ejem… necesidad estética, podría decirse, una especie de nostalgia de la belleza, entiende, porque era un ángel caído y todas esas cosas, tan… desagradablemente diferente en su, ejem, aspecto de, ejem… —El caballero de pelo blanco se detuvo, mirando por primera vez de frente a Basil Valentine y dándose cuenta, al parecer por primera vez, de que Valentine no estaba escuchando una palabra de lo que decía—. Ejem… hace mucho tiempo de todo eso, ¿eh? Oiga, ese labio suyo tiene una pinta muy fea, ¿eh? Se está hinchando como un globo, ¿eh? Cielo santo…

Entonces, cuando Basil Valentine levantaba la mano para tocarse la rota hinchazón, le bajó el brazo de un tirón.

—¡Cielo santo! ¡Cielo santo! ¡Cielo santo…! ¿Ve? Ya está aquí otra vez ese lunático. ¿Eh? ¿Lo ve ahí, al pie de las escaleras…? Parece apunto de… Dios sabe qué… de echar llamas, ¿eh? Mal asunto, muy mal asunto… No se pueden tolerar esas cosas, invadir de ese modo una reunión privada, ¿eh? La casa de un hombre es su, ejem… como-se-llame, ya sabe, ¿eh? Irrumpir aquí así de pronto con esa pinta, cielo santo, no, no hay ninguna razón para ir por ahí con dos trajes encima, en todo caso ninguna que yo recuerde en este momento, no le, ejem… Oiga, mi querido amigo, tenga un poco de cuidado, me está tirando la copa encima…

El miembro de la Real Academia retrocedió, sacudiéndose el coñac de la manga, y derramando mientras lo hacía el que quedaba en su copa; y cuando se calló, su inmediata vecindad, bajo la galería y en torno al pie de las escaleras, se aquietó un poco. Entonces algunos se callaron, otros empezaron a hablar más alto, algunos volvieron la atención y otros la espalda a aquel curioso visitante que miraba febrilmente a su alrededor, con un manojo de astillas chamuscadas en la mano, susurrando: «¿Dónde está…? ¿Dónde está…?».

Basil Valentine había retrocedido. Seguía con el dedo en el labio, apretándoselo; al sentir de pronto un dolor agudo allí se lo apretó con más fuerza, y la sangre le llegó a la lengua.

—¡Brown!

Aquel rincón de la habitación se quedó en silencio. Varias personas se apartaron del pie de las escaleras y de la figura que estaba allí, mirándolos. Algunos levantaron la vista hacia aquel metálico arrastrar de pies. Les vio mirando hacia allí, y se volvió también; pero no había nada a la vista más que el recodo de las escaleras, y la figura de madera policromada mostrando en gesto de bendición el rugoso muñón de su brazo amputado.

Al fondo de la habitación seguían sonando voces. En la chimenea, las llamas lamían perezosamente un leño negro de cerezo silvestre. De la radio brotaba un griterío apagado.

—¡Brown!

La figura encorazada alcanzó el descansillo en una caída, tardando mucho tiempo, según pareció después a los que lo vieron, y haciendo bastante menos ruido del que habrían esperado, golpeando de cabeza en la esquina, atacada por sombras que saltaron a su encuentro, y se retiraron cuando se desprendió de la pared y quedó suspendida un momento, en el que la habitación entera enmudeció y todos los ojos quedaron atrapados en una ecuación, los ojos vivaces inmovilizados, y los ojos inmóviles del jabalí de verrugas, la cara del retrato de juventud, los ojos ciegos de Valeriano estirado en su potro y los ojos

omnividentes de la pálida figura en paños menores en el centro de la mesa baja, aquellos y los ojos del tapiz, vueltos en la otra dirección, vigilantes.

—Por supuesto, en eso discrepo de Dante —llegó una voz desde el fondo, restableciendo el equilibrio inconsciente, rescatando lo que estaba vivo de lo que no lo estaba; y otras voces, las suficientes para librarse mutuamente del aislamiento de su identidad independiente, brotaron y se extendieron en una lenta oleada hacia el peso roto detenido al borde del descansillo, cuyas sombras ceñidas se apartaron de un salto cuando se movió, y reanudaron sus ataques concertados mientras caía de escalón en escalón, ahogándolo con su último abrazo al pie de las escaleras.

—¡Cielo santo…! Han tirado esa cosa por las escaleras, ¿ve? Más pesada de lo que uno habría imaginado, ¿eh? —El caballero de pelo blanco se acercó—. Cielo santo, yo… diría… que hay alguien dentro.

A su espalda, Basil Valentine se santiguó rápidamente con el cordial de la mano derecha; luego se llevó el nudillo del índice a los labios mientras se acercaba.

Haciendo crujir los escalones con sus grotescos zapatos, que parecían especialmente diseñados para participar en algún deporte, posiblemente uno de nieve, o de los que se practican en terreno pantanoso, o en cualquier otra superficie empapada, como una pista de barro, quizá, que no ofrece un agarre seguro para el pie, bajó
M. Crémer
, para plantar aquellos pies notablemente equipados entre las rosas de Aubusson, y mostrar las gafas de ancho puente y gruesos cristales que su anfitrión se había olvidado arriba. Hablaba de modo muy atropellado, y en su lengua nativa, así que nadie le interrumpió, y nadie le prestó la menor atención.

A su espalda, en el último escalón, estaba un hombre alto y mesurado sosteniendo una húmeda chaqueta cruzada; y había otros, apretados entre aquel y el manco policromado, tan silenciosos como él, y con los ojos también abiertos como platos, una concordia reticente que habría podido tomarse erróneamente por reverencia de no ser por la inmoderada curiosidad que había brillado en los ojos de san Juan Bautista desde la primera vez que le expusieron a la intemperie hacía varios siglos.

Entonces la mujer alta se llevó la mano a la oreja, y al encontrar un lóbulo desnudo gritó: «¡Oh…! He perdido mi caricia de niño…», frase que atrajo cierta atención.

Resonando en las regiones de más allá de la escalera, el ruido de la caída había hecho enderezarse en el acto a Fuller en su taburete de la cocina. Tardó un minuto en salir, pues la perra quería salir también. Empezó a trotar de un lado a otro por el cuarto, sintiendo nerviosamente que algo andaba mal con aquella intuición que Fuller conocía demasiado bien, y al verla ahora en acción se alarmó todavía más. Mientras la perra arañaba la puerta que daba al pasillo y al gran salón, Fuller se deslizó furtivamente por otra, subió las escaleras de la cocina hasta los pasillos del segundo piso, los siguió hasta la galería y salió lentamente a la escalera principal, ante cuya barandilla se detuvo y miró hacia atrás, dándose cuenta de pronto de que allí faltaba algo. Entonces reparó en el puro, medio consumido y apagado, pero no antes de haber dejado una larga quemadura en el arca de palo de rosa. Lo agarró, se lamió el pulgar y frotó el lugar quemado, pero no sirvió de nada: y en aquel momento advirtió con el rabillo del ojo lo que faltaba al final de la galería, y con el puro medio consumido en la mano corrió hacia las escaleras y estuvo a punto de caerse en su prisa por bajarlas.

—*Les pieds, voyez vous, les pieds de cette armure, il a trébuché vous savez*… —arengaba
M. Crémer
a su público, tan eficazmente que aumentaba por momentos, mientras agitaba en el aire las gafas de puente ancho y señalaba con la otra mano los escarpes de la armadura—. *Et sans les lunettes alors… Les pieds?, les pieds, voyez vous?, des Boches, pas vrai? Voyez vous quelle gaucherie allemande*…

—Cielo santo —dijo el R. A. desde algún lugar de las sombras que proyectaba la galería—, comprendo que haya tropezado con los pies porque eran alemanes, pero para empezar ¿cómo consiguió ponerse esa maldita cosa?, ¿eh?, ¿eh? —preguntó sin dirigirse a nadie.

De todas las figuras allí reunidas a sus pies, Fuller sólo conocía a dos, que ahora se juntaron junto al casco cuando Basil Valentine se arrodilló a un lado y extendió una mano, que retiró con la misma rapidez, pues la garganta estaba cubierta de sangre que brotaba de una de las comisuras de la boca, aunque eso era lo único que se podía ver de la cara, la garganta, la pesada barbilla y una comisura torcida de la pequeña boca. Lo que había ocurrido era que, en la caída, uno de los ganchos que sujetaban en su sitio la babera se había soltado; quizá no estaba bien sujeto al principio, o posiblemente no estaba sujeto en modo alguno. El caso es que la babera del casco se había torcido con el golpe y la visera se había cerrado trabándose sin remedio, como descubrió la figura que siguió arrodillada cuando se apartó Valentine, tratando

desesperadamente de abrirla de un tirón.

Fuller se quedó mirando a Basil Valentine, que tenía una rodilla en el suelo, la mano que había retirado de la garganta indemne apoyada ahora en el faldar, cuyas láminas, destinadas a prestar una holgada protección a los muslos, aparecían ahora estrechamente ceñidas a ellos, rígidamente combadas. El peto y el espaldar no habían sido atados, aunque estaban todo lo tirantes que podían estar, dejando ver por sus aberturas los pliegues blancos de la camisa y un lado desgarrado del chaleco azul del que de algún modo se había escapado el cortaplumas, que estaba en el suelo junto al pie de Valentine. Y una de las grebas también se había soltado a medias, y con ella el ancho escarpe, mostrando un pequeño pie cubierto por un calcetín de seda, donde la arrugada línea blanca del reloj sobre la seda negra ridiculizaba el grosor del tobillo que tapaba, y fue allí donde Basil Valentine hincó la punta de dos dedos, esperó un momento, los movió y los hincó con más fuerza detrás del tendón, esperó otra vez y los retiró para trazar rápidamente una cruz sobre su pecho mientras se levantaba, retrocediendo un paso, lo que Fuller repitió desde el descansillo; aunque ambos observaban ahora la figura todavía arrodillada junto a la cabeza, y ambos estaban en retirada, Fuller escaleras arriba con el puro medio consumido en la mano, perdiéndose de vista en el pasillo, y Valentine andando hacia atrás, lentamente al principio, cuando la figura empezó a hablar. Agitando ante sí los fragmentos chamuscados, dio un paso por encima de la cabeza y se quedó allí plantado.

—¡Esperen! ¡Esperen! —gritó—. ¡Esperen!

El sonido de su voz otra vez, y su vista, volvieron a ponerles inmediatamente en movimiento. El estanque se vació a su alrededor, y apenas se había desbordado por el resto de la habitación cuando volvió a vaciarse, pues el fraude de lo que se había agitado allí durante tanto tiempo como vida submarina se descubrió en cuanto quitaron el tapón del acuario y salieron en un chorro continuo, mientras él seguía plantado sobre el casco roto, gritándoles:

—¡Esperen! ¡Escuchen! ¡Esperen!

Basil Valentine seguía refugiado en las sombras, observándole.

—¿Quiere que me quede un rato, viejo? —dijo el R. A. a su lado—. Cualquier cosa que pueda, ejem, hacer, ya sabe, ¿eh? Antes de que vénganlos, ejem, como-se-llamen, ¿eh?

M. Crémer, por otra parte, tenía de pronto mucha prisa, pero encontró tiempo para decir: *«Il faut que je parte, je viens de me rappeler… heh heh assignation vous savez, mais le Memlinc, voyez vous, le Memlinc, je veux vous savez…».*

d'une

l'acheter

—Condenado tipejo… ejem. Cielo santo, ¿eh? Probablemente dispuesto a pujar hasta dos y medio…

—*A n'importequel prix, vous savez…* —dijo Crémer por encima del hombro, arrastrado ya por la gente.

—¡Cielo santo! —dijo el R. A., todavía junto a Valentine—, empieza a sonar como si fuera a llegar hasta tres chelines. Bueno, si no hay nada que pueda hacer aquí más que enredar las cosas, ya sabe, supongo que, ejem, será mejor que me vaya… Parece usted muy unido a este… ejem, a nuestro anfitrión aquí presente, ¿eh? Llámeme mañana para decirme a qué hospital lo han llevado, ¿eh? Es un buen tipo. Me gustaría enviarle unas flores, ya sabe. Y ese, ejem, lienzo de Van der Goes que tienen ahí dentro… ejem, me gustaría, ejem, llegar a un acuerdo, ¿eh? Sí, bueno, buenas noches, ¿eh? Buenas noches… buenas noches, buenas noches, buenas noches…

Varias personas, de hecho, recordaron de pronto otros compromisos y salieron corriendo a cumplirlos. Aunque la mujer alta, como se lo describiría a su marido a la mañana siguiente, simplemente lo sacó de allí «manso como un corderito»; el joven y barbado crítico de arte salió manoteando en una cresta de encantamiento, repitiendo ya la historia a la gente que no había estado allí para disfrutarla, apretando la manita caliente ovillada en la suya; y el argentino enzapado, con el pelo negro de punta cual aleta dorsal hendiendo la espuma a su alrededor, escapó murmurando: «No me previnieron contra este tipo de cosas en Nueva York…», volviendo sus ojos vidriosos para echar un último vistazo al impúdico espectáculo en el suelo, agradecido, al menos, por no ver estorbada su huida, como

M. Crémer

, por la figura plantada allí en medio.

—*Attention? eh? Qu'est-ce que tu veux, alors! Va donc… laisse moi passer…*

—Sí, sí, sí… Crémer, sí. Sí, maldito seas. *De, vous savez,*

l'argent

maldito seas, *il faut toujours en avoir sur soi…*

—Eh bien, tu es fou, eh?

—Ahora escuche, escuche… —el tono cambió bruscamente—, tiene que escucharme…

Cuando aflojó la mano, Crémer se soltó de un tirón y escapó hacia la puerta sacudiéndose la manga pulcramente arrugada. Había cierta confusión en el gran trastero del vestíbulo, habilitado aquella noche como guardarropa; pero Crémer salió en breve con un voluminoso abrigo de pelo de camello, suficientes tallas más grande que la suya para que lo considerase perfectamente ajustado, y con una etiqueta de Hollywood dentro, según descubrió como a una manzana de distancia.

Mientras tanto aquí y allá, en el inmenso salón, los ojos que se acercaban distraídamente a la puerta se veían aún detenidos por los ojos del retrato de juventud allí colgado, y se volvían con tal inconsciente brusquedad que casi siempre regresaban buscando confirmación al bulto roto en el suelo, y con la misma rapidez, para evitar la media cara, encontraban refugio en la mano enguanteletada allí extendida, abierta con las delicadas líneas de la palma hacia arriba, y volvían a posarse en el retrato buscando un desmentido.

La rechoncha comitiva pasó de largo, el tercero de la fila murmurando con la sumisa reverencia con que habla un turista de algo completamente distinto del horrible sarcófago para ver el cual, según pretende hacer creer a su guía, ha recorrido tres mil millas: «A Chikoski se le puede utilizar casi tal cual, pero ¿qué se puede hacer con Bach…?», el segundo de la fila calculando la iluminación, los enfoques y la perspectiva general de la pesada figura tendida entre rosas con perfecta elegancia pese a su distensión, sirviendo no de contradicción sino de complemento a la más ligera erguida sobre ella, nacida de ella y elevándose continuamente con la tensión del crecimiento… distintas posibilidades de primeros planos allí, la delgada mano vacía con forma propia elevándose con fiera urgencia y los ojos igual… mientras su propio guía confirmaba: «Hay que salir pitando de aquí… mala publicidad…». Y siguieron adelante, notables de pronto por el hecho de que todos parecían su buena media cabeza más bajos que el resto de la gente, salvo el último, que de haber tenido frente habría sido media cabeza más alto. Encontraron el guardarropa y, teniendo en cuenta sus tallas, salieron bastante malparados.

El R. A., que había buscado resueltamente la salida junto al árbol de Navidad, por razones que llevaban casi tres cuartos de siglo sepultadas en su pasado, o en el de sir Walter Scott (le resultaba difícil distinguirlos), salió ahora al campo desierto.

—¡Oye tú, qué haces!

—No, escuche, escuche… tiene que escucharme, tiene que… que… esperar… esperar…

—Cielo santo, mi querido muchacho, no tengo que esperar a nada… oye, oye, suéltame, ¿eh? No puedes, ejem, ya sabes, ¿eh? ¿Qué demonios crees que soy, un, ejem…?

—No, espere, si escucha, si… me escucha.

—Oye, sé buen chico, suéltame, ¿eh? Y, ejem, deja de meterme en los ojos ese sucio manojo de, ejem, lo-que-sea, ya sabes…

—Escuche… Espere…

—Oye, mi querido muchacho… —El R. A. se soltó, pero siguió allí parado un momento—. Un buen baño caliente, ¿eh? Un buen baño caliente y una buena noche de sueño, ¿eh? Eso te dejará como nuevo, ¿eh? Cielo santo sí, ya sabes… —Y salió con bastante agilidad, y apenas se demoró un momento en el guardarropa, pues su raído abrigo de *tweed* era una de las pocas prendas que quedaban, y jamás se le habría ocurrido marcharse con la trinchera colgada a su lado. Así que no tardó nada en verse en la calle, en un barrio ostentoso, según advirtió, pues en los cubos de basura no había más que botellas vacías, y las cajas elegantemente largas y blancas de las floristerías.

La última mirada que Basil Valentine había sostenido, mientras retrocedía un paso, y luego otro, solo le sobresaltó porque llevaba largo rato contemplando su contraparte al fondo de la habitación, la mimosa amarillenta, y entonces sintió que lo agarraban con fuerza del brazo, y oyó: «Vámonos, éste no es un buen sitio para quedarse ahora».

Valentine se soltó de un tirón.

—Váyase… usted, ¿eh? Váyase. Mañana me pondré en contacto con usted.

—Pero… está demasiado nervioso ahora, no está bien, no es un buen momento para dejarle… solo, ¿no?

—¿Solo? Váyase. Váyase de una vez, ¿quiere…? —Tras una pausa, en la que la cara de Basil Valentine ensayó todos los músculos que el otro contenía, dijo—: ¿Qué sabe usted de esto? ¿Qué sabe de… mí?

—Quizá tanto como usted de mí. Sí. Y la pistola, venga. No tiene ninguna razón para quedársela, ¿no?

—Sí, yo… déjemela, yo… me pondré en contacto con usted por la mañana. —Basil Valentine salió rápidamente al oscuro pasillo, entró en el cuarto de baño y echó el cerrojo.

Se quedó inmóvil en el suelo de baldosas, y oyó a Fuller en las escaleras de la cocina. Luego se acercó al espejo, y se quedó mirando lo que veía allí. El labio hinchado se crispó, y lo estiró en una sonrisa. Luego levantó un dedo y se lo apretó, y miró a los ojos todo el tiempo que pudo, y luego al brillo suave del anillo de sello de oro. El bulto de la cintura le resultó pesado cuando recordó lo que era, y sacando la pistola la

dejó en una cesta. Luego se quitó la chaqueta y, tras desabrochar botones y hebillas y estirar elásticos, se bajó la ropa y se sentó a expeler un débil chorro hipospadial. Se levantó y vio burbujas en la superficie que había enturbiado, burbujas que dibujaban los rasgos de una cara. La borró tirando de la cadena y, volviéndose de nuevo hacia el espejo, empezó a abrocharse la ropa (y ése fue el detalle, el detalle completamente irrelevante, la cara flotante, que recordaría mucho después).

Cuando salió Valentine le llegó de la cocina cerrada el gañido de la perra, y compases inconexos de música mientras se acercaba al gran salón y se detenía en la sombra, observando, y lamiéndose el labio, y, cuando oyó la voz, escuchando.

—Sí, todas tus hijas eran bellas, y… todas tus hijas eran bellas, pero la menor… oye, no sabía que tuvieras aquí una radio, ¿música aquí?

Basil Valentine miró primero hacia el pie de las escaleras, y no vio más que el inmóvil bulto encorazado. Luego vio a la figura en la pared del fondo, tan inmóvil como el resto de la habitación, y de espaldas a ella, sintonizando la radio, deteniéndose metódicamente a lo largo del torrente que vertía, carcajadas nauseabundas, ráfagas de música, la voz humana agresivamente distorsionada, queda para aconsejar, alta para cantar, sincera para ensalzar absurdidades, un absurdo desfile de devoción de un lado a otro de la escala: un insulso tenor, ampliamente conocido y amado, se enrolló «Noche de paz» a la garganta y se estranguló con ella, dando paso de nuevo a las nauseabundas carcajadas, y luego brotó del norte la *Missa solemnis* de Beethoven, empezó a llenar la habitación y se diluyó en jazz, «When the Saints Go Marching In». La dejó allí, le volvió la espalda y deambuló distraídamente por la habitación, ahora con las manos vacías. «Tú y yo…», dijo acercándose al pie de las escaleras. «Tú y yo… Eras tan condenadamente familiar…».

Una vez allí, postró una rodilla en el suelo e intentó otra vez levantar la visera, pero un momento después desistió, y alzó la mano para mirarse la sangre que la cubría. Luego volvió a mirar a la figura que tenía delante, y dijo en voz baja, jadeando roncamente con algo que sonó como una risa: «*Il sangue?, ti soffoca il sangue?* Oh sí, *ecco un artista*… Dios santo…». Luego miró la figura de arriba abajo, y perdió el equilibrio hacia los pies, donde agarró el tobillo al descubierto y apretó los dedos buscando un latido. «Sí, por aquí clavaban al reyezuelo, por aquí lo clavaban…». Volvió a ponerse de rodillas, mirando de pronto febrilmente la barbilla y la garganta, con la mano apoyada en el peto, hacia donde volvió los ojos y venció todo su peso, apretándolo con el pulpejo de la mano. Se hundió un poco y se combó de nuevo, y él siguió allí apoyado hasta que sus ojos se fijaron en el cortaplumas tirado en la alfombra, al otro lado, y alargó la mano para cogerlo y lo abrió mientras se levantaba. «Sí… ¿qué oportunidad tenías, cuando los hierofantes conspiraban…?». Entonces se alejó. «Dios santo», dijo, dirigiéndose con aire absorto al mueble bar del púlpito, abriendo y cerrando la hoja del cortaplumas entre las manos, mientras seguía sonando la música, «me até de buen grado una cola a la espalda, y bebí lo que me diste, pero maldita sea, allí…». Se detuvo y sirvió una copa de coñac, y con ella en la mano se volvió y paseó la mirada por la habitación. Luego dejó la copa sin llevársela a los labios y dio tres pasos, desapareció tras el púlpito y quedó oculto durante un minuto para Basil Valentine, que estaba donde se había parado, lamiscándose el diente roto con la punta de la lengua y sintiendo una cálida humedad que le empapaba la entrepierna. Esto duró un minuto entero, y Valentine se disponía ya a salir, pero en vez de adelantar el pie lo atrasó cuando volvió a aparecer la figura, guardándose algo en un bolsillo interior y silbando una especie de contralto desacompasado con la música, que interrumpió para decir: «Oh sí, “Te arañaré un poco hasta que veas mal… Pero todo lo que veas parecerá bello y bravo…”».

Entonces echó a correr por la alfombra hacia el bulto tirado en el suelo, gritando: «¡Levántate! ¡Levántate!». Cuando llegó se quedó parado ante él, con el cortaplumas cerrado en el puño y la otra mano encima, temblando, como su voz ahora: «Dios santo, me has… dejado en el aire, es como si… el suelo se hubiera hundido y caído fuera del tiempo». Luego se hincó de rodillas y tiró frenéticamente de la visera, tratando de levantarla. Finalmente se detuvo con aire exhausto, mirando hacia abajo, con la mano inmóvil sobre la barbilla saliente. «¿Y ahora qué…? Dios santo, ¿y ahora qué? Tú y yo… tú y yo, tú… eras tan condenadamente familiar». Se quedó mirando un momento más, y luego, mientras murmuraba «¡Qué lujo eras!» y bajaba la cara cogiendo el casco entre las manos, Basil Valentine se adelantó y llegó rápidamente a su lado. Estaba allí temblando.

—Oye… venga —dijo Valentine, de pie sobre él, sorprendido del temblor de su propia voz, y aún más de la expresión serena de la cara que se alzó hacia él. De modo que se quedaron callados, hasta que Basil Valentine retrocedió medio paso y dijo—: Deberías… ir a lavarte, ¿sabes? Tienes… la mitad de la cara llena de sangre… ¿sabes? —Entonces Valentine dejó de hablar, incapaz de separar la punta de la lengua del diente roto, y no tan consciente de la cara que tenía delante como de la que había dejado minutos antes en el espejo mientras la sonrisa de aquella imagen volvía, y la sentía torciéndole los labios para delatar la

emoción que no sentía, hasta que recuperó la voz y dijo—. Mi querido amigo… estás llorando, claro.

Todo siguió inmóvil.

—Vamos, mi querido amigo, levántate. Es una conmoción, pero…

—¿Quién es usted…?

Basil Valentine se adelantó de nuevo, dando casi en el casco con el pie.

—Ahora escúchame —dijo con firmeza por primera vez—, basta ya de todo este… asunto. —Su tono era impaciente—. ¿No crees que ya es hora de… lavarse, y ponerse ropa limpia, y empezar de nuevo? Porque todo este… todo este…

Valentine levantó el pie y sacudió el casco con la punta, con lo que el otro se levantó rápidamente y se alejó, dejando tirado el cortaplumas en el lugar de la alfombra donde había estado arrodillado.

—Después de todo —dijo a su espalda Valentine—, ahora habrá algunos cambios, ¿no?, sin… ahora que solo quedamos los dos.

—Me duele la cabeza, me… duele horriblemente la cabeza.

Se había parado en medio de la habitación, y Valentine se le acercó mientras se apretaba la frente entre las manos.

—No me extraña nada, ¿sabes? —Basil Valentine le puso una mano suavemente en el hombro, pero él se apartó enseguida. Valentine retrocedió un paso—. Y supongo que deberíamos… llamar a la policía, ¿sabes? —dijo, lamiéndose el labio.

—Probablemente llegarán en cualquier momento.

—¿Qué quieres decir?

—¿Dónde cree que he estado durante todo este tiempo? Dios santo, qué cree que me ha impedido volver enseguida aquí, antes de que esto… esto… —Señaló con una mano temblorosa la escena que tenían detrás —. Después de echar abajo la puerta de su casa, cuando salía…

—¿Has echado abajo la puerta de mi casa?

—Donde el… qué cree que son esos… trozos de… sucia… madera quemada, ese… ¿qué cree que es eso? Yo supe lo que era cuando entré y vi el… vi algo humeando en su chimenea. Supe lo que era, supe lo que había hecho, maldito sea… supe lo que había hecho.

—Ahora escúchame, ¿qué es todo eso? ¿La policía está en mi casa?

—No sé, no sé, no sé dónde está la policía. Sé que dos de ellos me estaban llevando a algún sitio después de eso y me escapé de ellos… y vine aquí. ¿Cómo voy a saber dónde está la policía? Por qué ha de… preocuparme dónde está la policía.

Basil Valentine se había puesto pálido; y ahora se tocó el labio inferior, un golpecito con la punta de un dedo. Luego alzó la vista y dijo con calma:

—En realidad no había ninguna razón para que hicieses una cosa así, ¿sabes? Yo… he estado intentando encontrarte desde… ayer por la mañana, cuando me dejaste en el parque de un modo tan… precipitado.

—¡Claro! Entonces, ¿quién cree que estaba llamando a su timbre hace una o dos horas?

—He estado fuera… algún tiempo —contestó Basil Valentine—. Incluso me he pasado por Horatio Street, ¿sabes?, a buscarte.

—¡Claro! ¿Y qué ha encontrado allí?

—No había nadie, mi querido amigo, obviamente.

—¡No había nadie! Esa sí que es buena… ¡No había nadie! ¿Sabe lo que ha pasado allí? ¿Sabe lo que había pasado cuando volví ayer? Se había quemado. Se había quemado la casa entera, el edificio entero. Debió ser porque… dejé unas cosas quemándose allí, en la chimenea, y había aceite y un montón de cosas tiradas por todas partes, y algo debió… el aceite debió… Dios santo, no lo sé, pero ya no está en pie.

Basil Valentine había retrocedido hasta el púlpito, donde estaba apoyado, observando.

—¿También ese cuadro en el que estabas trabajando, eh? —dijo un momento después—. El último, el que me gustaba tal cómo estaba, ¿eh?

—¿Qué? —La cara se volvió hacia él con confusión desde el vacío ensimismado en el que se había sumido, mirando hacia la alfombra.

—¿*Esa* Stabat Mater?

—¿Ella qué?

—¿También quemada?

—¡Dios santo! ¡Dios santo! No era… ella…

—Vamos, mi querido amigo —dijo Basil Valentine, acercándose de nuevo a él—. Domínate, domínate. —Esta vez le puso las dos manos en los hombros, para decir—: Ambos estamos trastornados, todo esto no tiene ningún sentido ahora, y no hay tiempo para intentar hablar racionalmente de ello. Si la casa se ha

quemado, se ha quemado, y todo lo que había en ella…

—¡Oh sí, y el huevo de grifo, eso estaba allí! Oh, ese huevo de grifo, maldita sea. Por eso fui allí, para cogerlo y ver si podía… —Entonces se interrumpió y volvió a soltarse de las manos de Valentine—. Ese último cuadro —dijo—, el Van der Goes, ¿dónde está?

—Mi querido amigo…

—¿Dónde está?

—Vuelve aquí… escucha…

—Oh sí, está en su cámara privada, claro. Ahí es donde guarda esas cosas, ¿verdad? Sí, ¿en la guenizá?

—Ven aquí, escucha… —Y en aquel momento Basil Valentine se fijó en el cuadro que tenía a la espalda, justo detrás del púlpito—. ¡Qué es esto! ¿Qué ha pasado aquí?

—Eso…

—Venga, deja de reír… esto, ¿esto lo has hecho tú?

Valentine estaba pasando un dedo por el agujero, donde la figura del emperador Valeriano estirado en el potro había sido limpiamente recortada.

—¿Yo? Dios santo no. Crémer, *monsieur* Crémer, *vous savez*…

—Para ya esa maldita risa…

—*Ah oui, qu'il voulait un souvenir, vous savez, un tout petit souvenir de sa vieille connaissance du monde des truqueurs*…

Valentine no contestó, mirando el cuadro dañado bajo su mano. Pasó el dedo por el borde del corte, mientras su lengua pasaba la punta por el diente roto, aunque dejó de hacerlo mientras se volvía, para morderse el labio inferior bajo el lugar roto.

—*Bleu de Prusse, alors, ça ne fait ríen, vous savez, le ciel en bleu de Prusse, retouché simplement, vous savez*… La obra de un restaurador incompetente, *un restaurateur vous savez*…

—¡Ven aquí! Sí, y ahora quieres dañar ese… Van der Goes del mismo modo… ¡Ven aquí!

—Por la misma razón, *vous savez*…

—¡Ven aquí!

Pero Basil Valentine lo siguió hasta la puerta de paneles; y se quedó detrás de él mientras miraba el cuadro colgado allí dentro.

—Esa cara, ésa… Dios santo, esa cara, ¿de dónde ha salido?

—¿La cara? —Valentine lo observó, echando apenas un vistazo al cuadro—, y… ¿qué te parece?

—¡Qué me parece! ¿Qué me parece? Dios santo, no… me parece nada, mírela, es…

—No te gusta, ¿eh? —Valentine se retiró un paso, franqueando la puerta—. Te parece mala, ¿eh?

—¿Mala? No. No, no es mala, es cómica. Es cómica, ¿sabe lo que quiero decir? —preguntó volviéndose hacia Basil Valentine—. Es cómica, es… vulgar —dijo levantando una mano entre ambos.

—Pero tú… para, mi querido amigo, para ya esa risa y sal.

—Por eso es cómica, porque es vulgar, ¿entiende?

—Maldita sea, sal de ahí.

Salió y siguió a Valentine por la habitación, riendo aún.

—¡Oh, y dicen… que yo he deshonrado a la muerte! ¿Ha visto esa cara? —Entonces se detuvo—. ¿De dónde ha salido?

—Mi querido amigo…

—No, dígame quién ha pintado esa cara, dígamelo.

Basil Valentine estaba sacando un cigarrillo, que se puso bajo el labio hinchado.

—Lo hizo tu benefactor —dijo, y señaló hacia el fondo.

—¿Lo hizo *él? ¿Él?*

—Qué crees que era toda esa… tontería de ponerse una armadura, esa…

—¡Oh no! ¡No! ¡No! Lo mismo, sí, oh sí, lo mismo que él quería, pero de la única forma que sabía, pero *tú… tú*…

Basil Valentine notó un sabor a sangre. El papel del cigarrillo le había vuelto a abrir el labio. Seguía apoyado contra el púlpito. Pero no podía volverse como había hecho ante la jaula de la leona: pues los ojos que lo acechaban eran los mismos, sus movimientos los mismos que hacía la leona, acercándose con la cabeza baja, un pie cruzado de un salto sobre el otro, y de nuevo los ojos, clavados en él mientras se acercaba, y no había barrotes entre ellos. La sonrisa rota se extinguió aún naciente en la cara de Valentine, mientras intentaba apretar los labios para detener un débil sonido que brotaba de ellos, iniciando una defensa o alguna propuesta. Luego se enderezó y se apartó un paso del púlpito. Las sombras amenazadoras se habían detenido, la figura se había alejado por la habitación hasta pararse ante la mesa baja, bajo el

tenue resplandor de la chimenea.

—¡Y tú eras el chico! —dijo Valentine con un tono casi pueril por recriminador—. El chico de tu historia, cuyo padre poseía el original, ¿eh? El chico que lo copió, y robó el original, y lo vendió por «casi nada» a… él.

—¡A él! Cómo iba a saberlo, no supe quién lo compró, yo sólo lo vendí. ¡El original! Creía… ¿sabes lo que fue entrar aquí años después y verlo aquí? ¿Esperando, verlo aquí esperándome?, esperando para grabar a fuego esta marca de compromiso definitivo, como si durante todos aquellos años, como si fuera lo que yo creía, en vez de… hasta un crío se daría cuenta, incluso con esta luz…

—Quizá tenías razón durante todo el tiempo —dijo Valentine en voz baja, acercándose.

—¡Pero esto es una copia!

—Por supuesto que lo es. Cuando el viejo conde vendió en secreto su colección, ésta fue una de las copias que mandó hacer.

—¿Y el original?, ¿durante todo este tiempo…?

—Durante todo este tiempo el original ha estado exactamente donde está ahora esta copia. —Basil Valentine se había detenido junto a la mesa, muy cerca de él—. Claro que era el original el que estuvo aquí tanto tiempo, el que tú le vendiste. Y esta copia la conseguí yo mismo en Roma hace apenas un año. ¿Recuerdas el día en que nos conocimos?, ¿aquí mismo, con la mesa por medio? Claro que era la original. Dije que era una copia simplemente para oír cómo la defendías. Sabía que Brown se fiaría de tu criterio. Y sabía que Brown se preocuparía lo bastante para hacer que la volvieran a examinar los «expertos». Le metí la idea en la cabeza simplemente para dejar que la descartara él mismo, de modo que, una vez cambiase las dos, dijera quien dijera que era una copia se reiría de ellos. Acababa de asegurarse por completo, ¿no? ¿Y el original? Va camino de Europa, de vuelta al lugar donde pertenece. Las cambié hace muy poco. ¿Crees que notó la diferencia? —Y Valentine se echó a reír, una risa desdeñosa cortada por una boqueada de dolor al abrírsele el labio.

—¡Sí, gracias a Dios! —Al otro lado de la mesa, la figura aparecía iluminada en los bordes por el resplandor uniforme del fuego—. ¡Gracias a Dios que había que falsificar el oro!

Valentine sonrió con su sonrisa rota, acercándose, y el otro se retiró un paso hacia el fondo de la habitación.

—Y querías que copiase el Patinir, para poder robarlo, para poder robárselo también.

—¡Robar! Míralo, míralo ahí tirado. ¿Robarle a él? Mira… su mano en la alfombra —se estremeció Valentine—. Como un sapo gordo y blando en la alfombra, el feo sapo venenoso con la piedra preciosa en la cabeza, mírala. ¿Manos como ésa, sobre estas cosas hermosas? —Entonces, juntando las manos ante sí como para protegerse, Valentine apretó la muñeca contra el bulto de su cintura. De pronto dio un paso hacia adelante, manteniendo allí el brazo, y dijo—: Escucha…

—¡Dios santo!

—Todo es diferente —dijo Valentine—, todo es diferente ahora, ahora que tú y yo estamos… solos.

—Tú… ¿qué quieres de mí?

—¡Y tú!, ¿qué quieres tú? —le espetó Rasil Valentine, avanzando de nuevo mientras la figura que tenía delante retrocedía de espaldas por la habitación, no tambaleándose, sino dando bandazos, de vuelta hacia las escaleras y el bulto tendido allí—. Sí, tú «¡Por todo lo que es feo!». Y tú, tratándote como a una joya —siguió, elevando la voz—. ¡Tú y tu obra, tu preciosa obra, tu precioso Van der Goes, tu precioso Van Eyck, tu precioso no Van Eyck sino lo que yo quiero! Y tu canciller Rolin, míralo ahí, míralo. Sí, ¿por qué no le pintaste en una *Virgen con Niño y donante?* ¿Crees que es diferente ahora? ¿Que ese carrilludo canciller Rolin no era igual que él? Sí, ¡maldíceme por todo lo que es feo! —siseó Valentine, y cobró aliento—. Vulgaridad, codicia y poder. ¿Es eso lo que te asusta? Es lo único que ves a tu alrededor, ¿y crees que entonces era diferente? Flandes en el siglo XV, ¿crees que era todo igual que *La adoración del cordero místico?* ¿Y qué me dices de las pinturas que nunca hemos visto?, ¿la basura que ha desaparecido? Sólo porque nos quedan unas cuantas obras maestras, ¿crees que eran todas obras maestras? ¿Y qué me dices de las pinturas que nunca hemos visto y nunca veremos?, que eran tan malas como cualquier otra cosa que se haya hecho. Y tu precioso Van Eyck, ¿crees que no vivía hundido hasta el cuello en una corte afectada y vulgar? ¿En un mundo donde todo se hacía por las mismas razones que se hace hoy?, ¿por vanidad y avaricia y lascivia?, ¿y el egoísmo ilimitado de esos cancilleres Rolin? ¿Crees que sabíanla diferencia entre lo que era grotesco y lo que era hermoso?, ¿que su vulgar ostentación no ahogaba la belleza en todas partes, en todas partes?, ¿igual que lo hace hoy? ¡Sí, maldita sea, escúchame ahora y jura por todo lo que es feo! ¿Crees que algún pintor hacía algo que no fuera venderse? Esos bellos retablos, ¿crees que glorifican a alguien que no sea el hombre vulgar que los encargó? ¿Crees que Van Eyck no maldecía tener que prostituir

su genio, tener que malgastar sus talentos en toda suerte de celebraciones vulgares, a merced de gente que odiaba?

La sangre le bañaba el diente roto. Había vuelto la espalda, pero giró de nuevo en redondo, incapaz de detenerse.

—¡Sí, recuerdo tu sermoncito, tu apología disparatada de estos cuadros, cada figura y cada objeto con su propia presencia, su propia conciencia porque Dios lo estaba mirando! ¿Sabes lo que era? ¿Lo que era en realidad?, ¿que todo tema tanto miedo, tantas dudas de que Dios lo viera que reafirmaba su vanidad ante Sus ojos? Miedo, miedo, pesimismo y miedo y desaliento en todas partes, igual que hoy, por eso tus cuadros están tan atestados de detalles, por este terror al vacío, este terror absoluto del espacio. Porque puede que Dios no esté vigilando. Puede que no vea. ¡Oh, ese culto piadoso a la Edad Media! ¡Saberse mirado por Dios! ¿Hay algún momento de fe en cualquiera de esas obras, en algún centímetro de lienzo?, o es vanidad y miedo, la misma decadencia que nos rodea ahora. Una profunda desconfianza de Dios, y necesitan sacar cada idea adonde puedan verla, donde puedan ponerle las manos encima. Tus… detalles —empezó a titubear un poco—, tu Bouts, ¿hubo alguna vez un burgués peor que tu Dierick Bouts?, ¿y sus malditos detalles? ¡Hablarme de conciencia separada, de saberse mirado por Dios, y luego jurar por todo lo que es feo! Hablarme de tus preciosos Van Eycks, y estar orgulloso de estar tan equivocado como ellos, tan equivocado como todos los que los rodeaban, tan equivocado como él. —Y Basil Valentine señaló bruscamente con la mano el bulto roto en el suelo, hacia el que acorralaba la figura que retrocedía ante él —. Separación —dijo con una voz que era casi un susurro—, todo ello atestado de separación, cada cosa encerrada en su propia concha vanidosa, cada cosa separada, aislada de todas las demás. ¡Saberse mirado por Dios! ¿Hay separación en Dios? —terminó Valentine, y volvió a extender la mano, pero más despacio, con menos firmeza, para retirarla en cuanto se alzaron las dos que retrocedían ante él, rompiendo la superficie mientras la voz rompía el silencio que había dejado.

—¿Y ese Van der Goes? ¿Quién le puso la cara? ¿Quién fue incapaz de soportar ese vacío? ¿Quién tuvo que ponerle las manos encima para verlo, eh? Sí, por qué me cuentas todo esto… tú…

—¡Cuidado! —Valentine habló demasiado tarde, y se quedó inmóvil mientras la figura que tenía delante tropezaba con un guantelete y caía otra vez de rodillas junto al bulto tendido entre ambos sobre la alfombra. Parado ante él, Valentine dijo en voz baja—: Porque, mi querido amigo, tú y yo…

—¡Tú y yo qué! ¡Tú y yo qué!

—Porque al fin estamos juntos tú y yo. Y ahora… ¡oye!, ¿qué haces? ¿Qué intentas hacer?

No recibió más respuesta que lo que vio, las manos tirando de nuevo de la visera, la sangre salpicando la rosa bajo la gruesa barbilla y el dorso de una mano contra los dientes desiguales ensangrentados, y el ronco susurro: «Maldita sea… maldita sea…».

—Oye, deja… deja eso en paz.

—Sus ojos, veo sus ojos brillando a través de esta… cosa. ¿Los ves? ¿Los ves?

—Para ya, para…

La visera se abrió de golpe. Y ambos tomaron aliento de pronto, como si aún ahora hubieran esperado ver la cara juvenil de un noble mantuano, y los hubieran engañado, y se vieran burlados por aquella pesada frente todavía húmeda, y los penetrantes ojos saltones con una mirada inalterada por las rápidas interrupciones de la vida.

Basil Valentine volvió a trazar una cruz sobre su pecho, se mordió, ahora de lleno, el labio superior con los dientes hasta que volvió a sangrarle, retrocedió un paso mientras sentía alzarse una oleada de calor húmedo de su entrepierna, vio su mano lanzando un destello de oro ante sí, y debajo una mano sobre la mandíbula inferior, un pulgar cruzado sobre los dientes desiguales ensangrentados, y la otra mano enjugando el sudor de la frente.

—Y ahora… —dijo Valentine.

La mano en movimiento se detuvo, y los ojos se alzaron hacia él.

—Este hombre…

Valentine se inclinó sobre él.

—¿Qué…?

Basil Valentine retrocedió un paso, apoyando todo su peso en un pie; y levantó el otro pie lentamente, hasta que tocó el casco. «Tú estás loco, ¿no…?», y de una patada cerró la visera, y mantuvo allí el pie apretado.

La visera se había cerrado sobre el pulgar que la había abierto, constriñéndolo con fuerza, como vio Valentine, aplastando la blanca falange entre los nudillos, y Valentine no movió más que los ojos, alzándolos hacia los ojos vivaces que ardían en verde mirándolo.

—Pero tú y yo, ahora, tú y yo…

Los ojos verdes no se movieron, y Valentine se retiró lentamente, retiró el pie de la visera cuyo borde solo se movió lo que le obligó el pulgar inmóvil al recuperar su forma, pues el propio pulgar se quedó quieto.

—Sabes… —dijo Valentine, apoyando ahora su peso sobre ambos pies—, todo esto… —Hizo un gesto débil abarcando la habitación—. Tú y yo… —Entonces observó el pulgar retirándose de la boca rota, y aquella mano dejando un rastro de sangre fresca sobre el peto—. Tú y yo… escucha. Escucha… —Valentine intentó sonreír, y al instante sintió volver la imagen que había dejado en el espejo para parodiar los fríos rasgos de su cara, que tan bien había aprendido a usar y en los que tanto había confiado—. Escucha… —dijo, observando cómo buscaba la mano entre las rosas, y detenía la punta de los dedos sobre el cortaplumas—. Escúchame. Tú y yo, ahora, no será… lo que… no será vulgar… no será vulgar —repitió, retrocediendo medio paso, observando cómo se separaba la otra mano de la visera entreabierta, y al ver juntarse las manos sobre el cortaplumas se llevó la suya a la cintura, pero la dejó allí inerte sobre el bulto —. Porque tú eres… parte de mí… maldito seas, maldito seas, maldito seas —gritó, llevándose las manos a la cara mientras la corta hoja le apuñalaba una vez, y otra vez, y otra vez, dirigida cada vez hacia lo alto de su pecho, y perdió el equilibrio, y se golpeó la cabeza contra el bolo de la escalera, y cayó.

Se oyó un grito, ¿o fue un gañido?, procedente de la cocina. Y allí Fuller se acercó al fregadero, con paso no muy firme, y se lavó las manos. Luego lavó el cuchillo de carnicero y lo secó con un paño, dejó caer el paño en un cesto y puso el cuchillo de carnicero en su estante, y luego agarró las dos maletas de cartón que había estado atando con cuerda durante todo este rato. Apagó la luz de la cocina inclinándose y apretando el interruptor con el hombro, y apareció en el gran salón con un bulto en cada mano.

—¡Usted, señor!

—¡Fuller…! Yo…

—Pero ¿qué ocurre, señor? —Los bultos de Fuller cayeron al suelo—. ¿Y el señor Valentine, señor?

—Sí, sí, yo… acabo de enseñarle la lección… la única lección que pueden enseñar los dioses, sí…

—Pero usted, señor, ¿ileso?

—¿Yo? Dios santo sí, yo… estoy tan sano como el día en que nací. ¡Oye! ¡Oye…! No te acerques ahí, no lo toques.

—Pero quizá el señor Valentine corra peligro de recuperarse, señor.

—Pero… no, no lo toques. Nunca se sabe lo que pueden… tener en el pelo. —Entonces se echó a reír—. ¿Y tú, Fuller?, ¿te vas de vacaciones, Fuller?

—Sí señor. Al lugar del que provengo, señor, después de todos los años de cautiverio. —Entonces Fuller se apartó de las maletas, hacia las que había vuelto, diciendo—: Me viene algo en mente. —Se acercó a un armario y sacó una caja plana y alargada de madera de cedro. La abrió, pasó una mano por encima, la sostuvo en alto y olió su contenido, y la cerró de nuevo. Al volver por la alfombra, evitando pisar las rosas, Fuller tenía en la cara una expresión de satisfacción culpable. Pero se detuvo a alzar la vista y decir—: ¿Qué pasa, señor?

Fuller no recibió uña respuesta inmediata, y se quedó mirando cómo forzaba el faldar que cubría las gruesas nalgas, para meter una mano en un bolsillo del pantalón y sacar un fajo de billetes húmedos. Luego se inclinó sobre la mano extendida a sus pies. Fuller estaba ahora a su lado, y ambos se quedaron mirando los diamantes hundidos en la carne del dedo.

—Señor… —vaciló Fuller—, he llegado a creer que los diamantes crecieron ahí, y han perdido su brillo a mis ojos. —Luego volvió la cara contra su voluntad hacia aquellos que le miraban desde la alfombra—. También los ojos —dijo, y se sacudió por última vez aquel yugo—, los ojos parecen los de esa perra negra un día que le tomaron la temperatura.

—¡Dios santo!

—¿Señor?

Al alzar la vista, Fuller le vio abriendo la chaqueta del esmoquin y hurgando en la cintura. La pistola cayó sobre la alfombra, y se quedó allí parado, enjugándose la frente, antes de meter la mano y sacar la cartera; después cogió la pistola y se guardó ambas en los bolsillos.

Fuller volvió hacia sus maletas. «Parece que voy a disfrutar el legado de unos puros excelentes», dijo, alzando la caja plana de cedro, incapaz de resistir la tentación de abrirla una rendija lo bastante ancha para mirar dentro y oler su contenido. Entonces cesó el cencerreo distante de la radio, y Fuller observó cómo cruzaba lentamente la alfombra, terminándose el coñac que se había servido antes. Se quedó mirando en silencio la tabla pintada de la mesa, el contorno de su figura inmóvil ante el fuego hasta que el movimiento de un brazo lo alteró, y la copa vacía se estrelló contra los leños ardientes. Entonces se puso en movimiento

la figura entera, quitando el cristal que cubría la mesa, aplastando con el pie su superficie, rompiendo la tabla pintada en pedazos lo bastante pequeños para arrojarlos al fuego, mientras susurraba: «Cave, caveat emptor, Dominus videt, ¡Cristo!, ¡el original…!»,un susurro quebrado por carcajadas, «¡sí, gracias a Dios que había que falsificar el oro!».

Todo ello fue cosa de momentos, y volvió a quedarse inmóvil ante el fuego. Las llamas se elevaban y agitaban mansamente más allá de su perfil, prestándole un contorno radiante y dejando en sombra las facciones, e imperceptibles los rastros de sangre.

Fuller observaba. Se aclaró la garganta, pero no interrumpió. El fuego se elevó con ásperos chasquidos de insistencia y súbitas llamaradas que arrojaban sombras más largas, y Fuller se movió como una de ellas hacia su equipaje, hablando en voz baja: «Hace ya tanto tiempo que me dijo que iba a convertirme de hombre negro en blanco…». Agarró sus bultos y se puso la caja de puros bajo un brazo. «Evidencia del gran poder que me custodia, que no haya podido realizar su designio». Y tras esperar un momento, bien erguido, Fuller se encaminó hacia la puerta sin echar otra mirada al gran salón, sin duda se sobresaltó al pasar ante el retrato de juventud, y saliendo al vestíbulo se descargó brevemente para coger su sombrero del armarito de paneles. Sombrero en mano se detuvo, preparándose para romper el silencio que le caía encima con su voz en despedida quizá, cuando un ruido metálico rompió el silencio, y Fuller recogió rápidamente sus bultos, azorado por la posibilidad de escuchar a escondidas una intimidad que por primera vez comprendió, al oír ahora:

—¡Dios santo!, ¡qué lujo eras!

Una vez en la calle, Fuller esperó. Se quedó parado, respirando a pleno pulmón. Luego, cuando la puerta se abrió y se cerró de nuevo a su espalda, habló sin volverse, mirando al cielo:

—Parece que la luna nos está esperando para iluminarnos el camino…

—¿La luna?, ¿la luna?, ¿dónde…?

Ambos escudriñaron el cielo en su busca.

—Hace un momento… —empezó Fuller.

—Ah, pero no importa, cuando nos haga falta, bueno, con hechizos, sí, los hechizos pueden hacerla bajar… Fuller, oye, escucha, este dinero. ¿Quieres coger algo? No sé cuánto hay, pero ¿adónde vas ahora?

—Primero debo buscar un teléfono para informar a un amigo del estado en que dejamos a esos dos, a fin de requerir sus servicios profesionales. Después estimo aconsejable por muchas razones huir de esta vecindad. ¿Y usted, señor?

—Sí, irse. Irse, pero primero, aunque… no haya salido como creía que iba a salir, pero ha salido, tenía su propio plan. Sí, irse, adonde. Pero primero tengo que ir a por ella, ¿entiendes?, lo entenderías, adonde he estado todo este tiempo. ¿Fuller?, ¿el dinero…?

—Oh, no, señor —empezó a alejarse Fuller, mientras una pálida franja de luz amarilleaba la de las farolas que le caía encima de lleno—. Estoy suficientemente provisto de momento —y con una sonrisa su lengua rosada se refugió delicada y arriesgadamente en la oscuridad de su mazmorra, mientras cerraba el rastrillo dorado de sus dientes.

La luna y otras brillantes ampollas del cielo habían desaparecido. Había empezado a nevar otra vez cuando el taxi entró en Central Park, y el conductor alzó la vista hacia su espejo para ver a la figura hundida en el asiento trasero incorporarse de pronto ante la aparición de los árboles y mirar hacia fuera, como alarmado e inseguro de dónde estaba en aquel bosque oscuro, hasta que salieron de él.

El taxi patinó en el fango de nieve y se detuvo, y el conductor giró en redondo en su asiento. «Mire, amigo, llevamos ya una hora dando vueltas, y ya le dije hace una hora que no se puede entrar en el Bellevue a estas horas de la noche a menos que te hayan cortado el cuello o algo así. ¿No tiene una casa en algún sitio adonde quiera ir? ¿No tiene alguna tía a la que pueda visitar? Pues yo no puedo perderme todas las carreras del Astoria, porque… ¿qué? ¿Ahora quiere volver al centro? Horario Street, eso está por el West Side, ¿no? Vale, es la última vez; iremos allí, pero es la última vez».

Arriba, las ventanas estaban iluminadas, y de cuando en cuando bloqueadas por caras poco curiosas que miraban al frente sólo por no mirar hacia atrás, y también ella estaba vuelta de espaldas a aquella habitación de desvaída elegancia eduardiana, inmóvil, ajena al montón de papeles esparcidos por la alfombra en torno a sus pies. La carta que tenía bajo el pie izquierdo, empezaba: «Ya le he escrito varias veces, y usted no me ha contestado…», y sus líneas estaban corridas donde se había derramado una copa.

Miraba fijamente el abismo oscuro que se abría bajo su alta ventana, incapaz de distinguir sus profundidades a la luz hiriente que enmarcaba su figura, y volviéndose, el aire tan lentamente aspirado fue expelido con decisión mientras cruzaba la alfombra sembrada de papeles. Un momento después, la pluma trazaba líneas verticales de violenta indignación: «Estimado doctor Weisgall. Quizá le interese saber que mi madre y el papa…».

Más abajo, en aquel helado caos concéntrico, caía incesante la nieve en copos aguanosos. El viento bramaba luchando consigo mismo en el oscuro solar lleno de escombros donde había estado el edificio, y al volverse, resbalando otra vez en la nieve fangosa, vio luces rojas suspendidas a lo lejos en la acera de enfrente, cerca de la esquina. Para llegar al bar tuvo que rodear dando traspiés el borde oscuro de un charco, y una vez allí se vio obligado aún a esperar en la puerta, pues tenía la entrada bloqueada por dos barriles de cerveza que hacían rodar en direcciones opuestas, y que se encontraron allí de frente mientras el propietario y el camarero se maldecían mutuamente y los hacían rodar de nuevo hacia atrás. Entró murmurando, se palpó el paquete abultado que llevaba dentro de la chaqueta, y pidió una copa. Alguien pidió una ronda para todos. El lugar era hediondo, el suelo estaba mojado y listado de cosas derramadas, y había un desagüe atascado tras la puerta del servicio de caballeros. Una pequeña figura que apretaba un inmundo billete de un dólar clavó en él una mirada estrábica. Bebió, respirando por la boca para evitar el olor, y estaba intentando contar los bordes de los billetes que le asomaban del bolsillo interior cuando empezó una pelea y se apartó, despacio por miedo a verse involucrado en su cólera salpicada de lodo, mientras arremetían ferozmente el uno contra el otro con manos y pies y una cabeza a modo de ariete que estuvo a punto de derribarlo antes de que ganara de nuevo la oscuridad y la calle bañada de rojo, como consumida por una llama húmeda. La disputa salió tras él, mientras se disponía a cruzar el lago oscuro.

—Mira, Leroy…

—Esta ciudad…

—Leroy…

—Esta

Al otro lado del abismo, el espejo reflejaba una cruda realidad brillantemente iluminada, que incluía en la inmediata vecindad a dos borrachos enzarzados en una conversación. Uno de ellos, que hablaba con la cara torcida, reculó y dio un pisotón al señor Pivner, obligándole a acercarse un poco más a su acompañante, al que robaba miradas cada dos por tres en el espejo de detrás de la barra.

—¿Sabes lo que soy yo? —preguntó el borracho del fondo. Estaban disfrutando muchísimo de su discusión; cada uno encontraba al otro inteligente, ingenioso y, en suma, un buen compañero, pues ninguno de los dos escuchaba lo que decía el otro—. Soy enfermero.

—Bueno, yo digo que cualquiera puede ganar un millón de dólares. Lo único que hay que hacer es empezar a pensar de ese modo, y si sigues así, si sigues así sin parar, caes en el hábito y no puedes evitarlo.

—Bueno, déjame contarte lo que hemos tenido hoy. Hemos tenido una c.a., ¿sabes lo que es eso?

—Al cabo de un tiempo no puedes evitarlo, no puedes evitar ganar un millón de dólares. ¿Sabes lo que soy yo? Soy adivino. Manos, cartas, sé leer cualquier cosa.

El señor Pivner se había quitado el sombrero mojado cuando entraron, había mirado a su alrededor y se lo había vuelto a poner. Se sentía bien, aunque un poco mareado. Su conversación no era atropellada, respondía con bastante presteza, pero se encontraba siempre muy retrasado: mientras escuchaba, incluso mientras hablaba, estaba aún examinando las palabras de dos o tres frases antes. Mientras hablaba: «Bueno, ¿qué estás estudiando ahora…?», seguía aún sopesando su azorado saludo cuando se habían encontrado en la calle: «Iba hacia casa, pero bueno, no, no, en realidad no tengo prisa». Mientras escuchaba: «Todavía no estoy estudiando nada en particular. Es bastante caro ir a la escuela nocturna, más que nada son los libros los que se tragan el dinero, le sorprendería cuánto cuestan. Sobre todo son libros de ciencia, es lo que más me interesa…», seguía aún saboreando: «Feliz Navidad, hey, me alegro de verle, señor. Iba nada más a la misa de medianoche…». Saboreando otra vez: «Me alegro de verle, señor…», se lamió los labios, y miró hacia el espejo.

—Esa c. a. del hospital, nunca has visto nada parecido.

—Como un amigo mío, se va a casar, como le predije que iba a hacer. Se va a casar mañana, el día de Navidad. Se estaba jodiendo a modo a esa chiquilla del Bronx, y le predije que se iba a tener que casar con ella.

—Ahora déjame describirte qué es una c. a.

—En cierto modo podría decirse que es un tipo con suerte, en cierto modo podría decirse que quizá sea

una buena cosa. Una cosa como ésa, cuando la vas retrasando, al cabo de un tiempo empieza a asustarte, pero si te ocurre pronto como a ese tipo, entonces ya estás liado, y no notas la diferencia, caes en el hábito y no puedes evitarlo. Como yo le predije, le predije, caes en el hábito y no puedes evitarlo. —Y dando un paso hacia atrás, el adivino hundió un codo en las costillas que tenía a la espalda.

Había ya cierto parecido entre sus narices, ésa era la revelación del espejo; y si era negativa, es decir, si ni la suya ni la que señalaba la cara chupada tan próxima a la suya eran en modo alguno excepcionales, no había tiempo para semejante aprensión: todavía parecía estar ocurriendo demasiado deprisa. Se oía hablando con la reserva cordial que había preparado mentalmente para las primeras conversaciones con su hijo; pero era una conversación que había previsto con tal detalle, con tantos ensayos, que ahora protegía con mimo cada hilo y cada giro, para no perderlos en la mutabilidad de un intercambio fortuito, sino retenerlos: sí, pues en aquel instante lo cierto era que la duda perduraba en la realidad presente, que esta realidad apremiaba la duda, un transeúnte sin rasgos distintivos hasta que ahora recibía tan bruscamente una esencia y un egoísmo carnal propios. Mientras hablaba: «Pero lo que quiero decir es si te gustaría… quiero decir que me gustaría comprarte esos libros, porque si puedo… si tú y yo…». El labio se le empezó a crispar, pero en lugar de volver la cabeza, como habría hecho por regla general, el señor Pivner miró de frente a la cara de Eddie Zefnic. «Creo que podremos arreglarlo», dijo. Sonrió, y el labio dejó de crisparse.

—Pero, hey, señor Pivner…

—Y escucha, Eddie. Mira, Eddie, tengo algo aquí que quiero regalarte. Quizá no parezca… pero hoy es Nochebuena y, toma, por favor, creo que deberías quedarte con él.

—No te puedes imaginar el follón que se ha armado, pero hay que esperarse eso con una c. a.

—Así que ha ocurrido tal como le predije, hay ciertas cosas de las que uno no puede escapar.

—¡Pero hey…! ¿Un reloj?, ¿y es de oro? ¿Un reloj de oro?

—Creo que deberías quedarte con él, porque…

—¡Pero hey!, señor. Y, hey, mire, son casi las doce. ¿No quiere venir a misa conmigo?

—Pero no creo que supiera lo que hay que hacer.

—Pero si está conmigo…

—Es eso o la religión.

—O ayudar a hacer una c. a.

—Sí, si estoy contigo…

Y el señor Pivner se sonó la nariz. Había estado a punto de dar las gracias a Eddie Zefnic por la bata.

Otto dobló una esquina, caminando por el bordillo como si estuviera al borde de un abismo, la espalda vuelta al río cuyo viento lo perseguía, momentáneamente deslumbrado por el fuego cuando se encontró un volquete de asfalto en medio de la calle señalizado con lámparas de queroseno. La nieve se había transformado en nevisca, luego en lluvia, y había cesado; pero tenía mojado el abrigo, y le colgaba de los hombros pesado como el plomo.

—¡Otto…!

Stanley apareció como surgido de un afloramiento de la calzada. Tiritaba, tenía los ojos rojos y su bigote parecía torcido.

—Stanley, ¿adónde vas…?

—Otto, ¿por qué hiciste eso? ¿Lo sabías?, ¿lo sabías?

—¿Qué, qué, si sabía qué?

—He estado detenido todo este tiempo, he estado en la comisaría desde la última vez que te vi.

—Pero ¿qué?, ¿por qué?, ¿qué ha pasado?

—Y la policía, ¿sabes cómo es la policía?, como máquinas, están tan aburridos, no escuchan, no saben quién eres, pero no puedes hacer nada, no puedes hacer nada…

—Pero ¿qué ha sido?, ¿qué ha pasado?

—¿No lo sabías? Ese dinero que me diste, ¿no lo sabías? El dinero que me prestaste, ese billete de veinte dólares, ¿no sabías que no era bueno?

—¿Que no era bueno…?

—¿Que era falso?

—¿Falso?

—Si no lo sabías, gracias a Dios si no lo sabías. No debería haber pensado lo que pensé, no debería haber pensado que me harías eso, lo siento, perdóname, perdóname por pensar eso de ti.

—Pero no… —susurró Otto—. No. No, no todo ese…

—Lo siento, perdóname, te lo devolveré. Perdóname, Otto. Ahora tengo que irme.

—Pero espera, espera espera espera…

—No puedo quedarme, me duele una muela, me lleva doliendo todo el día, tengo que irme, ahora tengo que ir a la misa de medianoche, y luego tengo que ir a ver a mi madre, la han trasladado hoy a otro hospital y se estará preguntando dónde me he metido, y además creo que la policía podría…

—¿La policía, qué les dijiste?

—¿Sobre el dinero? Dije que no sabía, les dije que no sabía de dónde lo había sacado, no sé si me creyeron, se te quedan mirando sin más, quizá me estén siguiendo, no lo sé, pero ya no importa, y perdóname, te lo devolveré…

—Pero no —susurró Otto.

—¿Qué pasa? Tengo que irme, ¿quieres venir conmigo ahora? ¿Quieres venir a misa conmigo?

—No. No. —Otto se pasó la mano por la frente, luego la dejó caer sobre el peso abultado de su chaqueta —. Él no podría haber hecho eso…

—Buenas noches, buenas noches… y te lo devolveré…

El viento que soplaba por detrás puso de punta el pelo de Otto, y arrastró ante él un cubo de basura vacío, haciéndolo saltar sobre manchas de nieve, resonar huecamente sobre tramos pelados de pavimento, hasta que se lo hizo perder de vista arrojándolo entre las sombras mutiladas cuando dobló la esquina de la calle de ella y vio que no estaba solo. Dio un fuerte grito, aunque la otra figura estaba muy cerca de él: ambos se detuvieron antes del encuentro, pero Otto se adelantó al instante.

—Gracias a Dios que estás aquí, después de todo el… todo lo que ha ocurrido, y ahora… Sí, todo se arreglará ahora. Te he estado buscando, te he estado buscando por todas partes, acabo de pasar a buscarte por Horatio Street pero no había nada allí, todo el edificio se ha quemado, y debería haber venido aquí, debería haber venido aquí primero en cualquier caso, claro, porque tú la conocías, y ella… tú…

—¿Dónde está?

—¿Dónde está?, bueno, ella… ella… ¿por qué? Oye, ¿por qué me miras de ese modo? ¿Y qué te ha pasado?, tu cara, ¿qué es?, ¿es sangre eso que tienes en la cara?

—¿Dónde está?

—¿Sólo la estás buscando a ella? Entonces, ¿es… por ella por lo que has venido? —Sus brazos se movían en la oscuridad como si apenas pudiera mantenerse erguido en la densa tiniebla que parecía haberlos envuelto—. ¡Pero yo he estado buscándote a ti! —exclamó. Y luego perdió el equilibrio sobre el hielo, al retroceder un paso para apartarse de los ojos que le habían atravesado y vaciado su cara—. Y ella… —logró decir, recuperando el equilibrio con otro paso atrás—, no lo sé. No sé dónde está —dijo, y lo repitió lentamente, pero con la misma claridad—: No sé dónde está… —vaciló, y se quedó quieto. Y cuando alzó los ojos, mirando al este hacia el hospital, estaba solo en la calle. El viento había amainado, y el frío inmóvil era insoportable. Se quedó allí entumecido, rodeado de hielo, entre los gigantes helados de los edificios, como si al arriesgar un paso fuera a verse arrojado de cabeza a una noche sin esperanza de amanecer ni revelación alguna de la presencia triunfal del cielo en las estrellas.

IX

«Viciste, Galilæe».

JULIANO, últimas palabras

El sol salió a las siete, y su luz se reflejó en el gallo de la veleta que coronaba el campanario de la iglesia, lo epifanizó allí arriba sobre el pueblo como un gallo de fuego surgido de sus cenizas. En la falsa aurora, el sol había preparado al cielo para su aparición: pero la luna con cuernos flotaba todavía confiada al borde de la tierra, antes de la llamarada que se alzaría tras ella para extinguir la fría calma de su reinado.

Abrazados por la luz del día, los objetos se erguían para afirmar sus identidades separadas, mientras el sol naciente rescataba a los aldeanos de la armonía palpitante de la noche, y extendía el mundo a sus pies para que pudieran ponerle la mano encima y abordarlo una vez más en términos razonables. Las formas recobraban la distancia cabal entre sí, volviéndose distintas en color y extensión, retraídas y autosuficientes, cada una entidad porque no era, y a la luz del día no podía confundirse con ni ser parte de, ninguna otra cosa. Se abrían los ojos, se miraban las cosas y, en suma, se restauraba la propiedad.

Sin embargo, a los que respiraban aquí y allá dejando ahora llegar el aire con un sabor consciente a todas sus partes sensibles, mientras la luz del día reinvestía de significado el decorado exterior, es decir, con la enojosa seguridad de que si no pertenecía a uno mismo al menos pertenecía a otro, aquí y allá se les cortó bruscamente la respiración cuando sus oídos sintieron dar la hora, los sonidos trabaron su atención y se quedaron así, más inquietos a cada repetición mientras la campana de la iglesia repicaba en séptimas, un tono irresuelto que ponía alerta los nervios auditivos, un cencerreo, un tono discordante que dejaba los labios abiertos en *aaa-*, repitiendo *aaa-,* confirmando desesperadamente siete veces aquel irresoluto *aaa-* y abandonándolo ahí, incompleto al final, esperando aún su resolución hímnica en aaa-*mén.*

Entonces, varios vecinos del pueblo se acordaron de su sacristán, consideraron lo que podía saber de campanas en general, y cómo podría ingeniárselas para arreglar aquélla en particular; luego, considerando que probablemente habría tenido algo ingenioso que ver en primer lugar con su puesta en aquel estado, fruncieron los labios e intentaron, con admirable fortaleza puritana, borrarle de su mente hasta que llegara la hora en que se viera liberado de la estrafalaria maraña de su envoltura mortal, calculando, con toda lógica, que no sería una hora muy lejana, confiando, con toda caridad, en que ganase aquella carrera (pues llegar antes que él a aquella meta gloriosa supondría ser enterrado por sus manos), e ignorando aún, con toda su buena fe, que aquel rescate se había realizado ya, con toda la intrépida serenidad implícita en la reputación de orden que tenía el Rescatador, a oscuras y en silencio: sin sospechar siquiera semejante cosa, y menos aún con aquel laborioso martilleo y tableteo que salía de la iglesia desde el alba del día anterior, mientras estaban ahora allí parados, escuchando, con los labios apretados ante sus ventanas, y aquí y allá posaban los ojos en la mole todavía en sombra del Monte de la Lamentación, y en el paisaje todavía incumplido de la Navidad.

Aquí y allá volvían la cabeza, para confirmar calladamente aquella celebrada rúbrica en el calendario.

Es verdad que, cuando acabó aquel día señalado, y su abundancia de hechos y detalles fue podada e injertada, adornada, y una vez dorada y castrada fue enterrada en aquellos pudrideros privados llamados memorias, donde, tras reordenar las cosas y hacer un poco de limpieza, se sentaban los vecinos del pueblo entre los cadáveres del pasado, inhalando, y esperando; es verdad que, cuando se restableció la paz aquella noche, y no hubo más ocasiones apropiadas para la enérgica intervención de lo que describían, con alivio unánime, como la mano de Dios; es verdad, en fin, que hacia las ocho de aquella noche, cuando hasta la mano de Dios se dispuso a retirarse decorosamente, algunos de los más exóticos relatos del suceso principal del día, crónicas expoliadas de los diversos epifenómenos y muestras escogidas entre los recuerdos de los pudrideros más ruinosos, habían ocultado ya sus fuentes, y ganado crédito con el uso.

Respecto al propio reverendo, por ejemplo, hacia el mediodía se rumoreó que una vez había viajado por Italia, y hacia la una se aceptó que se había detenido en Roma; hacia las dos se rumoreó que en España había ingresado como novicio en un monasterio cartujano, y hacia las tres se confirmó; hacia las cuatro, que, una vez se había vestido con harapos, había alquilado tres críos lastimeros y aparecido en estado de mendicante colapso ante las escaleras del hotel Ritz de Madrid; hacia las cinco, que había invitado a beber a la ciudad entera de Málaga, y conducido a su población masculina a una caminata experimental hacia

África a través del mar, buscando a Aquel que les haría cruzarlo a pie enjuto; hacia las seis, que en realidad se había casado con una arpía canosa con ajorcas en las orejas, se había proclamado heredero del trono de Abderramán y había encabezado una insurrección de los moros de Córdoba; hacia las siete había ya una veintena de personas que lo habían visto en el tejado de la iglesia a media mañana del día anterior; y hacia las ocho, hasta el cuento que contaba un tipo intragable (cuya actitud general hacia la vida aparecía esbozada en un tatuaje de su antebrazo derecho, y al que nunca se había visto en ningún centro sufragado por la comunidad a excepción de la comisaría, y mucho menos en la iglesia), un cuento según el cual aquella misma mañana el reverendo había sido visto en cueros fuera de casa, aunque dentro de los confines de sus céspedes y prados, un cuento que habría acabado aquella noche bajo la cornamenta de doce puntas del ciervo de la Taberna de la Estación de no haber sido por el suceso principal del día, o si el ciervo hubiera sobrevivido, o, ciertamente, si la propia Taberna de la Estación hubiera quedado en pie, pues hacia las ocho incluso este cuento se había abierto camino hasta varios salones respetables, un relato rococó, adornado a esa hora con elementos de los que muchos sospechaban ya que podían ser verdad.

Este tipo contó que volvía a casa (y algunos sospecharon por eso desde el principio, pues se sabía por su ficha policial que no tenía «domicilio fijo») del trabajo, según denominaba a los períodos nocturnos que pasaba durmiendo la mona en las obras abandonadas del puente, cuando, como hacía cada mañana, pasó junto a la casa del párroco, donde se había acostumbrado al espectáculo reconfortante del reverendo saludando a la aurora desde el porche delantero, con vehemencia creciente, según parecía, a medida que las recientes auroras coincidían con el final de la jornada laboral. Aquella mañana, sin embargo, y a pesar de la hermosa salida del sol, el reverendo no estaba en su puesto. El vigilante nocturno siguió contando cómo, al mirar atrás por encima del hombro cuando bajaba la colina, distinguió lo que parecía ser una figura imponentemente grande y blanca en las ramas de un árbol, abajo junto a la cochera, al pie del césped trasero. Se detuvo, de modo muy comprensible, a esperar el desarrollo de los acontecimientos, como también parecía estar haciendo la figura del árbol; y al cabo de un minuto apareció en el prado de abajo el toro negro. El toro fue identificado con bastante presteza; pero fue aquí donde la historia del tipo cobró tales proporciones que la credulidad tuvo que hacer un gran esfuerzo, incluso entre aquellos lo bastante ofendidos por los hechos subsiguientes, o heridos en la prueba de fuerza que tuvo lugar antes de que acabara la mañana, para aceptar cada palabra, pues el tipo detalló una caza y captura de tan heroica envergadura que solo unos pocos aquí y allá, cuya pagana curiosidad de juventud les había introducido en el comercio con los mitos, pudieron evocar imágenes para aproximarse a su descripción, y ninguno pudo igualarla. Pues una vez cogido por el cuello, momento en el que los pies del apresador, según admitió, se despegaron del suelo, dijo que el toro fue derribado; y cuanto más avanzaba el día, y más le daban de beber, más vocingleramente juraba este tipo que había visto al toro llevado a hombros, y luego arrastrado, por sus cuartos traseros, fuera de su vista, césped arriba hacia la casa del párroco.

Con contumelias disfrazadas de caridad por un lado, y caridad brindada como indiferencia por el otro, los feligreses y los parroquianos de la Taberna de la Estación se soportaban entre sí a distancia, mutuamente exclusivos, por no decir, hasta aquel día, apartados (pues hacia mediodía unos cuantos habían cruzado la línea en ambas direcciones). Y así, aunque unos cuantos de los reunidos aquella mañana ante la iglesia mostraban expresiones de inquietud, con los nervios de punta por la campana que llevaba repicando la hora en irresolutas séptimas desde el alba, y que seguía aún convocándoles al culto de la misma jadeante manera, ninguno estaba preparado para nada que se saliera de lo que, en tiempos extraordinarios, se llama lo ordinario. De todo el grupo de niños sobriamente vestidos y adultos sombríamente vestidos, entre los que aquí y allá bajo el brillante sol se oía una voz como címbalo tintineante, y otra que sonaba a cobre, ninguno llegó siquiera a advertir desde fuera que las vidrieras romboidales estaban tapadas con tablas por dentro; y ninguno estaba preparado, al entrar, para afrontar el aspecto del interior de la iglesia, aunque durante unos minutos fue difícil saber quién entraba y quién salía mientras bloqueaban la puerta describiendo el lugar oscurecido, la disposición de las bancas (pues más tarde se comprobó que algunos de los bancos habían sido reducidos a tan modestas proporciones), el altar corrido hacia el centro de la nave y coronado por la figura dorada de un toro, sobre la que caía de lleno un rayo de sol. Todavía fuera, una mujer pálida que nunca usaba perfume, y que por eso era sumamente sensible a tales cosas, creyó oler incienso. Y alguien notó incluso la desaparición de la placa de bronce que honraba amorosamente la memoria de John H. (un objeto nunca recuperado y, hasta la fecha, nunca sustituido).

—*Natalis Invicti Solis*…

Un hombre corpulento (resultó ser, a la luz del día, el comandante de la brigada local de la Legión Americana) se había encaramado a una vidriera y empezaba a desclavar una tabla, pero perdió el equilibrio al oírse aquella voz severa y sin embargo dulce.

—El nacimiento del Sol Invicto… Estamos aquí reunidos en la cueva del mundo ante el nacido de la Roca, el tallado en la Roca sin manos humanas, a la vista de los pastores que presenciaron su nacimiento, cuyo nombre significa «amigo», y «mediador», que trae alivio del pecado, y esperanza más allá de la tumba… y ofrece el renacimiento del Sol en prenda y promesa del suyo propio…

Algunos intentaban salir, y otros entrar; pero fuera cual fuera la nueva disposición del oscuro interior, cada vez resultaba más evidente que sólo podría dar cabida a cincuenta o sesenta como mucho, y eso si estaban familiarizados con la colocación trilateral de las bancas.

—*Transitus dei*… el toro yace herido de muerte… y del toro moribundo brota la simiente del mundo…

Posiblemente fue la autoridad familiar de la voz lo que les mantuvo en silencio al principio, parados en posturas torcidas y dejándose caer en las bancas aquí y allá.

—*Cultores Solis Invicti Mithrae*… aquí reunidos los cansados de las religiones de las ciudades, las religiones que se predican en las ciudades y no se practican en ninguna parte, los pálidos y exhaustos, los asustados y olvidados, venid ante el que premia los actos de piedad más que los actos de valor, el Señor de los Ejércitos, el Dios de la Verdad…

Alguien dijo después que la voz se interrumpió y se elevó de nuevo como el lento penacho de humo de un buque al pasar bajo un puente fluvial.

—Sacrificamos a Mitra, el señor de los vastos pastizales, que tiene mil oídos y diez mil ojos, un Dios invocado por su propio nombre.

—Sacrificamos a Mitra, el señor de los vastos pastizales, que dice la verdad, un jefe en las asambleas, con mil oídos, bien formado, con diez mil ojos, alto, omnisciente, fuerte, vigilante, siempre despierto.

—Sacrificamos a Mitra, el señor de todas las naciones… sacrificamos al sol imperecedero, radiante, alígero.

—Por su esplendor y su gloria le he ofrecido un sacrificio digno de oírse, a Mitra, el señor de los vastos pastizales.

Después alguien dijo que aquí la voz se extinguió y volvió a elevarse como el humo de un tren al entrar y salir de un túnel.

—Venga a nosotros su ayuda. Venga a nosotros su alivio. Venga a nosotros su alegría. Venga a nosotros su misericordia. Venga a nosotros su salud. Venga a nosotros su victoria. Venga a nosotros su buena conciencia. Venga a nosotros su gozo. Él, el terrible y dominador, digno de sacrificio y plegaria, inmune al engaño en todo el mundo material, Mitra, el señor de los vastos pastizales.

Pero para entonces, el sonido que acechaba entre ellos como un sonido entre piedras, llenando la caverna a sus espaldas, empezó a volver con un murmullo.

—En cualquier lado donde haya sido adorado primero con la plenitud de fe de un corazón devoto, hacia ese lado se vuelve Mitra, el señor de los vastos pastizales, con el viento que azota a los demonios, con el pensamiento flagelador de los sabios.

El murmullo se elevó, con el sonido de un eco brotando de una sima, y empezó a desintegrarse en voces aisladas. Alguien dijo: «Venga, agarradlo de una vez…».

—Con un sacrificio en el que se te invoca por tu propio nombre, con las palabras debidas, yo te ofrezco tres libaciones, oh muy benéfico Mitra. Aunque los malos pensamientos del hombre terrenal fueran cien veces peores, no se elevarían tan alto como los buenos pensamientos del celestial Mitra.

—Cuidado, cálmese… vamos, reverendo…

—Aunque las malas palabras del hombre terrenal fueran cien veces peores, no se elevarían tan alto como las buenas palabras del celestial Mitra.

—Basta ya de esto… agarradlo, hacedlo callar…

—Aunque las malas obras del hombre terrenal fueran cien veces peores, no se elevarían tan alto como las buenas obras del celestial Mitra.

El rayo de sol caía sobre la figura dorada del toro, mostrando una mano que lo agarraba una y otra vez por los cuernos, interrumpido más arriba por un rostro que lo cortaba y unos ojos que refulgían súbitos como el relámpago, mientras la voz se hacía más tronante a cada frase, y se abalanzaron sobre él al mismo tiempo:

—A Mitra de los vastos pastizales, de los mil oídos, de la miríada de ojos…

—¡Cuidado! Sujetadle los brazos…

—… el Yazad del nombre invocado…

Se oyó un golpazo, y un chillido de dolor.

—… sea sacrificio, homenaje, propiciación y alabanza…

Alguien logró por fin arrancar una tabla de una de las vidrieras. Con la luz, todo el mundo miró en

direcciones diferentes. El chillido de dolor lo había proferido un hombre que ahora estaba en el suelo, inmovilizado bajo el peso de la pila de agua bendita, y empapado, pues la había volcado al asaltar el altar donde estaba puesta. La campana empezó a sonar otra vez, y alguien consiguió desconectar el mecanismo. Otro buscó un teléfono y llamó a un pastor de un pueblo cercano, invitándolo, y luego suplicándole que viniera a celebrar el acontecimiento para cuya observancia se habían reunido.

Todo el mundo miró en direcciones diferentes; y más tarde, fuera, ninguno de ellos pudo decir a ciencia cierta cómo había aparecido la figura que los exhortaba, aunque dos críos imaginativos tuvieron un altercado al respecto, pues uno describía un traje persa y un turbante, y el otro uno asirio con una corona, y lo hacían de un modo tan gráfico, de hecho, que su maestro, que temblaba allí cerca, confirmó que habían visto esas estampas en una cartilla de historia la semana anterior, aunque esto no frenó su entusiasmo por un instante.

Una persona dijo que le habían llevado a un hospital; otra, que de vuelta a la casa del párroco.

El aire fresco se estaba volviendo frío; y al abrigo de un contrafuerte de tablas, donde ya se habían cobijado del sol antes de que el propio cielo empezara a oscurecerse sobre sus cabezas, este frío creciente abrazaba a un grupito de damas, uniéndolas de un modo tan familiar que podrían haber sido su fuente inmediata, y sus voces los espasmos de su emanación.

—En nuestra cena de anoche jamás sospechamos…

—Jamás imaginamos que semejante profanación estaba teniendo lugar encima mismo de nuestras cabezas…

—Yo oí un martilleo…

—Bueno, yo oí un *martilleo*.

—Yo también lo oí, pero jamás imaginé que una cosa así…

—¡Una cosa *así*…!

—Hace ya tiempo que tenía la impresión de que iba a ocurrir una cosa así.

—Desde la última vez que se tomó un descanso. Cuando todas convinimos en que lo mejor sería un descanso.

—Incluso desde que May…

—¿Desde mayo? [22]

—Creo que aquel…

—Oh, *May*.

—Aquel fue realmente su último oficio cristiano. El funeral de May.

—Cómo la hemos echado de menos.

—Cómo la hemos necesitado.

—Cómo ha necesitado él su mano guiadora.

—May cumpliría ochenta y tres este mes.

—Deberían avisar a alguien. Debería venir alguien inmediatamente. Debería…

—El hijo…

—¿El hijo?

—El hijo lleva tanto tiempo fuera. Un hijo pródigo.

—Pero no tuvo hermanos. Pobre Camilla…

—La pobre Camilla nunca fue fuerte. Arrebatada y abandonada en tierras extranjeras.

—No era un chico fuerte. Cuando se puso enfermo…

—El Señor le perdonó la vida.

—El Señor le perdonó la vida para que cumpliera Su obra. Para que siguiera sin desviarse los pasos de su padre. Es decir, por supuesto…

—Los de las seis generaciones que le precedieron.

—Para que sirviera aquí mismo, en su propia comunidad. La gente que él necesita, que ahora le necesita a él.

—No debería repetir esto, pero he oído…

—Sabéis…

—He oído…

—¿Sabéis lo que pensé, según recuerdo, después de esa enfermedad que duró tanto? Que el Señor no le perdonó la vida. Según recuerdo…

—Pero yo estaba segura…

—Bueno, es verdad que el pasado nos engaña cuando nos vemos obligados a depender de una memoria mortal.

—¡Esperad! ¿No oléis algo?

—Ahí dentro sí, olía a algo quemándose.

—El terrible olor dulzón de algo quemándose.

Sus palabras se elevaron en ráfagas de viento, se enrolaron en los remolinos del contrafuerte, y fueron apagadas por los chirridos metálicos de los clavos que arrancaban de la madera dentro de la iglesia, donde entraron un momento después, pues de pronto había empezado a nevar.

El viento era aún bastante flojo, y la nieve caía en copos ligeros; pero a través de ella, en la carretera, aferrado al volante sobre el que apenas podía ver, un joven cuya expresión redimía en parte la fisonomía por lo demás insulsa de su cara miraba hacia adelante con ojos de miope entre nudillos blancos de resolución, mientras corría a acudir en respuesta a la llamada. Los únicos ruidos que hacía eran gimientes esfuerzos por dominar su resfriado, ahora en su segundo y más acuoso día. La tormenta, como la llamaría después, y como después llegaría a ser en efecto, había empezado nada más salir del pueblo a unas diez millas de distancia; y como si hubiera estallado como un reto y un riesgo para su deber, aceleraba abismándose entre los copos blancos, haciendo de su suave caída una amenaza digna de su meta.

De hecho estuvo a punto de tener una desgracia al entrar en el pueblo, donde la flecha que señalaba a la izquierda advertía de la curva inminente a la derecha. De cuando en cuando había apartado una mano del volante para pasársela por la nariz, que es precisamente lo que estaba haciendo en aquel momento, y durante unos instantes incontables y terroríficos zigzagueó entre el monumento a la Guerra Civil y la Taberna de la Estación, como escogiendo cuál demoler, una experiencia que apenas podía redimir la más digna de las metas, y que explica por qué tuvieron que ayudarle a salir del coche cuando llegó a la iglesia.

Las cosas se habían arreglado lo mejor posible, el púlpito devuelto a su sitio, los bancos dañados enderezados y las vidrieras desentabladas, gracias sobre todo a los esfuerzos del hombre corpulento y sus colegas. Ahora estaba al fondo del inseguro y jadeante grupo de fieles, mirando con suma indignación a su alrededor, y hacia arriba, con un ojo ya muy hinchado y amoratado. Había otros tan severamente marcados como él, más de media docena, y ahora se volvió hacia uno de ellos, cuya camisa colgaba en jirones bajo su chaqueta desgarrada, y murmuró: «Lo hemos dejado allí bien tranquilo, el médico le dio un sedante, lo apagó como a una vela». Luego se volvió respetuosamente hacia adelante, esperando a que empezara el recluta en el púlpito.

El joven pastor empezó dos veces, pero los ruidos que hacía apenas pudieron oírse o distinguirse de los gritos sofocados y los gorjeos de los fieles. Y la causa de esta agitación era que, uno a uno, iban volviendo los ojos hacia arriba. Aunque entraba poca luz por las vidrieras romboidales ya destapadas, debido al cambio repentino del tiempo, y aunque las bombillas, al igual que el órgano, habían aparecido estropeadas, era aún bastante fácil distinguir las figuras de las estrellas, los planetas, la luna en distintas fases y un sol resplandeciente, entre otros profusos cuerpos celestes pintados a diestro y siniestro por el techo.

Poco apoco, el sonido procedente del púlpito se fue desenredando de los que se elevaban ante él, trepando fervientemente de un versículo al siguiente de lo que resultó ser parte del segundo capítulo del Evangelio según san Lucas. Después de esta tranquilizadora narración, el lugar quedó en silencio salvo por los sonidos de las súplicas sinceras del pastor, mientras seguía con san Juan, y ese episodio vernal referente a Lázaro, que por lo visto pensó que no vendría mal. Al parecer acertó. Parecieron más agradecidos a la resurrección que necesitados habían estado del nacimiento en el establo; y mientras su voz se entrecortaba y volvía a elevarse entre jadeos, y sus ojos lagrimeaban con lo que, casi desde cualquier sitio con aquella luz, parecía una abrumadora emoción de fe, muchos labios de las caras alzadas se sumaron a su porfiada declaración: «Yo *soy* la Resurrección y la Vida…».

Fue un servicio sencillo. Esperaba hacer ya poco más que leer un salmo, solicitar un himno, a *cappella,* y durante este ejercicio recuperar la suficiente voz para llegar a la bendición; pero apenas había iniciado el Salmo Número 89, «Hasta que haga de tus enemigos tu escabel…», cuando se oyó un choque estrepitoso que, aunque sonó a cierta distancia, en dirección a la estación de ferrocarril, no perdió nada de su fuerza de impacto sobre aquella asamblea convaleciente. Con gran presencia de ánimo, entonó «La roca de los siglos», y con la misma fortaleza dirigió personalmente las dos primeras estrofas, de modo que la bendición, cuando llegó, fue aceptada como un minuto de oración silenciosa por todos menos tinos cuantos que le vieron los labios, y cada rasgo de la cara, esforzándose por impartirla, hasta que al bajar su mano insegura se acabó todo, y nadie volvió a verle jamás.

Salió de aquel pueblo por donde había entrado, aunque más despacio, y más despacio aún cuando se acercaba al extremo urbanizado de la curva que había estado a punto de evitarle la experiencia por la que acababa de pasar, del mismo modo que otro, un completo desconocido según mostraba la bárbara matrícula, acababa de liberarse de las preocupaciones de este mundo para pasar a la quimera del venidero.

La Taberna de la Estación estaba en llamas, y la radio del coche, que estaba bien empotrada junto con toda su parte delantera, tocaba el rondó de *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* de Mozart al silencioso viajero, y al ciervo de doce puntas, levemente torcido allí arriba por el golpe como si hubiera ladeado la cabeza para escuchar, y a pesar de la roja lucecita navideña que le colgaba de la punta del hocico, observando con un ojo polvoriento y un aire de imperturbable serenidad.

Llegó la auténtica tormenta, velando el Monte de la Lamentación y luego borrándolo por completo. El viento soplaba con una fuerza extrañamente terrible, rompía aquí y allá unas algunas ventanas en el pueblo, vengativo, metía cruelmente los dedos donde no había nada que destruir. Barrió la cochera vacía y rajó un cristal empañado de aquella ventana alta de la casa donde habían encontrado a Janet, azul y con barba de varios días, llorando y babeando «nunca nunca nunca nunca nunca… volveré… a verlo…», lo que alguna mente tosca y poco imaginativa interpretó después públicamente como una referencia a la figura que sólo había conocido como el sacristán, hallado luego en respuesta al gañido de un perro tras una puerta cerrada, en la cama, aferrando un trozo de papel, según llevaba, como dijo el juez de primera instancia mientras desabrochaba el botón superior de la ropa interior para dar un toque formulario con su estetoscopio contra aquel pecho vacío, probablemente uno o dos días.

(En el piso de abajo, en el irreconocible despacho, el juez llegó incluso a arrodillarse en el suelo junto a la res muerta allí tendida cuan larga era, para observar y comentar la única herida fatal del cuello del toro, infligida mientras vivía, como podía verse por su índole redonda y abierta en lugar de ser un tajo de bordes apretados, como habría sido en otro caso aquella herida).

Y cayó la oscuridad como una sustancia arrastrada por el viento que rellenaba con ella todas las rendijas, y seguía sin ceder donde fracasaba su ímpetu destructor, gimiendo por las esquinas y silbando entre los maderos que se erguían torcidos pero firmes al pie de la colina. En cuanto a aquella plataforma, harían falta tres hombres y otros tantos días para desmontarla; y aunque en los meses siguientes aparecerían varias cosas curiosas en torno a aquel lugar, nadie encontró nunca nada que hubiera podido ser un globo.

En los primeros meses de la estancia del nuevo pastor aparecieron varias cosas curiosas, aunque apenas duró en la casa hasta la primavera. Realmente «metió mano afondo» (era una de sus expresiones) para intentar hacer el lugar «acogedor» (otra) e incluso «cálido» (…), eligiendo en primer lugar para su despacho una luminosa habitación del piso de arriba, donde hasta un día que estaba de espaldas en el suelo haciendo pesas (era una de las cosas que hacía) no descubrió que la pared estaba empapelada con rosas, todas ellas boca abajo. Hasta entonces el dibujo no lo había molestado, porque nunca había intentado descifrarlo; pero ¡entonces…! Se levantó inmediatamente y se ocupó de aquello enseguida, es decir, hizo empapelar de nuevo el cuarto con algo que (según dijo) tenía un carácter más masculino, una serie repetitiva de lo que para él representaba la cacería del zorro, no muy diferente del papel que había utilizado en una habitación más oscura del piso de abajo, una vez se hubo acuchillado el suelo para quitar las manchas y raspado el techo y las paredes para borrar los brillantes colores con que habían sido profusamente pintados, así como otra media docena de arreglos en las paredes allí donde parecían haber sido coceadas.

De un cuartito al fondo del pasillo del piso de arriba había sacado una imprenta manual, su revoltijo de tipos y un fardo de papel impreso, al que no pudo encontrar pies ni cabeza; no es que necesitase aquel cuarto para nada, pero no vio ninguna *razón* para tener en él una imprenta al pie de la estrecha cama. De los cajones de una cómoda de otra habitación sacó una cantidad considerable de botellas vacías. No es que necesitase los cajones. Descolgó algunos cuadros, cuyo asunto no era ni cálido ni acogedor, y los guardó junto con una estatua deteriorada, cuya presencia no era ciertamente ni lo uno ni lo otro, en un cuarto trastero donde había encontrado un revoltijo de libros y unos trozos de madera oscura al fondo, cada uno con un espejito roto en la punta, que tomó por restos de un curioso marco de pintura, aunque no se le pasó por la cabeza mandarlo a restaurar.

En cierta ocasión abrió un armarito empotrado y encontró en él latas de harina de avena, nada más que latas cuadradas y vacías de harina de avena apiladas del suelo al techo.

Luego estaban los libros. Amontonados en otro armario encontró títulos como *Magia malaya y Libellus de terrificationibus nocturnisque tumultibus* en un desorden torrencial, e inmediatamente volvió a cerrar la puerta como pudo. De un cuarto sombrío presidido por un no hay corona sin cruz bordado (que regaló a las Damas Úseme) rescató unos cuantos títulos sobrios para sus propios estantes, donde *El descanso eterno* de Baxter y el *Catecismo* de Fisher prestaron un aire de permanencia, colocados junto a *Cómo ganar amigos e influir en la gente* de Dale Carnegie. La *Penetralia* de Andrew Jackson Davis quedó, por supuesto, relegada como una

curiosidad, pues «Dick» (como este joven animaba a la gente a llamarlo, dado que su nombre de pila era Richard) no tenía ningún interés en ver el interior de los objetos. Como quedó también la *Historia natural* de Buffon, que se abrió por sí sola entre sus manos cuando la cogió, y lo dejó mirando la estampa de un mono coloreada a mano.

Había libros hasta en la habitación donde había encontrado los cajones llenos de botellas. Se quedó con dos volúmenes, los de la *Histoire des ballons* de Tissandier, no porque le interesaran los globos o porque habría podido leerlos si así fuera, sino porque estaban encuadernados en verde y hacían juego con el motivo del nuevo papel de la pared. En cuanto a los otros, dos volúmenes de Lew Wallace y *Un viaje a la luna, La vuelta al mundo en ochenta días* y *Cinco semanas en globo* de Julio Verne, se los regaló a la Legión Americana, con la que estaba colaborando en la gran Cruzada Espiritual de ámbito nacional que ellos patrocinaban.

En la comunidad, «Dick» también cantaba (tenía una voz de «tenor blanco» muy agradable) y dirigía la tropa de *boy scouts*.

Había, entre las madres locales de chicos de catorce años, una cuantas que creían entender muy bien a «Dick», y lo mimaban en consecuencia; había, por otra parte, unas cuantas personas mayores que no le entendían en absoluto, y hasta un robusto anciano que se quejó de la pronunciación del nuevo pastor. «No me gusta la forma en que dice *Dioss*…», dijo aquella eminencia gris, con la irritabilidad de un hombre que defiende a un pariente cercano, y nunca volvió a entrar por su pie en la iglesia.

Las damas de la Sociedad Úseme descubrieron en «Dick» a un oyente muy agradable; y pronto se hizo una idea de cómo habían ido las cosas antes que él, cómo la iglesia (a la que echó un vistazo y dijo: «Hey, aquí hay que meter mano a fondo…») había llegado a necesitar una renovación tan amplia, y así sucesivamente. «Y sabe usted…», dijo una de las damas (que ya se referían a él como «Nuestro “Dick”»), hablando del último sacristán, «una vez lo oí decir: “Sólo los que no tememos morir no lo conseguimos…”». Y por otras cosas que ella y sus compañeras decían de vez en cuando era evidente el alivio que sentían por haberse librado de la perspectiva de ser enterradas por sus manos, como si hubiera podido ponerlas torcidas, para impedir aquel salto potente cuando sonara la Trompeta. «Dick» se enteró de lo de la chica demente que había vivido allí arriba, hasta que la llevaron a una institución pública donde debería haber estado desde el principio (por su propio bien) si no lo hubiera impedido la caridad del reverendo (que a menudo llegaba demasiado lejos); se enteró de que había reescrito la Biblia y estaba imprimiéndola por su cuenta cuando «todo llegó a su desenlace». Hasta sacaron de aquellos pudrideros y airearon con toda solemnidad los detalles fidedignos de su rumoreada curación de la parálisis del sacristán: una noche, cuando se iba a acostar, el viejo había metido ambas piernas en una de las perneras de su pijama, había gritado «¡Un ataque…!» o «¡Paraplegia…!» o algo parecido, y ella había acudido al rescate por el pasillo. Aunque no revelaron de dónde habían sacado esta información, o la de que nunca salía de la casa por miedo a caer en las grietas de la acera.

En cuanto al propio reverendo, se admitía por lo general que sus esfuerzos y logros, sobre todo en aquellos dos días finales de su dominio, habían sido prodigiosos, y para un solo hombre, increíbles; igual que se coincidía por lo general en que a lo largo de su vida había sufrido pruebas muy severas, y como compartían el agregado magnánimo de sus pasados atribulados, pudieron convenir todos en concederle el derecho a un prolongado descanso en el confinamiento de una institución privada, donde lo que quedaba de sus fondos tras deducir el coste de las reparaciones de cierta propiedad comunitaria, y del toro de su vecino, bastaría para mantenerlo hasta que fuera liberado (o convocado: había dos opiniones distintas sobre esto) por el Señor; y donde «Dick», que tenía un carácter formal y responsable, decidió visitarlo.

Y se las arregló para salir de allí con el consuelo de que la figura familiar a la que su comunidad de bondad había cautivado no daba muestras de querer escaparse para volver y violentarlos con demostraciones de aprecio, y parecía, si no agradecida, distantemente resignada a lo que, con el mutuo acuerdo de la suya, se complacían en llamar la voluntad de Dios.

Montefeliz había sido construido en principio como un museo de historia natural, por un filántropo que pensaba que esas cosas deberían estar situadas en el campo. Cuando, a la postre, resultó evidente que la gente no estaba dispuesta a hacer aquella excursión simplemente para ver animales disecados e indios disecados, se sugirió que acaso vendrían a ver ejemplares humanos, sobre todo si eran parientes. La iluminación interior era muy mala. Al otro lado de una empalizada metálica que lo separaba de las preocupaciones del mundo, Montefeliz se alzaba sobre un mar de prados verdes cuidados por lunáticos solitarios: qué podía resultar más descansado y provechoso que seguir día tras día al cortacésped de un lado a otro de las verdes ringleras, y cuando uno llegaba a la lavandería ya era hora de empezar otra vez por la verja de la entrada.

El invierno sin hierba suponía un problema.

—De modo que usted es el hijo, ¿no?

El médico miraba con ojos brillantes a través de gafas con montura de oro. Hacía un momento, cuando se había levantado tras su mesa, había resultado ser una buena cabeza más bajo que «Dick», que apenas alcanzaba la estatura media.

—¿El qué? ¿Yo…?

—Señorita Inch —llamó el médico, y en la puerta apareció una enfermera—. El hijo… el hijo…

—Hermoso día, doctor.

—Sala G…

—Espere un momento… espere un momento…

Es verdad, el invierno sin hierba suponía un problema para todos. Una vez fuera bajo el sol, la enfermera dijo: «No debe usted preocuparse por el señor Farisy. Le hemos alojado en una habitación compartida con el señor Farisy».

El expediente del señor Farisy en Montefeliz era delgado: contaba poco sobre sus años de éxito como eminente anatomista, de hecho ni siquiera mencionaba el proceso que decía haber perfeccionado para curar jamones mientras estaban aún en el cerdo. Sólo empezaba a ser detallado cuando refería (según su propio testimonio) que la Sagrada Congregación de Ritos del Vaticano le había encargado oficialmente que investigara sobre los métodos primitivos de crucifixión: ¿se clavaban los clavos en las manos?, ¿o en las muñecas? Como científico, el señor Farisy se había basado siempre en métodos empíricos, y no vio razón para abandonarlos ahora: a su laboratorio llegó un pedido de veinte brazos. Clavó a la pared cada mano derecha y cada muñeca izquierda, y les colgó pesos móviles graduados por un sistema de fuelles que había extraído de una pianola, para simular los movimientos de elevación y caída del ser humano respirando. Luego puso la cosa en movimiento: los pesos se elevaron y cayeron, la madera crujió, la carne se desgarró, los huesos se astillaron, y algo se quebró en la cabeza del señor Farisy. Al día siguiente llamó para encargar dos docenas de brazos, luego doce docenas, y ya no se supo más: decía que le habían traído a Montefeliz poco después de que le encontraran columpiándose mano sobre mano en el trapecio de grandes e intrincadas proporciones que había construido en su laboratorio. (Pero, en fin, también decía que descendía de Atila el Huno).

—Ejemmm… eh… ¿salió realmente en libertad Barrabás? Escucha, anoche tuve un sueño, una pesadilla de lo más horrible. ¿Quieres que te la cuente?

—No.

—Estaba en la cima de una montaña junto a un pequeño cobertizo. No sé cómo podía saber que estaba en la cima de una montaña, porque no veía la montaña. Ni siquiera veía otras montañas. Simplemente sabía que estaba en la cima de una montaña, ¡pues eso! Ahhp… no interrumpas o no te contaré más. Quizá fuera la luz. La calidad de la luz es diferente en la cima de una montaña, ¿sabes?, diáfana, enrarecida, la quintaesencia de la purificación.

—Cállate. Duérmete.

—El cobertizo era un viejo edificio de madera. Deslucido por la intemperie. Bueno, cómo no iba a estar deslucido por la intemperie, en una cima de montaña como ésa, pues eso. El sol…

—Ejemmm…

—Sí, el sol estaba a mi espalda, bañándome con su luz quintaesencial, pues eso. Lo tenía agarrado por los sobacos, con la espalda contra el cobertizo, pero era mucho más grande que yo, tan grande que apenas podía levantarlo. Decidí que la única manera de hacerlo era clavar una mano a una tabla y la otra a una tabla más alta, luego sacar el primer clavo y ponerlo dos tablas más arriba, y luego lo mismo con la otra mano, mano izquierda, mano derecha, mano izquierda, mano derecha, mano izquierda…

—Para ya. Para ya. Para ya.

—Subiéndolo por la pared. Y eso era precisamente lo que estaba haciendo cuando vi que las manos se estaban desgarrando. Era demasiado grande. No podía seguir subiéndolo o las manos terminarían de desgarrarse antes de que pudiera tenerlo clavado allí arriba. Oh, oh, oh, oh, era terrible, y terrible, y desmoralizador desde un punto de vista científico, la forma en que el clavo desgarraba la carne, mano izquierda, mano derecha… quizá debería haber utilizado clavos más pequeños, ¿no? Así lo dejé al final, con las vueltas de los pantalones colgando hasta el suelo.

—Para ya.

—Allí estábamos, bajo la pura luz quintaesencial del sol.

—Ejemmmm…

—En la cima de la montaña.

—…

—Transmogrificación.

Al cabo de un rato:

—¡Oye! —se oyó el ronco susurro confidencial del señor Farisy—. ¿Ves?, ¿el martillo? Lo tengo todo guardado bajo el colchón. ¿Ves los clavos? ¡Clavos!, uno a uno. Los he cogido del taller, uno a uno, diez clavitos, veinte clavitos, uno a uno. Lo haremos en el marco de la puerta, lo he medido. Sé cuánto pesas. Lo miré en tu ficha. Lo haremos científicamente. Si te queman después, uno a uno, las cenizas no dejan ver las cicatrices, mano izquierda, mano derecha, veinte clavitos, treinta clavitos, clinc, clinc… ¡escucha!

—Matubone —dijo la señorita Inch, la enfermera—, o Mucorettes de metiltestosterona, entre el labio superior y la encía por encima de los incisivos.

—¡Eepa…!

—Sujétele el brazo.

—¿Luminal?

—Sedamyl.

—Tiene una visita. Su hijo…

—No es lo bastante grande.

—Usted no, usted no. ¿Doctor…?

—Pruebe con Palagren o Passiphen, o Pento-Del o Phanodorn…

—Reverendo, ¿su hijo…?

—¡Eepa…!

—¿El sol?

—Seconal o Sedamyl, Tolyphy o Tolyspaz…

—Espere un momento… Espere un momento…

Los trabajos de renovación que «Dick» había llevado a cabo en la iglesia habían sido considerables. Para empezar, la campana se había sustituido por un sistema de sonido accionado por electricidad que no sólo daba la hora con tonos más dulces, sino que los domingos por la mañana convocaba a los fieles tocando himnos familiares especialmente grabados con ese propósito, y emitidos desde el campanario de la iglesia con notas alegres y resonantes sacadas originalmente de un novocordio o algo igual de moderno (es verdad que había días, cuando el viento se portaba mal, en que sonaba como una guitarra hawaiana). [23]

Naturalmente, el agujero del techo había sido reparado y el interior repintado de blanco y gris oscuro. Los tubos dorados del órgano habían desaparecido, así como todos los ángulos violentos del maderaje; en su lugar, los ojos y las voces se elevaban hacia suaves curvas y ondulaciones en gris oscuro, y dos lámparas de cromo en forma de balas apuntaban hacia el púlpito, donde por primera vez desde el asesinato de James A. Garfield se exhortaba con bendiciones al presidente de los Estados Unidos. Los tablones de roble, donde se anunciaban durante los servicios los himnos y las letras, no eran ya necesarios, pues los programas se imprimían ahora cada domingo, detallando no solo el servicio, sino otras actividades de la iglesia. Los programas tenían a veces hasta tres o cuatro páginas, sin contar la cubierta que mostraba una «bonita» reproducción (ligeramente gotificada) de la propia iglesia.

Resistentes bandejas de cobre habían sustituido a las cestas de mimbre durante el ofertorio (que, por supuesto, en este luminoso mundo protestante no consistía en la presentación del pan y el vino para la aprobación divina antes de su consagración, sino, según la costumbre, en ese momento de comunión igualmente exquisito y quizá más realísticamente inspirado, en el que «Dick» recibía las bandejas rebosantes de los que las pasaban, y las elevaba solemnemente por encima de su cabeza en un gesto de intercambio de las más íntimas proporciones imaginables para los que habían contribuido).

En conjunto, los fieles parecían más jóvenes; y es nada más que posible que la «mala costumbre» de «Dick» tuviera algo que ver con ello. Parecía que desde el principio se había dado cuenta de que un hombre enteramente virtuoso, incluso uno del clero, ocupa en la sociedad una posición insostenible; y había entendido la sabiduría de ofrecer a tus vecinos un pequeño vicio en el que puedan desahogar su rencor en ausencia de otros mayores. Si su sabiduría hubiera aumentado con los años a la par que el ingenio, quizá habría dado un paso adelante en su lógica y tenido el sentido común de practicar este vicio en privado, dándole así el aura de lo secreto y algo de que hablar en susurros entre los vecinos del pueblo: pero no. No les dio esa satisfacción. Dejó que le vieran fumando sus puritos en público. Ahora bien, desde luego había miembros de esta comunidad que creían posible un hombre enteramente virtuoso, hombres que se habían reducido a sí mismos a tales proporciones; y entre las damas, había algunas que no tenían ninguna intención de considerar aquello un vicio menor, sino que mantenían una actitud hacia el tabaco tan severa

como la del rey Jaime I de Inglaterra y VI de Escocia, cuya Biblia se retiraban a leer en el limpio aire seco de sus padres, y de los padres que los precedieron, ofendidas en su soledad, es verdad, alguna que otra mañana de domingo en que el viento soplaba en la dirección indebida, y aquel aire vibraba dolorosamente con notas cristalinas y claros punteos procedentes de la casta aguja convertida en campanario, donde el nuevo pastor, cuyos antepasados, como era de dominio público, hablan surgido de la nada en Nueva Jersey, se disponía a iniciar el servicio con el Himno Número 347 del *Himnario del peregrino:* «Oh, Dios,
guia-dos
por Tu
ma-no
… Nuestros
pa-dres
exi-liados cruzaron el mar…».

Sin embargo, algunos pétreos semblantes grises seguían acudiendo, arrastrados por una costumbre que llamaban deber y quizá, aunque ninguno de ellos lo habría admitido, por una especie de peligrosa curiosidad despertada por aquel joven que invocaba a la carne y a la divinidad con los mismos tonos silbantes, que rebotaban en sus almas norteñas como cantos relucientes haciendo cabrillas sobre el agua en calma. En cuanto a aquellos acentos silbantes, al principio se atribuyeron a alguna distorsión eléctrica del sistema de altavoces, pues ahora había un micrófono instalado en el púlpito por medio del cual «Dick» conseguía provocar, si no severo temor reverencial, momentos de inquietud, y si no pasmosa admiración, momentos de intenso azoramiento; si no podía ofrecer misterio, podía despertar curiosidad, recompensada con ceremonia si no con ritual, inspirando, si no esperanza, al menos deseo sincero, si no fe, lealtad, si no caridad, tolerancia.

En consonancia con el espíritu general de renovación (pues hasta la flecha indicadora a la entrada del pueblo se había girado para que señalara la verdadera dirección de la curva inminente, una atención con los forasteros aunque al principio causara cierta confusión entre los nativos), el gallo de la veleta que coronaba el campanario había sido sustituido por una cruz, y «Dick» oficiaba cubierto con un manto (al que llamaba «sobrepelliz»). Todo esto lo llevaban muy bien los ancianos que le quedaban; y era muy popular entre los jóvenes. Le hacían preguntas de peso: una joven dama, si aprobaba que leyese una novela de actualidad, titulada sensación (era uno de esos libros calificados de «sátira amarga» por quienes consideran la vida mejor de lo que la encuentran, y de «inadecuado» por quienes la encuentran mucho peor de lo que creían); y no dijo que no. (Estaba esperando, y esperaría en vano, a que apareciese condensada en el *Readers Digest*). Era la misma chica que le había preguntado antes si un pasaje de Katherine Mansfield que le enseñó era sacrilego: algo que mencionaba al alma «presentada ante su Hacedor destocada, desmelenada y gozosa, con el espíritu intacto…». Y aunque era una sensación que desde luego nunca había tenido, «Dick» la toleró en la que, como san Pedro, consideraba la «vasija más frágil».

Pese a todo lo que «Dick» había hecho por alegrar las cosas, la casa del párroco seguía envuelta en un aire de duelo. Los golpes secos de sus tacones en el suelo (pues usaba tapas metálicas, según decía para proteger el cuero) resonaban ásperamente y rebotaban contra él como crujidos del maderaje. Y a veces, cuando debería haber estado ocupado buscando citas para un sermón, se veía parado ante la ventana de la oscura habitación del piso de abajo que nunca utilizaba, mirando entre ramas de hoja perenne hacia una lejana colina envuelta en niebla; o cuando estaba tranquilamente sentado despachando cartas, o asuntos de la iglesia, se inclinaba hacia adelante en su asiento, escuchando, con la mirada perdida, escuchando y luego atendiendo a los crujidos de otras partes de la casa. Y una tarde, en la luminosa habitación del piso de arriba que había elegido como despacho, se quedó adormilado mientras hacía planes para colaborar en una gran campaña (interconfesional) de envío aéreo de biblias, por medio de centenares de globos libres, a una parte del mundo donde supuestamente las deseaban. Se despertó a la hora del crepúsculo enderezándose de golpe, sobresaltado por el silencio, mirando a su alrededor donde nada se movía, y ni siquiera horas después había podido aún sacudirse de la cabeza (lo que intentó literalmente) el ruido de un niño llorando, que creía haber oído.

Ya había pensado en trasladarse a una pulcra casita blanca que sólo estaba a dos puertas de la propia iglesia, «más cerca del centro de las cosas».

Eso ocurrió antes de que el invierno diera sus últimos coletazos, poco después de la muerte de su predecesor, a quien «Dick», que tenía un carácter responsable, acompañó al crematorio con ese aire sombríamente vacuo que se adopta en tales ocasiones con el mismo cuidado, y parecido resultado, con que se maquilla la cara despojándola de toda traza de muerte, vida o familiaridad, antes de cerrar sobre ella la tapa. Con las cenizas, sin embargo, no supo qué hacer sino dejarlas allí, hasta que ocurrió un afortunado

incidente cuando acudió a la cascada de libros del armario en busca de material para un sermón fúnebre. Se puso a revisar lo que denominaría más tarde «estos curiosos y pintorescos volúmenes de sabiduría popular olvidada»; y aunque al principio se sorprendió al encontrar el hueco recortado en *La noche oscura del alma,* y estuvo a punto de dejar a un lado aquella curiosidad tan gratamente perfumada, de ella cayó un papel que resultó ser la última voluntad y testamento de su predecesor. En él encontró el ruego de que «los restos recibieran cristiana sepultura» (esta frase era de «Dick») junto a los de «la esposa del difunto» (ésta también). Fue afortunado en más de un sentido, pues dio oportunidad a «Dick» de felicitarse por su falta de decisión en otro asunto, que ahora podía llamar «previsión». En una alacena de la cocina había encontrado un gran paquete de alimentos de primera necesidad, medio envuelto en un papel que ya tenía la dirección escrita, y había decidido enviarlo pagando generosamente el franqueo. La operación que siguió fue bastante precipitada, pues este joven vigoroso tenía una aversión instintivamente sana por la muerte. Acordándose de las recias latas de harina de avena guardadas en el armario del piso de arriba, cogió una, trasladó a ella las cenizas de la frágil urna en que se las habían entregado y cerró con fuerza la tapa redonda, notando mientras lo hacía que la lata llevaba grabado el apellido de la familia. Luego la metió en el paquete dirigido ya a España, lo envió (por vía marítima ordinaria, ya que pagaba el porte de su bolsillo) y solo al sentarse a escribir la carta de explicación se dio cuenta de que había olvidado anotar el nombre del monasterio al que iba dirigido. En un almanaque encontró un prominente monasterio situado en Montserrat, y allí dirigió su carta en cordial inglés (en papel con membrete de la iglesia), juzgando que si no era exactamente el indicado las cosas se arreglarían allí, donde a fin de cuentas eran todos españoles, y a fin de cuentas todos católicos.

Antes de que llegara el domingo pasó bastante tiempo hojeando a Tertuliano y Orígenes, a Sozomeno y Zósimo, y el testimonio del *Avesta,* copiando pasajes señalados, todo lo cual serviría de baterías de exposición, aunque, por supuesto, el propio texto había que sacarlo de la Biblia. Se arrellanó en un sillón, fumando uno de sus puritos.

Y fue en esta postura pasiva, y sin cambiar en absoluto de expresión (en realidad había terminado el puro y estaba hurgándose en la nariz), en la que «Dick» tuvo la inspiración de tomar su texto de Corintios, I, «la necedad de Dios…», ¿cómo era? «¿No ha enloquecido Dios la sabiduría del mundo?». Se levantó musitando: «Piedra de tropiezo para los judíos, y necedad para los gentiles…», buscando el conocido lomo negro con letras doradas: «Sino que lo necio del mundo escogió Dios, para avergonzar a los sabios…». Su mirada distraída se centró poco a poco, mientras sus labios seguían: «Porque la necedad de Dios es más sabia que los hombres…», cada vez más despacio, hasta detenerse. Allí, sobre la mesa de arce, estaba uno de los diecisiete millones y medio de ejemplares del último número del *Digest,*
Reader's
cuya lectura lo absorbió tanto que se lo llevó a la cama.

—Y sabéis —dijo una de las Damas, después de estrechar la mano de «Dick», al salir al sol del paseo recién engravado que conducía a la iglesia—, hasta me ha parecido un poco atrevido…

Pues el sermón no fue un gran éxito. Pese al estilo fervoroso y estimulante de «Dick», y las molestias que se había tomado espigando los pasajes señalados del revoltijo de libros del armario, para ofrecer una imagen poco atractiva del mitraísmo, varias personas fueron de la misma opinión que aquella Dama.

Sin embargo, en aquella mañana especialmente agradable habría sido difícil abrigar cualquier sensación que no fuera de bienestar. Aquella mañana «Dick» se estaba comportando con algo más que su afabilidad habitual, mostrando incluso cierta cordialidad con el sacristán, a quien no aprobaba enteramente, pues se sabía que a aquel hombrecillo modesto, el antiguo jefe de estación, le gustaba tomar su vaso de cerveza diario, que incluso podía pasarse la tarde entera sentado ante él en el piso de abajo: una figura reconfortante, a pesar de su cervecita, para muchos de la comunidad, que difícilmente habrían podido encontrarlo, con su escaso estipendio, tambaleándose por Summer Street a altas horas de la noche, cantando canciones poco cristianas.

Si la afabilidad de «Dick» resultó exagerada, según pareció, después del servicio, fue porque hacia la mitad del sermón había advertido con su aguda perspicacia que algo iba mal, una inquietud que empezó con el pasaje de Corintios, I, y pareció extenderse sobre todo por las caras más viejas, mientras seguía hablando del contenido de los «curiosos y pintorescos volúmenes de sabiduría popular olvidada», esforzándose por presentar el mitraísmo bajo su «verdadera» luz, y a su más reciente propagador, si no como un demente, ciertamente como alguien equivocado. Respaldado por la batería de mercenarios robados, Justino Mártir y Tertuliano, Orígenes, Arnobio, Firmico Materno, Agustín de Hipona, Paulino de

Nola… difícilmente podría fracasar «Dick» en su innecesaria causa. Y fue al llegar al exmaniqueo obispo de Hipona, mientras leía una cita suya, cuando advirtió los labios moviéndose aquí y allá, como si las mentes estuvieran ya distraídas: «Pues los malos espíritus forjan, en efecto, en provecho propio ciertas apariencias de honor para así embaucar a quienes siguen a Cristo…».

—Pero sabéis… —como dijo después una de las Damas Úseme—, había algo… —Sorbió por la nariz—. Algo…

Pues «Dick» se había llevado al púlpito todas las notas que había tomado; y este panegírico de Juliano escrito por Himerio estaba entre ellas. Por antagonístico que pudiera resultar con el epígrafe corintio original, lo encontró a tiempo para cambiar de rumbo y, de modo tan brusco, entrar en aguas tranquilas con el viento a la espalda, pues lo leyó muy bien:

—«Merced a su virtud dispersó las tinieblas que impedían alzar las manos hacia el Sol, y como arrancándola de la vida sombría de un averno alcanzó una visión de los cielos, cuando erigió santuarios a los dioses y estableció ritos divinos que eran desconocidos en la ciudad, y consagró con ellos los misterios de las divinidades celestiales. Y no otorgó por doquier fútiles garantías de curación, como la pericia humana que revive a los enfermos de cuerpo, sino ilimitados dones de salud. Pues con una naturaleza humana semejante a la del sol no podía dejar de brillar e iluminar el camino hacia una vida mejor».

Poco después de aquel día, el nuevo pastor se trasladó a la pulcra casita blanca que estaba «más cerca del centro de las cosas».

Desde su patio trasero, parcialmente cultivado como jardín, el Monte de la Lamentación se alzaba aún en la distancia, y más distante cuando se retiraba, velándose de nubes en tiempo de tormenta. Rara vez miraba hacia la vieja casa del párroco, menos algún que otro crepúsculo, cuando observaba a los pájaros reunirse y poner rumbo hacia aquella elevación ya en sombra, donde un árbol había caído rompiendo una ventana del piso de arriba y quedando así inclinado, donde tantas cosas curiosas habían aparecido, y aparecerían, incluso un pequeño esqueleto en unas excavaciones cuando derribaron la cochera porque amenazaba ruina, ¿y no sabéis —siguió ganando terreno la historia— que aquél era el hijo?, y aunque algunos creían recordarlo más crecido, más grande que aquella evidencia, como pasó el tiempo y nadie volvió a verlo, la historia siguió en pie, con la casa del párroco como testigo, un lugar envuelto en un aire de duelo, aunque hacía mucho tiempo que nadie había nacido o muerto en él.

Tercera Parte

I

«Hay muchos *manii* en Aricia».

El puerto centroamericano de Tibieza de Dios yace en colisión con el mar pacientemente prolongado (hasta un grado tan poco tropical de franqueza que hace falta un dique de hormigón para separarlos), y luego se retira hacia arriba, extendiéndose por las colinas. Con sus pilas de camas de hierro, sus casas con barandas rotas cuya pintura es incapaz de indicar a los ojos quejumbrosos del forastero (pues ningún nativo se lo preguntaría) cuál era su color original, que de hecho ha olvidado ella misma, y sus bombillas desnudas colgadas de cables a modo de alumbrado publico, tiene el aire transitorio de un andrajoso carnaval que nunca se desmonta. La población es mayoritariamente negra. La gobiernan descendientes de españoles que viven en la meseta central, le da trabajo una compañía frutera norteamericana cuyos empleados blancos viven entre diez cables de alambre de espino y el mar, y su modestia y sofisticación se ven satisfechas a un tiempo por acres de brillante percal suministrados por la Compañía Mercantil de Tibieza, una familia de diecisiete chinos, todos varones, y todos de formas diferentes, cuya partida de cartas en el porche nunca se interrumpe.

A menudo el tráfico consiste únicamente en los carros de basura de alegre color naranja, ocupados por buitres negros que se balancean con recelo encima de ellos, o los siguen medio corriendo medio volando. A mediodía, en el calor de la sobremesa, no se ve ni un solo habitante humano (salvo los jugadores de cartas), y los que pasan por la calle rara vez hacen gestos de saludo, pues son perros, buitres y algún que otro caballo que avanzan a paso lento, sin mirar a la derecha ni a la izquierda, como dirigiéndose a citas tan casualmente fútiles como las mareas. Cuando cesa la lluvia vespertina empieza de nuevo el negro ajetreo, y los nativos aparecen en tales estados de desintegración que un trozo de cuerda anudado al cuello o a la muñeca parece indicar que hasta estas partes se perderían si no estuvieran atadas.

Flotando a la deriva, los únicos ruidos eran las roncas llamadas de pájaro de los viejos que vendían cacahuetes, «maní… maní…», y el del mar. Ahora, después de tres días de lluvia, estaba marrón, más allá verde, y el horizonte una dura línea azul contra el cielo gris. Los refuerzos de acero del muelle estaban corroídos hasta la delgadez de un tobillo en la línea de agua, y el mar se estrellaba a su alrededor contra el dique con despiadada resolución, acumulando su plenitud en temerarias oleadas y arrojándolas dentro con tesón incansable. A primera vista, aquel dique parecía ridículo, una lamentable barrera que el mar podía saltar con facilidad para borrar del mapa aquella frágil ciudad. Pero el agua volvía a deshacerse bruscamente en blancura y se replegaba otra vez sobre sí misma.

Aunque aún no lo sabía, Otto iba camino de Tibieza.

En aquel momento su avión estaba tendido como una gran cerda en la pista de Nueva Orleans, pandeado de un lado a otro y reteniendo a duras penas el peso de su larga panza para que no tocara el suelo. Otto tenía un color amarillo uniforme. Lo interrumpían en su cara recién afeitada las dos pálidas cuencas de sus ojos, que miraban con exhausto dominio. Las manos, ambas libres y una sensiblemente más blanca, le temblaban. En otras épocas se había imaginado burlando a docenas de las mentes más expertas de las fuerzas internacionales de detectives, realizando despreocupadamente proezas de audacia pasmosa, de osadía inhumana… (justo entonces, cuando pasó un mozo uniformado, la mano le tembló tanto al llevarse un cigarrillo a los labios que la apoyó en la rodilla, y volvió a mirar el libro que sostenía contra el brazo del asiento).

Apretó la muñeca contra el bulto de su cartera, para asegurarse de que la cartera repleta y su billete para el aeropuerto de Balboa, en Panamá, seguían aún allí. Anunciaron su vuelo. Salió a la pista. Cargaron el correo. Cargaron el equipaje. Cargaron un perro que rebullía de excitación en una jaula blanca. Sobresaltado por la inmensidad del avión a su lado, el aire y todas sus entrañas se vieron de pronto estremecidos por otro avión que despegaba ante él. Luego se extinguió bruscamente la furia del avión que se elevaba, y un frágil pajarillo pasó volando, con silenciosa dignidad, en dirección opuesta.

Otto advirtió que una de las alas de su avión parecía curiosamente doblada. Pasó un hombre de uniforme. Otto estuvo a punto de hablarle de ello; luego se contuvo. ¿O quizá sabía el hombre de uniforme que la cosa estaba doblada de un modo suicida y no pensaba hacer nada al respecto? Sería todo un trabajo enderezarla. Otto miró su reloj. Obviamente, no había tiempo. Parecía una cosa tremenda.

El gran cuerpo palpitaba en el suelo. Se sentó en el vientre de aquel furioso animal. Luego fue peor: avanzó por aquel suelo con desesperada resolución, rabioso por abandonarlo. Algo lo hizo elevarse, y rugió apartándose de la sensata dureza de la tierra para internarse en la nada. Pasaron remolinos de humo junto a las ventanillas: no humo, sino una nube. Había nubes debajo, moviéndose turbulentamente unas sobre otras mientras el absurdo animal plateado flotaba inmóvil por encima de ellas. Desde él, Otto miraba hacia los campos blancos de abajo con nerviosa extenuación al verse tan encerrado, como si todo fuera a resolverse si pudiera salir allí y sentarse un rato. Pero el avión siguió adelante, flotando sin esfuerzo consciente, como si hubiera olvidado el disparate que estaba haciendo. Más pesado que el aire, penetró en una nube y retembló airadamente mientras la atravesaba, consciente de nuevo. Frágil, con las alas vibrando con un esfuerzo tan poco natural como armonioso es el planeo de un ave, se agitó, se dejó caer, sobrevoló una extensión de agua verde poco profunda y aterrizó en México para tomarse un descanso; recobró su furia, hizo acopio de ella y volvió a desgajarse del suelo con la frenética velocidad de un poseso, con miedo a mirar atrás, como si vacilar, dudar por un instante, fuera a echar a perder todo lo que la ilusión hacía posible.

Debajo se extendía el mar, duro e inmóvil como un campo de plomo.

Otto miró hacia atrás. La cola los seguía de modo tranquilizador, aunque no podía ver su entero perfil roto por la figura aferrada a ella, que desequilibraba el avión. Más allá se extendía la gigantesca curva, dos colores nada más, separados por el brillo superficial de su encuentro: ¿el tranquilo límite del mundo? Siguió suspendido allí arriba, finalmente sobre Guatemala, cuyas tortuosas carreteras le recordaron el curso de su vida. Luego, a la derecha, alarmantemente cerca, apareció un volcán, dejando escapar su humo tranquilo contra el cielo verde. Sobresalía del espacio, en el tiempo, como algo visto en la memoria. Intocable e incognoscible en modo alguno, lo ignoraba, una belleza que no admitía ninguna alteración, para perderse en el horror de la intimidad. A cada esfuerzo de sus ojos se volvía menos real, más distante, mientras el avión seguía volando, como un fragmento del propio tiempo abriéndose paso a través de la eternidad.

Varios miles de pies sensibles más abajo, en lo que había parecido una superficie de plomo, el Mercader Isleño avanzaba lentamente con rumbo sudoeste por la superficie del mar Caribe. Esta embarcación tenía apenas doscientos pies de eslora, y su sucio casco, que se mantenía a una velocidad de siete nudos, tenía un calado de trece pies. Hélices gemelas la impulsaban hacia adelante. Había sido construida en Copenhague en 1934 como un yate privado. Hacía tiempo que no veía el Atlántico, ni siquiera el Mar del Norte: protegida por la cadena de las Antillas, surcaba noblemente un mar cuya superficie era como de cristal, como era ahora el Caribe. El Mercader Isleño volvía de Florida, adonde había llevado siete mil ramos de plátanos verdes. El grumete hondureño estaba en cubierta contemplando la puesta de sol. Asomando de la portilla que tenía junto a la cabeza, los largos dedos de un pie negro buscaban pendencia con los de otro, tirando de un dedo calloso cuyos compatriotas protegían afanosamente. El grumete parecía tentado a dejar de lado la puesta de sol y atender a aquella contienda para ver quién ganaba. Dentro cantaba una voz: «Chiquilla, por favor sal de mi cuarto de soltero…».

El sol se había fundido en el horizonte en forma de un ojo de cerradura, y el Mercader Isleño avanzaba como cercado por el mar y la pálida belleza del cielo, donde apenas se vislumbraba, por aquella puerta abierta, el verdadero mundo exterior de fuego.

Con un grito del contramaestre terminó la contienda, los pies se retiraron bruscamente y reaparecieron un momento después en el umbral de la puerta, donde Fuller se detuvo a embutirlos en unos zapatos. «Me está llamando —dijo Fuller—. Vaya, espero que no esté enojado otra vez». Esto era porque Fuller se sentaba en las comidas junto al contramaestre, al extremo de la mesa. Aunque servían inmensos cuencos de puré de patatas, fuentes de carne y pescado, chuletas, croquetas y muchas verduras, la dieta del contramaestre nunca variaba de manos de cerdo, raíces cocidas y plátano frito. Este menú era lo único que llegaba a Fuller, a menos que interrumpiera la silenciosa tarea alimenticia que se desarrollaba a su lado para pedir otra cosa. Cuando el contramaestre estaba enojado, Fuller no se arriesgaba a esta interrupción. Hacía lo que podía con lo que quedaba en los tres cuencos, cuando el plato que tenía al lado estaba lleno de manos de cerdo, raíces cocidas y plátano frito. Esta dieta le resultaba difícil, pues Fuller no tenía dientes. Los había vendido en Tampa, Florida, a un joven negro prometedor con aspiraciones sociales, dejado atrás, como Craso fue dejado debajo, con la admonición: «Di, ¿te sentó bien el sabor del oro en la boca?».

En respuesta al oscurecimiento del cielo, el mar cambió su superficie de cristal a mármol, el mármol rosa Breche de Italia que reflejaba el color desvaído del sol, y luego lo perdió para pasar al blanquigris Piastraccia, que reflejaba una luz surgida de ninguna parte, veteada de sombras.

El sol se hundió por el borde afilado del mar de mármol. Volvió a oírse el grito desde arriba. Sin

embargo, Fuller se detuvo un momento ante la borda, con esa momentánea sensación de algo perdido, ese súbito momento de vacío que se extiende por todas partes en el instante en que desaparece el sol.

Había agitación en Tibieza. Nadie la quería allí. Venía de la capital, en la meseta central, donde el tiempo fresco estimulaba esa inteligencia agitada necesaria para la revolución. Estaba muy bien para *ellos* correr de un lado a otro por las colinas disparando viejos rifles Springfield del año seis, macizas ametralladoras Hotchkiss francesas cuyos peines se encasquillaban tras las primeras explosiones, pesadas Brownings norteamericanas refrigeradas por agua y delicadas Bredas italianas: ese arsenal que lleva décadas vagando de un lado a otro por Hispanoamérica, con paraderos totalmente desconocidos hasta que la necesidad los revela con magia revolucionaria en cualquiera de las repúblicas hermanas. Muy bien para la gente educada de la meseta hacerse pedazos mutuamente, pero en Tibieza… Sólo que Tibieza de Dios (era de hecho la única razón de su existencia) era un puerto, y uno de los pocos que había. Por tanto, debía ser tomado. Primero era necesario establecer quién lo dominaba. Esto quedó resuelto una mañana a primera hora, cuando tres hombres sospechosos de pertenecer al partido revolucionario, y de los que se sabía que habían intervenido en turbios manejos (una acusación fácil de hacer y siempre justificable), fueron muertos a tiros mientras tomaban su café matinal, como represalia por la eliminación del cura local que había aparecido llamativamente maquillado con lápiz de labios, y castrado, sentado en actitud de reposo en una de las rocas petrificadas con forma de esponja que había en la punta del dique, con un agujero en el lado de la cabeza donde había estado una oreja, y otro en el otro.

Después de esto, hasta la partida de cartas del porche se trasladó al interior.

La catedral, en un estado de colapso tan genial que parece no haber sido construida nunca piedra sobre piedra, con los arcos desportillados y tan erosionados que ninguna piedra se distingue de otra, sus santos mancos y decapitados, esperando en nichos abiertos, gastados y amansados por la lluvia, y sus torres pesadamente erguidas con las campanas mudas, se alza a un lado de la plaza central, tras un muro de hormigón agujereado. Estos agujeros, obviamente debidos a los pobres materiales de años atrás, estaban ahora rodeados de círculos de tiza, junto a los que aparecía garabateado «Calibre 45 para los niños», [1] aunque en realidad, por lo que se sabía, hacía tiempo que no habían reventado a tiros a ningún niño. Al otro lado de la plaza estaba el Hotel Bella Vista, rodeado de una galería raquítica, y ladeado, como si el raquitismo le resultara familiar en toda su armazón, como un viejo renco, hacia el mar. Había unos cuantos árboles grandes en la plaza, que estaba pavimentada con hormigón. Nada más doblar la esquina, camino de la playa, estaba la consulta del doctor Espinach, cuyo letrero decía que había estudiado en los Estados Unidos de América.

Fue sobre esta franja de playa sobre la que se precipitó el potente avión de Otto para hacer un aterrizaje poco airoso. El pasajero que había provocado esta perturbación aerodinámica, por ir fuera en vez de dentro, estaba tan helado que siguió pegado a la cola mientras los demás salían a ver por qué había vacilado su gigante, qué agente de fragilidad humana había interferido en aquel milagro tan preternatural que lo daban por supuesto. Los demás pasajeros formaban un grupo bastante abatido, salvo por una hermosa dama con un ramo de orquídeas, y un hombrecillo cuya ropa abultaba sospechosamente, los cuales parecían encantados de que les dejaran allí mismo. El pasajero que venía tomando el fresco se había subido en Nueva Orleáns, según dijo en español, pues era lo único que hablaba, con labios que eran la única parte de su cuerpo que podía mover. «Lo habríamos visto cuando paramos en México», dijo el copiloto, que sólo concedía a los milagros unos límites razonables. «Dios… Dios…», dijo el pasajero. El avión podría haber esperado hasta que se resolviera este problema, pero su llegada había causado cierta consternación, y deleite, en la ciudad. En aquel momento siete coches cargados de hombres corrían hacia él, creyendo que había traído armas de la capital. Dos de los coches iban cargados de revolucionarios, cuatro de leales al Gobierno, y el último indeciso, pero armado. Todos se detuvieron tras las dunas. Antes de que supiera lo que estaba ocurriendo, el copiloto cayó derribado con una bala en la pantorrilla. Él y el piloto evacuaron consultas con palabrotas concluyentes, y un minuto después el avión rodaba con estrépito por la playa y se elevaba hacia el cielo, ligeramente escorado, con su pasajero exterior tan ocupado en agarrarse que ni siquiera levantó una mano paralizada para despedirse.

El propietario del Bella Vista era un hombre con un pesado manojo de llaves que tintineaban contra su grueso muslo mientras recorría a zancadas el porche del primer piso, evitando el lugar sobre la puerta del comedor donde las tablas se habían hundido una noche durante una visita de marines de los Estados Unidos. Se preguntaba cuál habría sido la misión del avión, a qué se debería todo aquel tiroteo, y era estupidez más que valor lo que le permitía exponerse como estaba haciendo. Sin embargo, lo único que vio

fue una figura desgarbada vestida de franela gris que cruzaba la plaza vacía hacia su puerta. Todo estaba en silencio salvo por un lejano canturreo, puntuado por golpes sordos, procedente de la iglesia baptista, donde había una reunión de oración en pleno apogeo. Estaban usando el nuevo bombo con resultados estruendosos, pues su clamor se veía intensificado por la resonancia del techo, que estaba cubierto de latas de aceite aplastadas.

Una vez pasado el letrero del doctor Espinach, un blanco oscilante y tentador que ya tenía tres agujeros, entró con aire un poco mareado, y le dieron una habitación con una ventana que daba al mar, cubierta con unas cortinas abandonadas en medio de una cuerda combada. Había dos puertas que no daban a ninguna parte, y la persiana de la puerta de entrada estaba rota. El cable de la bombilla oscilaba libremente sobre la pared. El lavabo gorgoteaba como las cañerías de un barco. Había dos grandes fotos de chicas rubias en la pared, una sosteniendo narcisos en honor de las galletas inglesas
Carr's
, y la otra, que sufría una ictericia galopante causada por una gotera en el techo, presentando una bandeja de Canada Dry. Se tumbó con un cigarrillo a meditar sobre la modesta porción del techo que estaba pintada, justo encima de la cama, y sobre sus recursos, un peso abultado en su pecho, donde tenía la cartera vacía de todo menos de billetes sin contar. Había escapado dos veces, esta segunda de las seguras dificultades que habría tenido al llegar a su destino cuando le pidieran que mostrara sus documentos de identidad y el visado. Había escapado no sabía adonde, no pensaba en ello, no había pensado en nada desde la Nochebuena, y cada vez que le asaltaban el pensamiento o la memoria se los sacudía de encima con calculada decisión encaminada a un solo propósito: seguir moviéndose, con dinero cuyo gasto no tenía otro objeto que permitirle seguir adelante, seguir moviéndose y sobrevivir, sin mirar atrás. Alargó la mano hacia el suelo y acercó el orinal para usarlo como cenicero.

Por la tarde parecía que los gubernamentales controlaban completamente la situación. En cualquier caso, la policía entró a caballo en la plaza, aunque nadie sabía si estaba a sueldo de los gubernamentales o de los revolucionarios. Iban armados con pistolas y llevaban sables. Esto se debía a que iba a haber una manifestación, promovida en la escuela local y prohibida por el alcalde, cuya medida en pro de la paz y el orden se entendió como un desafío a la libertad.

La manifestación empezó a su hora. Los niños entraron en la plaza con pancartas que decían: «¡Madres! ¡Vuestros hijos tienen derecho a ser libres!» y «Calibre 45 para los niños». Alguien tiró una piedra a un policía montado. Otro tiró otra. Los caballos tenían dificultades para mantenerse firmes sobre sus patas en el resbaladizo hormigón.

Tras una pésima comida servida por una chica negra enfundada en un vestido blanco lleno de manchas, Otto quiso café. Esperó. El comedor estaba engalanado con gallardetes de papel crepé de colorines manchados por las moscas, cada uno de los cuales había perdido casi todo su color y adquirido parte del de su vecino. En medio de la sala había un frutero en una mesa, una lujosa economía, pues los plátanos estaban tan podridos que nadie cogía nunca uno, o, en el mejor de los casos, nunca cogía otro. «No café. Ella quemó la leche», dijo la chica. Otto encendió un cigarrillo y salió. Había llegado hasta un *café* al otro lado de la plaza cuando empezó la manifestación. Desde allí observó su avance. No tenía sentido. Echó a andar de vuelta al Bella Vista. La manifestación era ruidosa, pero él la miraba con ojos cansados, negándose a interesarse por semejante tontería. Hasta que un policía cabalgó hacia él, agitando un sable; y el cuello del policía estaba cubierto de sangre.

Así de repente, aquello fue real. Y aterrorizado de forma igualmente repentina, Otto buscó frenéticamente refugio. La catedral, con su muro protector, se alzaba esperando. Miró con ojos espantados a su alrededor, pero no vio nada mientras echaba a correr hacia ella. Por detrás del quiosco de música salió un policía a caballo, él y su montura mirando a todas partes, los ojos del hombre y del caballo equiparados en aprensión inyectada en sangre, esquivando las piedras que les tiraban desde arriba.

Justo entonces saltó de una rama un pájaro blanco describiendo un arco, cayendo como una piedra antes de remontar el vuelo, y el policía, para esquivar la amenaza, venció su peso hacia adelante, su caballo resbaló un trecho por el hormigón y cayó, y el flanco que caía golpeó a Otto mientras corría sin ver hacia la iglesia, lo derribó y lo dejó clavado en el hormigón, inconsciente.

El buitre posado en el tejado se agitó un momento, con un ala extendida, con la impaciencia de un dignatario enteramente vestido para una cita que consulta su reloj. Luego el ala se plegó un poco torcida, como si se hubiera abrochado mal el abrigo, y sin notarlo en su impaciencia se quedó balanceándose sobre una y otra pata.

En la calle, un crío sostenía en alto un perro macho, exponiéndolo para que lo examinara una hembra. Su madre dijo a otra mujer negra más grande: «Mañana por la mañana, pronto, pronto…». Pasaron otros críos negros, tocados con sombreros de hombre. La partida de cartas había vuelto al porche.

Cerca del único catre ocupado, en el aula de la escuela que había sido habilitada como hospital, había un zorro disecado cuyas fauces mostraban una lengua rosada manchada por las moscas. El médico estaba de pie junto al catre mirando la cara. Nada se movía en ella salvo una mosca. Exploró una mejilla por un momento, examinó las ventanas de la nariz, correteó por el vendaje hasta el puente de la nariz, desde aquella prominencia divisó la maravilla circunvolucionada que había al otro lado, y saltó silenciosamente a la oreja. Los ojos parpadearon, y se cerraron con fuerza como para recuperar la larga noche y el milagro de la ausencia de identidad que había permitido: recreación no para el cuerpo, ni para el alma, sino oportunidad para que las circunstancias se renovasen, una esperanza no marchitada por los largos años de experiencia en los que cada mañana no trae ningún cambio, sino sólo la reanudación del conflicto en los términos en que se había abandonado. Se movieron los labios, abriéndose dos veces para decir: «Lo sé… lo sé…», y apretándose luego para conocer sólo el sueño, y animar allí la circunstancia con las buenas intenciones que ya la habían abatido hasta el presente desastre; y descendiendo luego un poco más, sólo para pormenorizar esas buenas intenciones, narcóticos substitutivos que operan en la semiinconsciencia para diluirse en la persecución de los sueños, sueños apresados con uñas y dientes, mientras la barba crece contra la almohada en la oscuridad.

Volvió la mosca para recorrer el cálido terreno de un párpado, moviéndose con la persistencia indiferente de las cosas diabólicas, y se abrieron ambos ojos.

—¿Qué ha pasado?

—Iba a hacerle la misma pregunta. Acaban de traerle hecho cisco, y…

—Me siento enfermo.

—Bueno, está enfermo, así que es bueno que lo sepa.

—Apenas le oigo.

—Tiene suerte de oírme algo. ¿Ha tenido antes problemas de oído?

—Sí. No.

—Bueno, ¿sabe usted?, hasta puede quedarse sordo de un oído antes de salir de ésta. Igual que Julio Cesar, eso estaría bien, ¿eh? ¿Quién es usted? Es muy joven para tener algo así. Hasta diría que es trágico si supiera quién es.

—Espere, no… no puedo mover el brazo.

—Eso es en parte porque está roto. ¿Recuerda haber intentado andar ayer? Por favor, perdone que le grite.

—Pero ¿qué es?, ¿qué es?

—Como un borracho. Tambaleándose por ahí como un borracho. Por supuesto, no le diría eso si supiera quién es. No le hemos encontrado ni un solo papel encima. Sólo dinero. Un montón.

—¿Dónde está?

—Vuelva a tumbarse, está seguro. ¡Todo ese dinero! Pero ahora no puede salir a gastarlo por ahí. No sea impaciente. Vaya, fíjese en mí, yo sí que tengo derecho a estar impaciente. Me mandaron aquí para ayudar a esos neg… nativos en sus problemas de alcantarillado, y míreme ahora. No dejan de prometerme que me van a trasladar a Barbados, pero nunca lo hacen. Un proyecto sanitario especial en Barbados… —Se había acercado a la ventana, y miró hacia fuera—. He mandado por más medicinas para usted. Por supuesto sé todo el rato que al final tendré que ir yo por ellas, ese idiota tatuado que se supone que trabaja para mí… —Entonces gritó por la ventana—: ¡Jesse…! ¡Jesse…! Vaya, ¿ve? No se lo ve por ninguna parte. Idiota tatuado, inútil, despreciable… por supuesto no lo llamaría esas cosas si supiera que me está oyendo. Ya es la tercera vez que he pedido el traslado a ese proyecto sanitario especial entre subdesarrollados… ¡eepa! Espere, no vomite en el suelo. Tome… eso es. ¡Ejem! Eso está mejor. ¿Se siente mejor?

—Pero… qué… ¿qué es esto? ¿Quién es usted?

—¿Qué hacemos tanto usted como yo aquí? ¿Quién es usted? Chis chis, perdone que le grite.

—Pero usted… debe decirme…

—Supongo que debo. El médico no debería discutir el caso con el paciente, pero ¿con quién voy a discutirlo si no? Bueno, tras su pequeño accidente se le ha declarado algo. Algo.

—¿Qué?

—No se precipite. Algo. Puede que algo completamente original. ¿Oye ruidos en los oídos?

—Le oigo a usted…

—Tengo que gritar, si no no me oiría. Vértigos, náuseas, vómitos, tambaleos y cae al suelo sin sentido.

No suena muy original, ¿verdad? ¿Qué le parecería que pusieran su nombre a una enfermedad?

—Pero yo…

—Bueno, le diré un secreto. Puede que sea la enfermedad de Méniére. Puede ser. Aceptaría eso, ¿no? Porque si es así no podríamos ponerle su nombre. Ya veremos. Le he dado un poco de ácido nicotínico. ¿Trabaja para la compañía frutera de aquí?

—No… no, yo…

—Está bien, no me lo explique. Yo también estoy a mal traer con ellos. Si supieran que está aquí intentarían llevárselo como paciente suyo.

—No, yo… ahora me…

—Muy bien, eso es. Ahora limítese a esperar aquí. Si entra alguien, tápese la cabeza y gima. Voy a acercarme al dispensario de la compañía frutera a ver si puedo conseguir un poco de Diasal para usted. Diasal o Lesofac, Amchlor o Gustamato. Si es el síndrome de Méniére le veremos de pie tambaleándose por ahí dentro de nada. Claro que no sé hacia dónde se tambaleará usted sin papeles. ¿Cómo se llama? No podemos ponerle su nombre a una enfermedad si no tiene nombre.

—Pero yo… yo…

—Yo me llamo doctor Fell. Eso es. ¿Y usted?

—… Gordon. Gordon. Me llamo Gordon.

—De acuerdo, Gordon. No vomite en el suelo mientras estoy fuera, Gordon. ¿Gordonitis? Chis chis… Duerma un poco, Gordon.

—Pero usted…

—Roniacol o Dramamina…

La puerta se cerró de golpe. Fuera estaba todo en silencio, salvo por el lejano rumor de embestida y repliegue del mar en el dique, donde continuaba el ensayo. Brillaba el sol.

Frente a la ventana, en el caballete del tejado de lata, el buitre se paseaba a trancos de un lado a otro, con las alas plegadas detrás en un manto negro y la cabeza inclinada hacia adelante, como un viejo pensando en dinero, entrelazando nerviosamente las manos bajo las alas de su frac. Entonces se oyó a lo lejos la ronca llamada de pájaro de un viejo: «Maní… maní…».

II

«—Señorita Potter, ¿dónde está Dios?

—Está en todas partes —contestó la señorita Potter con dignidad.

—Pero, mi querida muchacha —exclamó Su Alteza, acomodándose firmemente en uno de los sillones—, ¿de qué me sirve eso a mí?».

ACKERLEY, *Vacaciones hindúes*

—¿Una santa patrona?

—Es perfecto.

—¿Y qué hace?

—Intercede.

—Qué quieres decir con que intercede.

—No lo sé, pero ésa no es la cuestión. Mira, han descubierto a esa santa Clara. Va a ser la santa patrona de toda la industria.

—¿Dónde has oído todo eso?

—En una reunión de guionistas. Alguien lo había leído en el periódico. Ya han preparado un proyecto de guión sobre ello. Una vez tuvo una visión, en una basílica, donde vio aparecer ante sus ojos todo el asunto de la Navidad. Fue algo así como el primer espectáculo televisivo, por así decirlo.

—¿Qué es una basílica? ¿Qué era ella, italiana? No enseñan italiano en Yale.

—Supongo que sí. Es donde vivió san Francisco de Asís. El pobre. Un lugar llamado Porciúncula.

—Y cómo es que lo llaman san Francisco de Asís si vivió en Porci…

—No lo sé, pero ésa no es la cuestión. Mira, esto es perfecto para el programa que inaugura *Vidas de santos* en televisión. El argumento es fabuloso. Esa pobre chica vivía cerca de san Francisco, y al fin se acercó a preguntarle cómo podía llegar a ser santa, como él, sólo que fundando uno para mujeres. Así que él dijo…

—¿Fundando un qué?

—Como un convento, pero ésa no es la cuestión. Así que él le dio su camisa de pelo, y le dijo que saliera a mendigar durante una temporada, y que volviera luego a su lugar de Porciúncula vestida como una novia. Así que lo hizo. Es perfecto. Esa escena donde todos esos monjes le salen al encuentro con cirios encendidos y la acompañan hasta el altar.

—Y luego qué. ¿Se casan?

—Supongo que sí. ¿Por qué iba a ir vestida de novia si no?

Caminaron un momento en pensativo silencio. El largo pasillo desnudo estaba brillantemente iluminado y vacío, hasta que pasó a su lado un joven de cara enjuta, nariz ligeramente ganchuda y una expresión agotada que emanaba de toda su persona. «Ese, ése es el tipo que está trabajando en ello, es uno de los guionistas. Eh, Willie…». Pero la figura agotada siguió adelante. Llevaba dos libros, uno titulado *La destrucción de los filósofos,* y el otro *La destrucción de la destrucción.* Dobló una esquina y se perdió de vista, murmurando: «Cristo. Cristo, Cristo, Cristo, Cristo, Cristo».

—Estaría bien que pudiéramos conseguir algún testimonio sobre eso.

—Esa santa está muerta.

—Ya lo sé, por el amor de Dios. Quiero decir de alguien como el papa. Sería un bonito enlace.

Caminaron un minuto en pensativo silencio.

—Desde que el Vaticano se sacó de la manga ese truco de decirles a los católicos que no basta con ver la misa por la tele, que siguen teniendo la obligación de salir e ir a la iglesia, cuando en la comodidad de su propio cuarto de estar podrían…

—¡Ellery…!

—¡Morgie!

—¿Os conocéis, muchachos? Ellery, te presento al señor Darling, es el ejecutivo de cuentas para Necrostyle…

—¡Que si nos conocemos! Morgie es un antiguo miembro de los Tibias y Calavera. Toda la industria está siendo tomada por la Ivy League. ¿Cómo demonios estás, Morgie?

—Anoche decía lo mismo en una fiesta —dijo Morgie—. Antes acabábamos todos en el corretaje del viejo, y ahora… no me digas que la publicidad no es el nuevo Wall Street.

Él y Ellery siguieron andando por el brillante pasillo, cada uno con la mano en el hombro del otro. El tercer hombre dijo: «El negocio mejor pagado actualmente en los Estados Unidos…», y siguió tras ellos. Era un antiguo miembro de los Cadetes Arietes de Alabama.

—Sólo he venido a echar un vistazo a nuestro nuevo programa matinal —dijo Morgie—. Pero por qué habéis escogido una escuela de ballet infantil para Necrostyle, qué demonios, Ellery, con programas para críos como los *santos*…

—Así es como se llega a ellos —dijo Ellery—, a través de los críos. Los críos tienen algo. La gente confía en ellos, ¿sabes?

—¡Pero una escuela de ballet! Nosotros queremos…

—Sabemos lo que queréis, Morgie. Ten un poco de paciencia, sabemos lo que queréis.

Había una chica vestida de novia junto a una puerta del pasillo vacío. Era muy joven, y el abundante maquillaje de su cara ocultaba casi su agudo caso de acné. Sonrió con aire indeciso mientras se acercaban. «¿Perdida, cariño?», le preguntó Ellery. Ella asintió con la cabeza y sorbió por la nariz; a tan corta distancia parecía a punto de echarse a llorar. «¿Estás en el programa Vamos a Casarnos?», le guiñó un ojo Ellery. Ella asintió y sorbió con esperanza. «Mira, por allí, rápido, ¿ves a ese tipo con faldas que sale del servicio de caballeros? Rápido, síguelo. Es en el estudio treinta y siete», gritó tras ella mientras corría, estorbada por su ceñida falda de novia, calibrando el silencio del pasillo con sus finos tacones, alejándose de ellos.

El tercer hombre se volvió y observó el movimiento constreñido de sus muslos. En aquel momento tenía una sola y modesta ambición: meter una frase que había oído en alguna parte en el guión de un cómico muy bien pagado. La frase era: «Esta mañana parecía tan bonita fuera que me la dejé fuera todo el día». Los censores no estaban dispuestos a pasarla: decían que era inmoral. Sin embargo, él pensaba que era una de las cosas más graciosas que había oído en su vida. También tenía un salero que llevaba encima y usaba en lugares públicos. Era una tosca reproducción en plástico de la Venus de Milo. El letrero del sitio donde lo había comprado decía: «Dada la divertida manera en que sirven estos saleros, será mejor que los escondan cuando ande cerca la abuelita». Se estaba convirtiendo en un «personaje», que era exactamente lo que quería. Salía a la calle tocado con una gorra. La persona que se la había vendido le había dicho que con ella se parecía al duque de Northumberland. Ahora dijo: «Qué bonito culito apretado».

Morgie miró también hacia la chica por encima del hombro.

—No podrías abrirlo ni con un abrelatas. Es un crimen la forma en que se ciñen.

—Nada de comentarios desdeñosos.

—¿Qué quieres decir?

—Llevamos la publicidad de Kanthold Korsets.

—¿Y ese esparadrapo que tienes encima del ojo, Morgie? ¿Te ha mordido una chica?

—Esa fiesta en la que estuve anoche. Un rebaño de intelectuales asustados, ¿sabes? Un rebaño de puñeteros antiamericanos.

—Pero tú les cantaste las cuarenta, ¿verdad, Morgie? —Ellery se volvió hacia el tercer hombre—. Morgie es serio como el que más. Siempre fue serio, incluso en la universidad.

—Esto es serio, puñeteramente serio. No te engañes —dijo Morgie—. Corrompen, esos puñeteros intelectuales. Corrompen.

—Te dije que Morgie era serio —dijo Ellery, y sonrió burlonamente—. ¿Ves lo que se ha hecho defendiendo a su país?

—No te engañes. Un cabrón empezó a hablar de cómo cambiaría Nueva York si legalizasen la prostitución. Casas de putas limpias y honestas, ¿entiendes?

—En ese caso tendrás que considerarme antiamericano a mí también, en Alabama…

—No, la cuestión era la sublimación, ¿entiendes? Esto es el puterío de las artes, y nosotros somos los chulos, ¿entiendes?

—Deberías haberle pegado.

—Lo hice. Así me hice esto. —Morgie señaló el esparadrapo que llevaba encima del ojo—. Por mucho que se lo expliques no lo entienden. Es demasiado simple. Es demasiado puñeteramente simple para que lo entiendan. Siguen pensando que sin publicidad los cigarrillos les costarían la mitad. Todo el puñetero alto nivel de vida americano depende de la economía americana. Toda la puñetera economía americana depende de la producción en masa. Para mantener un puñetero mercado de masas hace falta la publicidad. Eso es lo que hay. Sin publicidad, un producto desaparecería de la noche a la mañana. Da igual lo que sea, un libro o una marca de jabón, desaparecería. Hemos pasado por la puñetera Era de la Fe, por la puñetera

Era de la Razón. Esta es la Era de la Publicidad.

—Vale, Morgie, tú crees en ello. Ven a la sala de control a ver a tus bailarinas.

—Pues claro que creo en ello, qué carajo. Tienes que considerar la publicidad como información pública, eso es lo que es.

—Vale, Morgie, cálmate. Apaga tu cigarrillo.

Morgie tiró el cigarrillo al suelo, y se detuvo a apagarlo con el zapato.

—Ya sé, pero me pone negro la forma en que hablan algunos. Hablan como si no fuéramos respetables.

—Es el negocio mejor pagado en los Estados Unidos —dijo el antiguo Cadete Ariete de Alabama.

Salió por la puerta un hombre en mangas de camisa.

—¿Has visto a Benny? —le preguntó Ellery.

—¿Benny qué?

Una chica que entraba oyó esto.

—Sé a quién te refieres —dijo a Ellery—. Está en OP, nadie de aquí le conoce. Sé a quién te refieres, estuvo aquí antes y se fue.

—Gracias —dijo Ellery; encorvando un hombro tiró su cigarrillo, lo apagó y se quedó mirando a la chica que se alejaba por el pasillo, mientras sostenía la puerta abierta.

—¿Sólo tenéis dos cámaras ahí arriba? —preguntó Morgie. Estaban mirando hacia tres pantallas selectivas. Ellery asintió con la cabeza—. No creo que pueda llamar a esto ni un programa de serie B, ni siquiera para el horario matinal —dijo Morgie. Estaba observando la pantalla de primeros planos donde una niña de cuatro años, estirada en la barra de ejercicios, sonreía con mucha personalidad hacia la cámara equivocada. Ellery consultó su reloj.

—Y mira. ¿Qué demonios están haciendo ahora, eso también forma parte del espectáculo? —Ellery estaba mirando aquella pantalla, donde la fachada de una fea iglesia tembló hasta quedar enfocada. La imagen cambió al achaparrado campanario, y giró hacia arriba para seguir la aguja hasta la punta—. Hay un tipo ahí arriba, hay un tipo trepando ahí arriba…

Alguien pasó un teléfono a Ellery. «Está bien, teleobjetivo en la número uno en cuanto tengáis instalada en la calle la cámara número dos, ¿me oyes? Mete un aviso ahora mismo, ¿me oyes? Cobertura de primera mano de un drama humano al desnudo, y sigues así. Enfoca la iglesia, mejor si puedes conseguir una toma del servicio que están celebrando, pero no estropees *ésa* de arriba, ¿me oyes? Eso es, eso es…», siguió, observando la pantalla. «Levanta un poco, toma las campanas…».

—Mira a ver si pueden coger entera la puñetera cruz —susurró Morgie.

«Señoras y señores, Necrostyle, la moderna ayuda científica para la vida civilizada, interrumpe su programa habitual *Angeles de hoy* para ofrecerles la cobertura en directo de un drama humano al desnudo…».

La pantalla de primeros planos volvió a iluminarse con la figura de un hombre que trepaba por la aguja tejada hacia la cruz. Ellery se quedó callado, apretando el teléfono.

—Pero espera un momento —dijo—. Espera un momento…

—Déjalo seguir, déjalo seguir —dijo Morgie a su lado—. Es tremendo.

—Espera un momento…

—Casi se puede ver el sudor en su cara —dijo Morgie a su lado—. Es una toma de ensueño.

—Es una pena que no le hayan puesto un poco de maquillaje antes de subir —dijo el antiguo Cadete Ariete de Alabama—. Pero esa corbata azul claro…

—Esa corbata azul claro…

Morgie dio un paso hacia las pantallas. Contuvo el aliento. Cuando se dio cuenta de que el hombre que tenía al lado estaba conteniendo el aliento, empezó a respirar forzadamente. El hombre que tenía al lado se dio cuenta de ello, y empezó a respirar forzadamente.

Entonces dejaron de respirar los dos de nuevo al mismo tiempo.

—Parece que nuestra cámara tiene problemas… Lo sentimos, amigos, pero debido a la multitud que se ha reunido en la inmediata vecindad de la acera parece que no vamos a poder acercar nuestra cámara para tomar un primer plano…

—De ensueño —dijo Morgie, y respiraron de nuevo.

Cuando se borró la escena, dando paso a un rostro grasicnto de pelo engominado, se volvieron el uno hacia el otro.

—¿Dónde está Ellery?

«… que les hemos ofrecido por cortesía de Productos Necrostyle. De modo que no lo olviden, amigos, Necrostyle, en la vanguardia de la vida civilizada moderna. Pidan a su farmacéutico favorito el producto

Necrostyle que convenga a sus necesidades. Necrostyle, el somnífero en forma de oblea, no se masca, no deja sabor. Zap, el despertador milagroso. Puño, está en un puño. Y Pubies, el recentísimo…».

—¿Dónde está Ellery?

Al fondo, un órgano eléctrico tocaba «El final de un día perfecto».

«… sin efectos posteriores nocivos. Para hombres y mujeres por encima de los cuarenta, empiece a vivir otra vez con Pubies…».

—Debe de haber salido, ¿crees que eso le ha deprimido?

—De modo que recuerden, amigos, cuando lleguen al final de un día perfecto…

Salieron al brillante pasillo, donde un momento después apareció Ellery saliendo de un despacho. Andaba muy despacio y mirando al suelo. «Sólo tenía que ver un momento a B. F.», dijo cuando se reunieron con él, y se quedó allí parado junto a la puerta, y encendió un cigarrillo.

—De ensueño —le felicitó Morgie. Pero Ellery no levantó los ojos. Oían una voz dentro del despacho. Era B. F. hablando por teléfono. «¿Diga, diga, Ben? Escucha, ha habido un salto hace unos minutos, era… ¿qué? No, éste era un hombre, se ha tirado de una iglesia en el Bronx, era… Sí, de eso se trata, era uno de nuestros hombres, un tipo llamado Benny… ¿qué? No lo sé, algo ha debido ir mal. Ya sé que no puedes encubrirlo, pero intenta dejarnos al margen de ello… Sí, entonces pueden inflar ese otro, el de la mujer…». Dentro del despacho, B. F. colgó el teléfono. Se quedó mirando al vacío durante casi un minuto. Luego chasqueó los labios y sacó un puro.

Ellery arrojó un grueso anillo de humo hacia el suelo. Flotó alargándose, cayendo cada vez más despacio, y se posó en torno a la punta de su zapato.

Morgie no había dejado de hablar en todo el rato. «Lo has dirigido magníficamente, era una toma de ensueño. Pero oye, ¿qué te pasa?, ¿te ha trastornado eso? ¿Una cosa como ésa? Míralo de este modo. Esas cosas ocurren. Esta ha ocurrido. Resulta que nosotros estábamos allí. Qué demonios, no es más que un puñetero día de trabajo. Vamos —dijo mientras echaban a andar por el pasillo. Ellery tiró su cigarrillo y se detuvo a pisarlo—. Vamos, te invito a comer en el mejor restaurante de la ciudad. Ya verás cómo te reanimas».

—¿Veintiuno? —dijo el Cadetearietedealabama.

—¿Veintiuno, Ellery?

—Veintiuno.

Uno tras otro destellaron los flashes, y a la luz gris de aquel día parecieron detener cada vez un instante de movimiento desordenado, igual que el relámpago congela el movimiento y luego, de nuevo a oscuras, la persistencia de la visión retiene esa imagen de abandono que no podría haberse sostenido por sí misma, como lo hizo aquí, sobre el pavimento invernal, después de que el fotógrafo del periódico recogiera su equipo y entrara corriendo en el hotel, con la esperanza de llegar a la final deportiva.

El correo matinal venía con retraso, pues el cuerpo que caía había golpeado al cartero, provocando una serie de molestias que interfirieron en numerosas rutinas. En el exterior de aquel hotel de desvaída elegancia eduardiana, que como había llegado a ser un lugar distintivo estaba a punto de ser derribado, el cuerpo yacía en una pose de temeraria extravagancia, una actitud gratuita que incomodaba a transeúntes como la mujer alta que llevaba a una caniche de la correa e iba diciendo a una amiga: «Se llama
Huki-lau
, que significa “merienda de pescado” en hawaiano, ¿no es una monada? Antes se mordía las uñas hasta dejárselas en carne viva, pero el psicoanálisis le está viniendo de maravilla. ¡Oh, Dios! ¡Mira! No, no mires».

Al descubrir que todavía respiraba, se la llevaron en una camilla en vez de en la caja de pino que ya habían empezado a descargar.

La habitación del hotel resultó tan provechosa que el fotógrafo del periódico telefoneó para pedir más flashes, y preguntar en la sección de información local si le podían mandar a alguien que supiera taquigrafía. Dijo que el reportero que iba con él acababa de ponerse enfermo por el humo. Luego volvió corriendo por el pasillo, respiró hondo y entró en aquel *mélange* de humo, whisky y rosas, donde sólo se detuvo a barrer con el pie parte de las cartas para formar un montón, como testimonio gráfico del reportaje que diría que cubrían la habitación entera hasta la altura del tobillo. Las botellas no tuvo que reordenarlas en modo alguno, pues sus golletes vacíos asomaban por todas partes. En cuanto a las rosas, no habría podido hacer un trabajo mejor aunque le hubiera dedicado un mes entero. Aparecían en guirnaldas marchitas, marchitándose, y dos o tres docenas todavía lozanas, allí donde se le había antojado a aquella inventiva desesperada, y donde había alcanzado la mano. «Rosas…», diría más tarde (cuando alguien

intentase recordar un verso que incluyera «Rosas, rosas…» para utilizarlo en el pie de foto), «Rosas para llenar el infierno». El cuarto de baño, sobre todo, estaba completamente transformado. No había un solo sitio para sentarse.

Pero cuando volvió a su redacción, el fotógrafo del periódico se encontró con una atmósfera de tensa pesadumbre que ni siquiera pudo disipar su valioso botín. Tanto el director gerente, como el jefe de redacción, como el de información internacional estaban abismados en un reportaje aparecido en sus columnas. Había dos fotos: en una de ellas, una niñita con medias blancas; pero estaban mirando la otra, la de un hombre de cara redonda cuya textura fofa y débil desmentían un primoroso bigote y unos ojos penetrantes bajo un pico de viuda limpiamente dividido. «Ese cabrón», musitó uno de ellos, y no quedó claro quién fue, pues todas sus expresiones reflejaban el mismo sentimiento. «Ese cabronazo latino».

—Bueno, ¿cuánto son cuatro millones de liras? ¿Qué son las liras, españolas o italianas?

—Italianas.

—¿Y qué quieren hacer esos españoles de mierda con dinero italiano?, por el amor de Cristo.

—Eso es asunto suyo.

—Seis mil seiscientos sesenta y seis dólares y dos tercios de centavo —informó un joven reportero, tras un cálculo cuidadoso y erróneo.

—Déjame ver otra vez esa maldita carta. «Un respetable profesor y hombre de negocios», por el amor de Cristo. «Sólo un niño de teta cuando ocurrió aquel desgraciado incidente», por el amor de Cristo. «Indemnización… mi carácter intachable… cuatro millones (
4 000 000
) de liras…», por el dulce amor de Cristo.

—Tú también eres católico, ¿no?

—Cristo sí, pero no uno de esos ignorantes católicos latinos.

—¿Entonces?

—Entonces estamos jodidos. Llegaremos a un acuerdo con tres millones. ¿Cuánto es eso…? ¿Y qué demonios es todo esto?

—Éstas son parte de las cartas de esa habitación de hotel desde la que se tiró por la ventana esa tipa —dijo el fotógrafo, y siguió sacándolas de un bolsillo abultado—. No me mandasteis una taquimeca, así que me largué con unas cuantas antes de que llegaran los polis.

—Cualquier buen reportero habría hecho eso en primer lugar. ¿Por qué no las has traído todas?

—Habría necesitado un camión…

—Así que dejaste allí las demás para que el resto de los periódicos de la ciudad puedan hurgar a gusto…

—Envié una de ellas por correo.

—¿Que hiciste *qué?*

—Había una muy gruesa y bien cerrada, con el nombre de ese doctor no sé cuántos, así que simplemente busqué el nombre en la guía y escribí la dirección…

—Estúpido cabrón. Estúpido cabrón. ¿Qué dirección?

—No me acuerdo, la primera que vi bajo su nombre, creo que era en la calle Catorce…

—Oh estúpido cabrón.

—Simplemente creí que le haría un favor a ella, yo…

—Simplemente creíste… ¡Cristo! ¿Cómo entraste en este periódico? ¿Cómo entró cualquiera de vosotros en este periódico? ¿Y cuánto son tres millones de liras?, ¿todavía no lo has calculado?

—No me salen más que seises, seis, seis, seis…

—Vale, cállate. ¿Y ahora, qué es esto?

—Un reloj. Lo encontré en la acera, a su lado.

—Jesucristo. —La cosa destrozada quedó colgando entre sus dedos—. Ni Minnie lo reconocería. «Había rosas, rosas durante todo el camino».

Y como una avenida de banderas desplegadas, los periódicos temblaban en las manos de los pasajeros cuyas caras reflejaban contento estreñido e indigencia satisfecha, prodigios de inconsciencia, realizados conspirando contra la vida, seguros en el desencanto, recuperados de los tiempos en que el índice gnático de Cleopatra, o el índice cefálico de Nefertiti, podían haber tenido importancia, mientras las sacudidas del tren sólo causaban respuestas negligentes de posturas que se mofaban del esteticista que ideó la proporción divina de siete a uno partiendo de las dimensiones del ser humano.

Todas menos una: pues había cierta viveza en la postura del señor Pivner, como había cierta avidez en su cara, que lo distinguían, mientras se dirigía apresuradamente hacia su casa por debajo del suelo. Eddie Zefnic iba a venir otra vez esta noche, e iban a escuchar algo en la radio que, según decía Eddie, valía

realmente la pena escuchar.

Por encima del suelo apretó el paso, deteniéndose apenas en los bordillos, deteniéndose apenas a saludar a Jerry cuando compró el periódico, a punto de ser atropellado en la misma esquina de su calle cuando un camión giró bruscamente pasándole por los ojos un primitivo pictograma familiar y la leyenda: «Aquí no crece nadie salvo el negocio». Ni siquiera se detuvo apenas cuando, cerca ya de su portal, dejó caer una moneda en la taza de hojalata del acordeonista ciego que llevaba unas cuantas tardes allí apostado.

Una vez dentro no perdió un momento, ni siquiera se detuvo a echar el cerrojo de la puerta a su espalda, sino que entró a oscuras y cruzó en línea recta la habitación hasta la lámpara de pie, que encendió graduándola en su máxima intensidad. Comió sin sentir nada, salvo lo que estaba demasiado caliente o demasiado frío; miró tres veces para asegurarse de que había dos botellas de cerveza de litro en la nevera; se puso la inyección con prontitud profesional; y luego, dejando caer los hombros con cansancio, alzándolos de nuevo con orgullo, se puso la bata, ciñéndose sus generosos pliegues: pues seguía teniendo la sensación de que había sido un regalo del invitado que esperaba. Encendió la radio, que le respondió con «Las campanas de santa María», interpretado por la Banda del Departamento de Sanidad. Sin saber muy bien qué era lo que había dicho Eddie que valía realmente la pena escuchar, lo dejó ahí y se sentó con su periódico.

LOS ARTISTAS NEGROS —Leyó maquinalmente el anuncio.

Nosotros lo pintamos Usted lo firma ¿Por qué no hacer una exposición?

Se lo quedó mirando un minuto entero sin comprender, y luego siguió con un artículo que decía que unos científicos suecos esperaban poder criar pronto hombres de diez pies de altura.

No podía concentrarse. No era que no tuviera puestas las gafas, que apenas había usado desde Navidad: podía leer con bastante claridad. No era que el periódico fuera menos provocativo que de costumbre: todo lo contrario, en realidad. Además del reportaje de primera plana, donde leyó fragmentos de las cartas encontradas «hasta la altura del tobillo» en la habitación del hotel (entre las que incluían una propuesta de matrimonio dirigida a un hombre ejecutado por asesinato hacía tiempo, una discrepancia justificada con la prueba de una noticia arrugada, arrancada de un viejo periódico que habían usado para envolver las rosas), había otras entretenidas tribulaciones: los huesos de Toro Sentado, enterrados en Dakota del Norte, habían sido desenterrados por personas no autorizadas y enterrados en Dakota del Sur; un hombre detenido bajo la acusación de imprimir billetes de diez dólares decía que la cosa había empezado con aguafuertes de historia natural, que se había «visto arrastrado casi sin darse cuenta a la falsificación por la afición a andar por ahí grabando planchas de cobre»; un tal Reverendo Gilbert Sullivan había sido detenido por practicar la frenología sin licencia, y además por distribuir literatura que describía su reino sudafricano, agua bendita del manantial de Nebo, polvo de huesos del Gato Negro de Tío Ned, polvos de poderío de Joe Ojo de Águila, aceite de pie de gato del Gato Negro de Tía Sally, y óleo sagrado n.º 8 de la Madre Pata… entonces sonó el timbre de la puerta.

—Es *El Mesías* de Haendel —dijo Eddie, una vez hubieron intercambiado saludos ligeramente azorados, y después de dejar su montón de libros nuevos—. Es en esa emisora tan pequeña —siguió, acercándose a la radio con aire formal, articulando con la leve disculpa de su tono la expresión de la cara del propietario de aquel modesto artilugio de plástico, que estaba a su espalda, entrelazando ansiosamente las manos.

«Qué he *he-cho*… de modo amigos que para recibir gratis su… consigue controlar el balón… *en este momento*… y ahora un nuevo y flamante…».

—¿Todavía… llegamos a tiempo? —preguntó el señor Pivner de modo vacilante, insinuante, cohibido, una timidez reflejada en la cara de su serio y flaco invitado mientras una mano se hundía en un bolsillo y el reloj de oro se abría de golpe, y el señor Pivner lo miró, y miró su futuro con la emoción que una vez había sentido contemplando el suyo.

—Desde que estoy estudiando tanto no tengo ya muchas ocasiones de oír música —dijo Eddie, inclinado sobre la radio con una expresión inflexible en la cara, y como en la caja de Pandora, el torrente de cosas encerradas en aquella maravillosa creación brotaba mientras giraba el sintonizador—. Debería ser aquí mismo —murmuró, como buscando realmente el único bien que quedaba al fondo cuando se levantaba la tapa y todos los tormentos y absurdidades que yacían allí a la espera salían en tromba, para imponerse con tal minuciosidad en la vida del hombre que llegaba a darlos por supuesto como parte de ella—. No queda ninguna… esperanza —musitó Eddie cuando un chorro de risa nauseabunda, abierta como un grifo, le salpicó la cara.

—Eddie…

«Los propietarios de aparatos de televisión del área metropolitana presenciaron hoy una tragedia humana al desnudo en sus propios cuartos de estar, cuando…».

—¡Escuche…!

El Mesías intentaba a duras penas salir aplastándose por un resquicio infinitesimal, donde se veía empujado a codazos, con los hombros, apartado y deformado por una contienda acrobática entre violines que interpretaban *el Movimiento perpetuo* de Paganini, por un lado, y una voz cordialmente necia que se dirigía a amigos, finalmente un programa concurso en el que regalaban una casa entre muchas risas disciplinadas.

El señor Pivner escuchó con toda su atención, y apenas pudo oír:

«Fue despreciado… rechazado… un varón de dolores…».

Pero se encontró escuchando el programa concurso, en el que un tal señor Crotcher acababa de responder a una pregunta sobre una fábula que tenía a una hormiga como héroe, ganando así una casa completamente amueblada en una comunidad suburbana popular llamada Arsole Acres.

—Un varón de dolores y avezado a la aflicción… —mientras la voz describía los gozos de la comunidad suburbana (su curioso nombre venía, al parecer, del latín *ars,* que significa arte),[2] y sonó el timbre de la puerta.

Había algo familiar en el hombre que estaba detrás del que abrió con el pulgar una pequeña cartera, cuando entraron, para dejar ver por un instante el destello de la estrella del Servicio Secreto.

—¿Y quién es éste?

Eddie Zefnic estaba allí parado, con los ojos tan abiertos como su anfitrión.

—¿Este? Un… joven amigo mío, es… ¿qué pasa, agente?

—Será mejor que vengas también.

—Pero ¿a qué viene todo esto?

—Ya nos dirá a qué viene cuando lleguemos al centro.

—Pero… ¿adónde vamos?

—A la esquina de las calles Oeste y Once —dijo pacientemente el hombre del Tesoro. Luego—: Espere un momento, déjeme echar un vistazo a esa bata.

—Pero esto, yo… —empezó el señor Pivner, quitándosela.

Miraron la etiqueta. «Es ésta, desde luego…», y la enrollaron.

—¿Va a decirnos que no sabía que la pagaron con dinero falso?

—Pero…

El señor Pivner estaba poniéndose la chaqueta, el abrigo, la bufanda verde. Eddie Zefnic estaba recogiendo sus libros de texto de ciencia nuevos.

—Espere un momento, ¿adónde va?

—Sólo a… buscar mis gafas —dijo el señor Pivner, y el hombre que había estado callado le acompañó al dormitorio. Sólo habló cuando estaban a punto de salir:

—Será mejor que apague la radio, no volverá aquí esta noche —y el señor Pivner lo reconoció, cuando cruzaba deprisa la habitación a oscuras, mientras lo esperaban en la puerta. Era el acordeonista ciego.

—Venga, vamos…

Pero ni siquiera entonces abandonó la costumbre al señor Pivner. Esperó a que el locutor de la radio terminara su frase:

«Y ahora, amigos, manténganse en nuestra sintonía a la espera de un drama con el impacto de la realidad».

El programa se abrió con «Hermoso soñador», tocado en el órgano del estudio. De algún lugar, lejanos, espectrales, llegaron los tiernos aleluyas de un coro procesional del siglo XVI, escrito por Gabrieli para ser interpretado en la plaza de San Marcos, donde era organista.

—«Vine aquí de otro estado pensando que sería más feliz con mi padre y…», empezó una voz insistente y temblorosa; y las apariciones de la plaza de San Marcos se retiraron. «Espera un momentito, querido, ¿cuántos años tienes…?». Con delicada fuerza preternatural, los espectros reaparecieron por un instante en cuanto se calló la voz viscosa, y luego: «Doce años y vine aquí de otro estado pensando que sería más feliz con mi padre y mi padre empezó a beber otra vez y a pegar a mi madrastra…».

Se oyó un golpazo. Stanley se levantó, y retiró el pie de la rejilla de la radio de plástico, que estaba en el suelo. Se quedó parado, mirándola, sin poder creer que hubiera hecho una cosa así: pero allí estaba, hecha una muda maraña a sus pies. Luego miró con inquietud por encima del hombro, como si lo pudiera haber visto alguien (el dueño de la radio prestada, por ejemplo). A su alrededor, todo lo que había en la habitación estaba empaquetado y listo, todo menos el crucifijo colgado sobre su cama. Los ojos de Stanley repararon en él, y se lo quedaron mirando. Empezó a dolerle otra vez la muela, la misma que le había

estado doliendo a la hora en que murió su madre; y con aquel sordo dolor punzante volvió aquel recuerdo, punzando con la misma intensidad. Entonces Stanley cuadró los hombros. Se enderezó, un movimiento que le llenó el pecho de aire. Apretó los dientes con fuerza, y luego apagó la luz sin echar una mirada al paquete que contenía su obra casi concluida, palimpsestos junto con partituras en limpio, que esperaba corregir y copiar en el barco; y salió por la puerta sin detenerse en el servicio comunal del vestíbulo, como había pensado hacer, pararse allí a corregir por milésima vez aquel problema de multiplicación, y se vio en la calle sin la menor idea de adonde iba. No tardó en llegar al lugar que todos los demás que habían salido tan a la ventura como él decidían que era el lugar hacia el que habían salido.

La *jukebox* tocaba «Retorno a Sorrento», y Ed Feasley, a quien no recordaba haber sido presentado, lo saludó con: «Hola… Criss-to», y le tendió un vaso de cerveza.

Una atmósfera agotada flotaba sobre el lugar. La gente estaba parada en ángulos chocantes, como relojes que deben colocarse en ángulos chocantes para que sigan funcionando, que es a fin de cuentas lo único que se espera de ellos, pues rara vez indican la hora correcta, esferas rajadas que se conservan por costumbre mientras sigan un poco el rastro del día y la noche.

—Así que entonces empezó a hablar de sopetón en braille… —dijo alguien.

Y Hannah pidió a Ed Feasley que la invitara a un vaso de cerveza. Mientras él lo pedía, ella se volvió hacia Stanley y dijo:

—He oído que te vas a Roma de peregrino. ¿De dónde has sacado el dinero?

—Mi madre… lo dejó.

—¿Un seguro?, no se puede cobrar un seguro si…

—No, fue que… lo tenía prendido en la ropa, en la ropa interior.

—He oído que tu amiguita de las uñas blancas se ha tirado también por una ventana.

—¿Qué? —Stanley se la quedó mirando con horror.

—¿No te has enterado? Max estaba ahí dentro, tenía un periódico. Viene en la primera plana. Se ha tirado por la ventana de un hotel.

—No, pero ella no se habría tirado, se ha debido de… caer —titubeó—. Ella no se habría… suicidado…

—Se ha tirado, no seas… así con eso, se ha tirado. Y no se ha matado, simplemente se ha hecho cisco. El periódico dice que está en el Bellevue. —Hannah cogió su cerveza, dio un sorbo sin decir palabra y se volvió—. Eh, ¿adónde vas?

—Bueno, pensaba pasarme por allí, por el Bellevue…

—Vamos, por el amor de Dios, no puedes entrar allí a estas horas. En cualquier caso probablemente no podrías visitarla. Probablemente estará toda colgada allí…

—Por favor… —dijo Stanley alzando la vista en súbita súplica hacia Ed Feasley, que miraba al suelo en silencio.

Los tres guardaron silencio un momento, con la vista baja, y les llegó la voz quejumbrosa de Don Bildow: «Está completamente hinchada, y yo a punto de embarcarme. No sé si debería marcharme con ella así».

—¿Hidropesía?

—¿Cómo va a tener hidropesía una niña de seis años? —gimió Bildow, tocándose la corbata amarilla y marrón que parecía sostenerle.

—Quiero decir, Crissto, ¿qué le pasa a la gente? —preguntó finalmente Ed Feasley. Stanley parecía aturdido—. Y quiero decir, Crissto, todo el mundo se está largando, todo el mundo se está yendo al extranjero. No he estado en París desde que tenía siete años, ¡Crissto, ir allí ahora! Quiero decir, a Saint Germain des Prés, donde están imitando al Greenwich Village, y aquí estamos nosotros, en el Greenwich Village, imitando todavía a Montmartre… Quiero decir, Crissto. —Hannah le había estado observando con atención, notando la tensión de su voz, el modo forzado en que hablaba y desviaba la vista. Cuando la alzó y la vio empezó a hablar de nuevo, con voz más forzada y refiriéndose a Max para evitar referirse a cualquier otra cosa—. Y quiero decir, ¿habéis visto ese fajo de dinero confederado que tenía Max? Todos esos billetes antiguos de diez y veinte dólares confederados, dice que los ha conseguido por casi nada, quiero decir ¿para qué quiere eso si se va a París? Quiero decir, ¿sabéis? Crissto. Y le he visto hablando con Bildow, quiero decir cómo es que se lleva tan bien con Bildow después de esa cosa del poema, ese poema que publicó Bildow…

—Lo ha explicado —dijo Hannah—. Él no lo plagió, dice que fue esa chica escuálida, ¿te acuerdas de ella?, la que escribía poesía, o eso decía a todo el mundo. Max dice que ella se lo dio y le pidió que lo publicara con su nombre. Supongo que no querría utilizar su propio nombre por si acaso no le gustaba a la gente. Fue una jugarreta, poner a Max en un aprieto de ese modo. Probablemente estaría colocada. Han

pescado a ese yonqui que la andaba rondando.

—¿Y qué le ha pasado a ella?

—No lo sé.

—Quiero decir, Crissto, qué le pasa a la gente. ¿Sabéis? Quiero decir, como Anselm, ¿os habéis enterado de lo suyo? Max me ha dicho que ha ingresado en un monasterio. Quiero decir, Crissto, preferiría morirme. Ten cuidado, estás derramando tu cerveza.

—Él ha… ¿eso es verdad? —preguntó Stanley.

—Quiero decir, Crissto, ¿cómo voy a saberlo? —dijo Ed Feasley con impaciencia—. Es lo que me ha contado Max. Una orden con voto de silencio, en el oeste.

—Siempre pensé que era marica —dijo Hannah.

—Pero… ¿eso es verdad? —repitió Stanley, mirando a Ed Feasley.

—¡Cómo voy a saberlo! —le gritó en la cara Ed Feasley—. Quiero decir, ya te he dicho que… Lo siento, pero Crissto, quiero decir, ¿es que no estamos todos hartos de todo esto? —Lo miraron con sorpresa, porque la voz lo había cambiado tanto que casi se le quebraba; y luego se recuperó sin alzar la vista hacia ellos, musitando—: Porque, Crissto, quiero decir que no se puede sin más, ya sabéis, quiero decir, Crissto…

—He oído decir que compraste un avión —dijo Stanley un momento después. Ed Feasley asintió con la cabeza, pero no alzó la vista. Y entonces Hannah le preguntó:

—¿Es verdad eso, lo que hemos leído en el periódico? ¿Era tu padre el que salía en el *Times* esta mañana?

—Cómo voy a saberlo, yo no leo el *Times*. Crissto. Supongo que sí. —Entonces alzó la vista—. ¿Tenéis un cigarrillo? —Ambos se lo quedaron mirando sin expresión—. ¿Qué quieres decir? —volvió a exclamar—. ¿Todo eso de… esas acusaciones de connivencia con un gobierno extranjero, y que todos los astilleros se han ido al carajo, y que además de eso mi viejo ha tenido un ataque? ¿Es eso lo que quieres decir? Quiero decir, Crissto, di lo que quieres decir.

—Ella… no quería decir nada —dijo Stanley extendiendo una mano.

—Bueno, Crissto, nadie quiere decir nada —se apartó musitando Feasley, y se puso a restregar el suelo con el zapato.

—Pero tú… ¿andas bien de dinero?, debías de tener un montón de dinero si pudiste comprarte un avión, ¿no?

—Esa cosa, se estrelló en Florida. ¿Habéis estado alguna vez en Tampa? Quiero decir, Crissto, qué ciudad más asquerosa es ésa, Tampa. Se pusieron la hostia de bordes con eso.

—¿Te estrellaste?, ¿con un avión?

—Estaba despegando, me tragué esa bandada de pájaros asquerosos.

—Pero ¿saliste sano y salvo?, ¿no te hiciste nada?

—Crissto no, no sé qué pasó después de ver esos pájaros blancos delante mismo de mis narices. Estaba borracho. Quiero decir, Crissto, qué Crissto de lío horrible es todo, todo de golpe.

Ed Feasley se quedó mirando la punta del zapato que restregaba contra el suelo de tablas, pulverizando una colilla contra la madera, y no alzó la vista hasta que el silencio prolongado de los otros le provocó. Alzó la vista, y ellos la bajaron.

—Quiero decir, mi viejo, Crissto, nunca me ha caído bien el viejo cabrón, pero me… me jode la hostia verlo así, ahí… ahí sentado sin más y sin poder mover nada, está ahí sentado sin más.

Cuando Hannah empezó a hablar, Stanley la miró con aprensión, como si esperase alguna nota de ácido triunfo (y algo así le habían atribuido en un suelto periodístico sobre su detención la noche en que estaba lavando su ropa en los servicios del metro, tildándola de estalinista, o trotskista, o de la raíz que asociaba ambas cosas, algo así); pues tanto él como ella parecían sentir que de pronto habían perdido a un amigo, o al menos a un conocido adinerado al que podían acudir en un momento de necesidad, como en efecto habían hecho: o quizá que alguien de esas características había simplemente salido de sus vidas, y otro, con el que guardaba un parecido superficial, había entrado. Por eso a Stanley le sorprendió ver en la cara de Hannah la misma expresión que sentía en la suya; y su tono, que no pudo evitar ser amargo, quizá aún más por todo esto, supuso un alivio, pues cambió bruscamente de tema con:

—¿Os acordáis de aquel jodido maricón que me tiró al suelo de un golpe en la fiesta de Max aquella noche? ¿Sabéis qué ha sido de él?

—Herschel… ¿qué?

—Es una estrella de cine.

—¿Ése?

—Es una estrella de cine. Es el nuevo mejor partido de Hollywood.

—Santo Crissto.

—Va a ser san Sebastián en una película sobre la Virgen María.

—Pero si él era… si san Sebastián era del siglo III… —se quejó débilmente Stanley.

—Santo Crissto. Quiero decir, que esto es como una autopsia, como la noche que Otto y yo… Crissto. No sé. —Ed Feasley miró a su alrededor—. Quiero decir, que cuando vengo aquí toda esta gente me recuerda partes de mí mismo que nunca han crecido.

—Vivimos en un país que nunca ha crecido.

—Vivimos en todo un maldito mundo que nunca ha crecido —dijo Ed Feasley—. Y todo el mundo se está marchando. Quiero decir —miró otra vez a su alrededor—, todo el mundo se ha ido. ¿Adónde van? ¿Qué van a hacer cuando lleguen allí?

—Bildow va a ver si echa un polvo —dijo Hannah.

—Quiero decir, Crissto, casi lo comprendo. ¿Sabéis? Lo único para lo que me ha servido un condón en mi vida es para llenarlo de agua y hacerlo rodar por el suelo. Lo hacíamos en la universidad. Quiero decir, que os sorprendería lo enormes que se ponen. Es como una gran masa de agua sin nada alrededor rodando de un lado a otro.

—¿Creéis que habría tantos maricas por ahí rondando si hubiera unas cuantas buenas casas de putas en la ciudad? —preguntó Hannah ásperamente—. No, aquí prefieren ver a sus chicos irse a la cama con una foto de alguna estrella de cine con grandes tetas, y pasar una luna de miel de cinco dedos, como decía Anselm, con una estrella de cine.

—Lo sé. Quiero decir, Crissto, cada vez que voy de bares en busca de una chica acabo borracho hablando con algún viejo.

Los tres se quedaron mirando al suelo.

Don Bildow se fue, con un aire todo lo vengativo que pueden permitir unas gafas de plástico. Acababa de enterarse de que alguien a quien conocía había sido detenido cuando intentaba cargar un traje de trescientos dólares a la cuenta de alguien a quien ninguno de ellos conocía. Otro descubrió que el viejo del abrigo negro, el sombrero negro, los chanclos negros y el paraguas negro no era en modo alguno el crítico de arte de *Viejas masas,* sino que lo habían contratado para que fuera a visitar galerías porque daba el tipo (y así podía estar calentito); las columnas las escribía una mujer en Jersey City, que las mandaba por correo porque nunca venía a Nueva York. El viejo se fue, llevándose un vaso de cerveza. Y al fondo de la barra, el Gran Hombre Sin Afeitar recibió una oferta de trabajo para escribir la columna de corazones solitarios de un periódico de Buffalo.

—Me encantan esos escritores serios que escriben un libro donde dicen que el dinero da un significado falso al arte y luego agarran un cabreo de mil demonios cuando su libro no los hace ganar nada de dinero.

—Toma, echa esto en la *jukebox.* Pon «Retorno a Sorrento».

—Eso es lo que está sonando.

—Vuélvelo a poner.

—Crissto me gustaría que dejara de sonar eso y pusieran «En el lado soleado de la calle».

Stanley se había quedado allí parado con aire alelado, mirando al suelo sucio, y siguió así hasta que Hannah le preguntó qué iba a hacer al día siguiente.

—Bueno, supongo que primero me pasaré por el Bellevue —dijo—. ¿Por qué?

—Pensaba que tal vez quisieras venir conmigo a sacar un pasaporte.

—Pero tú, ¿tú también te vas? ¿A Roma?

—¿Roma, por el amor de Dios? Me voy a París. —Lo único que pudo decir él fue: «Pero…», mirándola. Hannah lo miró directamente a la cara, y luego, con la misma rapidez con que él se había vuelto, se puso de puntillas y le besó—. Porque quizá no vuelva a verte —dijo, y se fue. Él se quedó allí parado, tembloroso el bigote, y se lo apretó con el dedo en el sitio donde le había besado.

—¿Sabes? —dijo Ed Feasley a su lado—. Quiero decir que me siento como si hubiera dejado pedacitos de mí mismo desparramados por todas partes. Como si nunca pudiera terminar de juntarlos aunque me pasara el resto de mi vida intentándolo. Trozos míos y trozos de otros revueltos y esparcidos por todas partes. Quiero decir que hay gente con la que… haces algo y nunca vuelves avería. Como Otto, ¿sabes? ¿Dónde demonios está?

—No lo sé —dijo Stanley con claridad, pero siguió mirando al suelo.

—Quiero decir, que seguramente estará armándola buena y pasándoselo bien en algún sitio, ¿sabes? Pero Crissto, ¡pasarlo bien! Quiero decir, como la noche que fuimos a aquella fiesta en Harlem con todos los maricas, parece que fue hace diez años, aquel negrito del vestido lavanda en el urinario de al lado. Y estaba aquella rubia, una mujer, quiero decir, que aún me parece oírla cantando: «Si no encuentras café Maxwell

House del bueno compra té Lipton por huevos», quiero decir, Crissto, me parece estar oyéndola ahora mismo. En cierto modo nunca me repuse de esa noche, en cierto modo me quedé colgado, hasta recuerdo cómo olía el jabón, esa clase de olor medicinal, quiero decir, ¿por qué tendrá siempre el jabón un olor medicinal en un sitio como ése? Se supone que debería estar perfumado. ¿Adónde vas, te vas ya?

—Es tarde —dijo Stanley—. Me voy a casa.

—Sí pero a casa, quiero decir tarde, y luego apareció aquel corredor de maratón, pero quiero decir, Crissto, quiero decir, ¿cuánto tiempo?

—Media hora —dijo Ellery con voz pastosa—. Os veré allí.

—Sería mejor que uno de nosotros te acompañara —dijo Morgie—. Apenas puedes andar.

—Te he dicho, como te he dicho, te he dicho que sólo voy a tumbarme un rato a solas, os veré en ese club nocturno como se llame os veré.

Le ayudaron a subir a un taxi, que le dejó en casa de Esther antes de que le diera tiempo a quedarse dormido en el asiento trasero. Tuvo dificultades para apearse, pero lo logró, se acercó tambaleándose al portal y apretó el primer botón que encontró su pulgar. Luego empezó a subir las escaleras, parándose cada dos por tres para intentar contar los tramos que había subido, y finalmente llamó a la puerta a mitad del pasillo. No le abrieron. Puso la mano en el picaporte, giró y apareció una niña con un matamoscas.

—¿Rose? —La niña se le quedó mirando—. ¿Qué pasa, está dormida?

—Sí —dijo la niña—. Todavía está dormida.

La siguió murmurando: «Rose, Rose, eres como una cría, Rose». Había un olor extraño en la casa. Se hizo más fuerte a medida que se acercaban al dormitorio.

—¿Ves? Todavía está dormida. —La niña señaló con el matamoscas una figura tendida en la cama y repitió—: Todavía está dormida.

El olor era insoportable. Ellery estuvo a punto de caer sobre la cama, pero recuperó el equilibrio y se quedó mirando. Sacó un cigarrillo, pero se le cayó.

—Todavía está dormida, y yo le sacudo las moscas.

—Rose. Cristo. Jesús… —Se volvió con arcadas.

—En el colegio dicen que no hay moscas en invierno —siguió la niña, mientras él vomitaba sobre el respaldo de una silla—, pero las hay, y yo se las estoy sacudiendo.

Se quedó allí inclinado un minuto y luego tiró de un paño de tocador hasta acercárselo para enjugarse con él la boca.

—Porque sí que hay moscas en invierno, están ahí…

Se volvió lentamente, sosteniéndose la cabeza con la mano, mirándola, y luego se enderezó y echó a andar hacia la puerta, contra cuyo marco se golpeó al volverse para mirarla otra vez. «Rose, escucha, Rose…». El aliento entraba y salía de él a borbotones. Luego salió por la puerta con un movimiento brusco y llegó a las escaleras. Se detuvo tres o cuatro veces durante la bajada, para evitar caer de cabeza, y finalmente cayó cuando le faltaban tres escalones para alcanzar el portal. Hizo suficiente ruido para que saliera el portero, que le ayudó a levantarse y le preguntó:

—¿Sabe algo sobre cincuenta toneladas de azúcar?

Ellery se le quedó mirando sin más. Luego levantó una mano y señaló hacia las escaleras.

—Alguien lleva todo el día intentando entregar aquí cincuenta toneladas de azúcar.

Ellery se apoyó contra la pared, señalando aún escaleras arriba. Luego dejó caer la mano como si fuera demasiado pesada para sostenerla y salió del portal, encontró un taxi y llegó por fin al club nocturno, adonde había llegado también alguna gente del cine, pues todavía era relativamente temprano.

—Vaya, esa sí que fue una *verlklärte Nacht* —dijo el director musical del señor Schmuck—. Fue mala publicidad.

El señor Schmuck tamborileaba impacientemente con los dedos sobre la mesa, esperando su plato mientras el señor Sonnenschein, a su lado, atacaba una tarta Alaska. El señor Schmuck sólo había pedido *un filet de mignon.*

—Te dije que deberíamos haber comprado enseguida nuestros cuadros y largarnos de allí —dijo el señor Sonnenschein, lanzando al otro lado de la mesa una delicada filigrana de merengue con la palabra cuadros.

—Un auténtico Walpurgis… —empezó el ayudante del señor Schmuck.

—Cállese —dijo el señor Schmuck—, para que pueda ver cantar a la dama.

—Nooche de paz, nooche de amor, haa nacido… —cantaba, enfundada en un vestido azul con una chaquetilla de lentejuelas a juego, llenado un círculo selectivo de focos azules con una canción que había

tenido tanto éxito en Nochebuena que la estaba cantando otra vez.

En las sombras reverentes, el Cadete Ariete de Alabama echaba sal a un filete con la Venus de Milo. Morgie empujó una copa hacia Ellery. «Bébete esto y te reanimarás».

Ellery musitó algo, mirando legañosamente al vacío. A través de un bocado de carne llegó del otro lado de la mesa: «Vamos, si no puedes comer tienes que…».

De una mesa cercana llegó: «Estuvimos aquí también el día de Nochebuena. Intentamos entrar en San Pat para la misa mayor, pero deberíais haber visto qué masa de gente».

Y de la pista:

Ni
—Dueermel ño suúús…
Je

—¿Qué pasó esta mañana? Es como si hubiera sido hace mil años —dijo Morgie, y añadió dirigiéndose a Ellery—: No tenía la menor idea de que fueras tan puñeteramente sensible.

—Y eso —murmuró Ellery, siguiendo a pesar de la salva de aplausos—. Su cara, sigo viendo esas gotas de sudor en su cara, ¿entiendes?, como una maldita corona de… gotas de sudor alrededor de su frente, ¿me comprendes?

—Esta noche tenemos con nosotros una famosa estrella de la escena y la pantalla… —Los focos lucharon entre sí sobre la superficie de caras inexpresivas—. Es un poco tarde, pero sé que todo el mundo tiene todavía algo del espíritu navideño… ¿qué tal un saludo navideño para todo el mundo…?

Colgándose del micrófono, la estrella saludó:

—Feliz Navidad a todo el mundo. Me alegra ver a todo el mundo tan alegre. Pero tengan cuidado no se les vaya a ir la parienta a casa con otro. —Hizo una pausa para respirar y dejarlos reír, balanceándose—. Ha sido la Navidad más bonita que he visto en mi vida… cuando me levanté la mañana de Navidad… parecía tan bonita fuera que me la dejé fuera todo el día…

—¡Ese cabrón!

—Tengo a una chica esperándome en el Fritz-Carlton… —siguió barboteando la estrella.

—¡Ese cabrón! ¡Se lo ha cargado! —dijo el Cadete Ariete de Alabama, pero ninguno de sus compañeros pareció advertirlo. Ellery estaba intentando sentarse derecho y beber. Morgie miraba sombríamente su vaso.

—Oye, ¿qué quería antes el chico número uno de Schmuck, cuando te has parado a hablar con ellos?

—Me han hecho una oferta. —Los hombros de Ellery volvieron a hundirse—. La vida de la Virgen María. La están filmando en Italia. Quieren que me encargue de la publicidad.

—Mira, Ellery, por el amor de Cristo, eres un tipo guapo. Me jode un montón verte mezclado con la gente del cine.

—Qué demonios —dijo Ellery—. Hay que cambiar de vez en cuando.

—¿Cambiar? ¿Crees que va a cambiar algo allí? Es la misma mierda, sólo que peor. Aquí al menos conoces a la gente con la que trabajas, se sabe quién eres, tienes amigos. Allí no te conoce nadie. —Morgie estaba mirando al mismo punto vacío del mantel al que estaba mirando Ellery—. Hay que dejar de cambiar en algún momento. Cambias de puñetero coche, cambias de puñetera mujer, y en cuanto te acostumbras a la puñetera cosa algún cabrón saca un nuevo modelo. Se pasa uno la vida yendo al puñetero banco. Banco de ojos. Banco de sangre. Banco de huesos.

—Es una buena idea para un programa —interrumpió el Cadete Ariete de Alabama—. Los bancos como símbolos del progreso. Bancos de dinero. Bancos de huesos. Bancos de ojos. Bancos de sangre.

—Acabamos de comprar un programa enlatado sobre los adelantos de la ciencia —dijo Morgie, hablando lentamente. Ninguno de los dos había levantado los ojos. El tono quejumbroso de la voz de Morgie reflejaba esa decepción desafiante de la voz de la radio que hace sólo unas horas ha pronosticado *despejado,* y vuelve ahora para admitir la posibilidad de chubascos dispersos sin arredrarse por el hecho de que sus oyentes estén mirando por las ventanas cerradas una lluvia torrencial—. ¿Sabes que un pañuelo y una bala de cañón caen en el vacío a la misma puñetera velocidad? Bueno, pues ahí es donde estamos, en este gran vacío puñetero donde un pañuelo y una bala de cañón caen a la misma puñetera velocidad, ¿entiendes lo que quiero decir?

El compañero de ambos estaba mirando al suelo, con la figura hueca de plástico apretada en la mano. Pasaba el pulgar de un agujero del salero al otro, y las luces volvieron a reducir su intensidad y se apagaron. Una emanación fantasmal ocupó su lugar, ocultando la realidad, mientras salía una desdibujada mujer desnuda, y un par de manos rosadas se definieron en fosforescencia cubriéndole las nalgas, que se

restregó ante su público como si las pesadas manos del amor (aleteando, tanteando, eclipsándose bajo otras mesas en la oscuridad) las estuvieran estrujando con orgiástica violencia.

—Está en el bote —dijo el ayudante del señor Schmuck al señor Schmuck. Luego se volvió hacia el director musical del señor Schmuck—. Tiene usted razón. Verklärte…

—Tiene *usted* razón. Walpurgis… —empezó el director musical del señor Schmuck.

—Cállese —dijo el señor Schmuck—, para que pueda ver bailar a la dama.

Allí fuera giraba y agitaba una delantera ondulante, que florecía en las puntas en rosas fosforescentes.

—¿Por *qué* quieres mezclarte en eso? Es el mismo puñetero pañuelo y la misma puñetera bala de cañón cayendo en el mismo puñetero vacío.

—Por viajar —musitó Ellery—. Ver por qué vive la otra mitad.

Seis meses: «Elmira», decía uno de los matasellos, y sus labios formaron las palabras en silencio. El matasellos de la otra carta era indescifrable, aunque los sellos eran españoles, y ella la acercó a la luz, apretando los labios al ver que sólo el entrevero de una letra florida interrumpía la translucidez. No llevaba remite. La dejó a un lado y cruzó la habitación con la primera carta, metiéndosela bajo el brazo mientras encendía la radio con una mano y sintonizaba su nuevo audífono con la otra. Luego se sentó, apoyando la cabeza en el respaldo, torciendo de nuevo los labios para articular «seis meses», con la carta todavía sin abrir en la mano mientras la radio se calentaba a los compases de «La dulce Betsy de Pike» cantado en *yiddish,* y se quedó mirando una grieta del techo.

A la luz del día, la grieta parecía haber crecido otra pulgada entera o aún más, y Stanley estuvo a punto de saltar de la cama en busca de su cinta métrica. Luego volvió a arrebujarse bajo la manta (ya había metido la sábana en la maleta), apretó con fuerza las mandíbulas sobre la muela punzante para rechazar la imagen que le traía junto con el dolor y se quedó tumbado, como esperando instrucciones de lo alto sobre algo inmediato de lo que no acababa de acordarse, aunque le quedaba poco tiempo para hacerlo. La frente se le cubrió de arrugas con el esfuerzo por recordar con claridad qué podría ser, y al ascender el esfuerzo a aquella parte de su cara se le relajaron las mandíbulas, e inmediatamente le traspasó como un dardo el dolor de la muela, y con él, enseguida, le llegó la imagen.

Media hora después andaba ya recorriendo los pasillos del hospital.

—Pero, cariño, llevarse *eso* a Ischia sería como llevarse un
bú-ho
a Atenas —oyó al acercarse a su puerta, y se detuvo—. Y no dejes que me vaya sin la llave de mi *baúl,* todas esas cosas prrre-ciosas, sencillamente no podría presentarme allí desnudo.

Oyó decir a alguien: «Agnes, me alegro de verte bien…», y luego:

—Cariño, ¿llamas bien a eso?, ¡toda colgada como un artículo en un escaparate! ¡Chico
crru-el
!

Stanley se quedó allí parado, tras entrever el grupo que rodeaba su cama, apretándose la mandíbula intensamente dolorida, escuchando.

—Arny, cariño, deberías intentar levantarte, o te meterán en un cuartito y ya nunca nunca nunca volverás a ver el mundo normal de fuera. Arny-ricura-diablura-criatura, ¿qué *tienes* en el bolsillo?

Luego oyó la voz de ella, dando a alguien una dirección, la dirección de su madre en la Via Flaminia de Roma.

—¡Friegas de alcohol! ¡Deberían darte azotitos!

Stanley se volvió con repentina decisión: había oído decir que había una capilla en el Bellevue, y fue en su busca, rescatado de la perspectiva de verla de hecho por la reflexión más duradera, y seguramente más prudente, de que podía encender una lamparilla por su restablecimiento. Y allá fue dispuesto a hacerlo, recorriendo con aprensión los pasillos, como temiendo que le fueran a encerrar de pronto en una sala o a ponerle una camisa de fuerza. Pero al llegar al fondo de aquel pasillo, donde las tres confesiones occidentales tienen sus depósitos, le paró en seco una aparición que salía de la sinagoga vestida con una bata de rayas rojiblancas como barritas de caramelo, su cara tan bruscamente familiar, delicadamente íntima en la virginidad angulosa y ojerosa de las sombras antinaturales, como aquellas sacerdotisas de Delfos transidas en silencio subterráneo de lo que podría haber sido miedo en una cara a la luz pero que allí era parálisis prof ética (hasta que violaron a una: entonces las sustituyeron por mujeres de más de cincuenta años).

—Hola, Stan-ley —le saludó como siempre le había saludado, como a un desconocido al que conocía.

—Pero… no sabía que fueras… ¿judía? —dijo él, y pareció más sorprendido aún, pues había querido decir: «No sabía que estuvieras aquí…».

—Se está tan a gusto ahí dentro —dijo, y sonrió, como alguien que vaticina la muerte por desplome de columnas, la muerte en el mar.

Ferviente, inoportuno, insistió.

—Pero ¿aquí?

—Ella ha estado siempre aquí mismo, pero aquí mismo,
Stan-ley
—le dijo; y luego bajó los ojos y volvió la cara—. Pero ahora la van a mandar lejos.

—¿Cuándo? —preguntó rápidamente.

—Ayer, u hoy, muy pronto. —Se lo quedó mirando, y por un instante pareció a punto de echarse a llorar.

—¿Adónde? —le preguntó Stanley; pero ella se lo quedó mirando sin más—. Espera —dijo, y empezó a hablar precipitadamente—. Tú, entiendes, tú puedes venir conmigo, sí, claro, puedes venir conmigo. —La agarró de la muñeca, y ella se le quedó mirando—. Entiendes, porque… sí y entonces todo, entonces te salvarás… quiero decir que estarás a salvo, estarás segura… Ahora… espera, primero… —Se apretó la mandíbula dolorida, como para transmitir su apremio—. Esto, primero tengo que ocuparme de esto, tengo que ir a un dentista pero luego volveré y nosotros, y tú te… pondrás bien. Entiendes, yo… nos vamos a ir… —La pregunta sólo asomaba a sus ojos, que sondeaban las grandes pupilas inmóviles de ella.

Después echó a andar con compulsiva seguridad. Y sólo cuando se acercaba a la salida, apretándose la mandíbula, pero con la cabeza alta, al pasar ante la delegación que había impedido su proyectada visita, se acordó de que no había preguntado por sus gafas, y luego de que no había encendido una lamparilla.

—Arny-ricura-diablura-criatura —pasó de largo rápidamente—, ¡levántate! ¿Cómo se te ha ocurrido intentar telefonear a tu *mujer*, aunque *estuviera* comunicando?

El teléfono seguía sonando cuando entró Maude. Lo había oído desde el descansillo y había estado a punto de romper la llave tratando de meterla al revés.

—Sí, ¿qué? —dijo sin aliento ante él—. ¿Yo? ¿A mí…? —Mientras hablaba sus ojos se elevaron despacio para posarse en los de la figura que se balanceaba apaciblemente a la entrada del dormitorio—. Pero… ¿por qué me han elegido a mí? —exclamó al fin—. Pero no, no… no —gritó, y con aquella última palabra volvió a quedar en silencio el teléfono en el sitio de donde lo había cogido, y ella apoyada en él con la vista fija y sin moverse, como apuntalada por aquellos ojos que le sostenían la mirada desde el otro lado de la habitación. Fue sólo en el reflujo, al retirarse la energía con que el teléfono, durante tanto tiempo silencioso, la había inundado, y al vencer su peso en el collarín ortopédico con un gesto de dolor, cuando se rompió la trabazón de sus ojos, y rodeando a la figura suspendida entró en el dormitorio para quitarse el abrigo. Y el bebé quedó allí colgado, sentado en silencio en una especie de boya salvavidas que le había hecho con unos pantalones cortos de Arny y unas cuerdas, una boya salvavidas que no derivaba hacía barco o costa alguna, moviéndose apaciblemente, sólo lo necesario para intensificar el reposo de su ocupante, cuya única actividad era mirar a Maude con fijeza y retenerla con sus claros ojos azules.

En el dormitorio se quedó mirando distraídamente aquella cosa enrollada encima de la cómoda: aquella misma mañana, cuando intentaba encontrar su banco en la guía telefónica, se había quedado perpleja al dar con la *Compañía de Bragueros Garantizados*, y dejando caer la guía había desistido de llamar para averiguar qué cantidad insignificante le quedaba en la cuenta corriente. Y allí estaba aquella cosa, un círculo de acero ahusado y acolchado, uno de cuyos lados se ensanchaba en una almohadilla que sobresalía lo suficiente de la cómoda para parecer una capucha abierta, y toda su extensión tensamente enrollada una cobra ladinamente al acecho: y pasó a su lado a toda prisa dando un manotazo al interruptor de la luz.

El fregadero de la cocina estaba rebosante de platos. Cuando se dirigía allí con el bebé tropezó con unos zapatos de Arny que ella había dejado, vacíos, en medio del suelo.

—¡La anfitriona más popular de la semana…! —dijo con voz débil mientras lavaba, primero un plato, luego un pie diminuto, luego una taza—. Me llaman para preguntarme si me gustaría
d-dar
un almuerzo… y ellos traerían todo y harían todo el trabajo y después s-servirían… v-venderían su vajilla a mi… mi… Y yo le pregunto que cómo me han elegido a mí y ella dice: «Vendamos los ojos a una niña y encontramos su nombre en una guía telefónica», es un gran… un gran honor ser… ser elegida la anfitriona más…

Los ojos no se apartaban de ella. La cabeza del bebé no era cónica, y en realidad, al mirarlo, uno no tenía esa impresión; pero nada más desviar la vista se formaba esa imagen en la mente, y por mucho que uno volviera a mirarlo, o lo examinara desde ángulos estratégicos, nada atenuaba la plácida imagen que persistía. Había lavado ya casi todos los platos cuando lo agarró del cuello, y de repente apretó ambos pulgares contra la base de la cabeza del bebé. «Debería estar más hundida por *aquí»,* susurró, luego le apretó allí con el borde de una mano, y finalmente retrocedió un paso y volviéndose se alejó de la mirada fija como si rompiera unos grilletes. Dejó al bebé en el fregadero con los platos que quedaban por lavar y entró en el cuarto de estar, donde encendió la radio, volvió a tropezar con los zapatos vacíos y se quedó parada un momento con aire pensativo antes de coger el teléfono y marcar, leyendo el número del farmacéutico escrito en el frasco que tenía en la mano.

«Amigos, ahora es el momento de vender sus diamantes…».

—¿Oiga? ¿Podría comprarle un poco de morfina? ¿Qué? No, sólo quiero un poco de morfina pura…

Fue una larga lucha, como si la propia imagen lo estuviera reteniendo en el sillón mientras él dentista trabajaba. Y hubo tiempo para la angustia del arrepentimiento, pues Stanley se había apeado sin más del autobús y entrado en el primer dentista cuyo letrero vio en un primer piso, alguien del que nunca había oído hablar y que sin duda nunca había oído hablar de él. Se agarraban y tiraban uno del otro, Stanley del sillón, el doctor Weisgall de Stanley, y cuanto más duraba aquello más se alarmaba Stanley, pues también el dentista parecía en un estado intranquilo. Tenía brazos fuertes, necesitaba un afeitado y sudaba copiosamente enfundado en su bata blanca. Y entonces, mientras Stanley estaba aún recostado, aferrado a los brazos del sillón con la rigidez de un terror concentrado, oyó una voz y abrió los ojos para ver la cosa sostenida ante él con unas gruesas tenazas. «¿Está fuera?», intentó decir. «¿Es eso?». Pero no podía controlar aquel lado de la boca. Sin embargo, la pidió cuando se marchaba, para llevársela envuelta en gasa y en un trozo de periódico. Una vez en la calle, el lado dormido de su lengua rozó el hueco entumecido de su encía, y se paró a escupir sangre junto al bordillo. Los transeúntes le echaban ojeadas de aversión, el desdén que provoca la familiaridad de la calle Catorce con tales espectáculos, pues lo ofrecía bastante penoso, un hilo de sangre corriéndole por la barbilla, goteándole del lado incontrolable de la boca, porque no tenía pañuelo.

Desde la ventana que había encima, el doctor Weisgall lo vio tambalearse, chocar con un cubo de basura, con un niño, con otra figura tambaleante que intentó abrazarlo como a un compañero de armas, y finalmente perderse de vista. Entonces se quitó la bata blanca y se quedó allí parado, frotándose la barbilla durante un minuto. Luego, como si hubiera aplazado ya bastante tiempo un deber ajeno y fortuito, pero no menos insoslayable, cogió la carta que había recibido aquella mañana, la abrió y se quedó mirando sus páginas mientras llamaba a la policía para denunciar esta persecución anónima:

Querido doctor Weisgall:

¿Qué significa la «I»? ¿Cuál es su nombre de pila? El libro que voy a escribir se titulará *Las flores de la amistad*, pues se acordará usted de lo de «Antes de que se marchiten las flores de la amistad se marchitará la amistad», bueno, pues de eso va a tratar mi libro.

Nosotros somos los grandes rechazados, doctor.

Por qué nos aman y confían en nosotros por todas las razones erróneas, razones de las que a menudo no sabemos nada y entonces se sienten decepcionados. Siempre se sienten decepcionados. A veces sólo quiero parar, sólo parar todo y dar las gracias a todos. Qué hacen, nos liberan cuando nos traicionan. ¿Es eso demasiado fácil, doctor? Es porque podemos compartir una parte de Nosotros Mismos con todo aquel que conocemos, la parte que él exige, pues el resto no lo ofrecemos porque no reconocería el resto y, más importante todavía, ni siquiera creería que somos nosotros, así que quizá nos parece mejor guardárnoslo simplemente y no molestarlo con ello. Y entonces mírelo, con toda su fuerza y poder y toda su necesidad construye un entero Nosotros con su fragmento, un Nosotros que puede que nos resulte difícil de reconocer también pero respondemos amablemente a ello pero más bien con espanto, más bien con recelo y temor de que algún día nos haga encararnos con ello y entonces quién puede decir: «Éste no es nosotros en modo alguno, por qué ha confiado en ese Nosotros que hizo con tanto cuidado amoroso, ¿no?». ¡Oh, se siente sorprendido y decepcionado! ¡Cómo le hemos fallado, cómo le hemos fallado! ¡Se siente irritado y profundamente herido, traicionado! ¡Traicionado! No confiéis en Nosotros, flores de la amistad. Mientras tanto buscamos más allá de él aquello que tan honestamente cree haber ofrecido, tan honesto como es, tan honesto. Encontrando en él y en todas partes algún lugar donde podamos compartir una parte pero nada más, ¿es que hay alguien con el que no puedas compartir nada? Entonces, ¿hay alguien con el que puedas compartirlo todo? No no no no: pero ellos no lo entienden. Hubo demasiados, doctor. Eso es, eso es, ¿ve? Su amabilidad es hipocresía. Te lo dieron todo, compartió contigo todo lo que tenía. ¿Se lo pediste? No, te

lo dio tan honesto como es y tan sincero. Y un día descubre que nunca lo aceptaste desde dentro, ¿entiende? Sólo lo aceptaste desde fuera, como un apretón de manos. Se siente irritado y disminuido, no por ti ahora sino contigo entonces a quien pretendía compartir, y no compartió sino que dio, y al dar sólo dio un fragmento a cambio, ¿entiende? Qué poco de nosotros conoce qué poco de otro. Y un día recuerda su confianza en ti como debilidad, y para quitársela de encima te quita a ti de en medio porque tú la aceptaste de él, así que le diste lo que se merecía, y ahora es mayor, y más que la amistad recuerda la hostilidad y la debilidad tan cauterizadas ya.

¿Por qué no me ha contestado después de tanto tiempo? ¿Qué es lo que quiere?

Por qué me trata como ellos, como si fuera exactamente lo que quiero ser. ¿Por qué tratamos a la gente de ese modo? Pero lo hacemos, todo el mundo trata a los demás de ese modo, diciendo yo he tenido estos fracasos y estas decepciones, pero tú a quien encuentro ya sabes lo que vas a decir, actuando de acuerdo con tu naturaleza que está aquí en flor, pero yo sigo sin entenderlo, yo, por mi parte, sigo sin entenderlo. Como mis problemas no son los tuyos no debes tener ninguno, sino vivir solo encerrado en ti mismo, por tanto estos son mis problemas y hemos de compartirlos. Son tan honestos, cogiendo las flores con tanta soltura y tanto interés.

Si ha salido fuera una noche de verano entenderá esto, si ha salido con la cara desnuda contra la oscuridad y entonces hay una telaraña cargada de humedad entre magnolias y el tejo te pasa su empapada delicadeza por la cara, entonces entenderá lo que quiero decir. Aquí, él hace amistad a pesar de todo, sonsacando confidencias como dicen, no pierde ocasión de descubrir tus flaquezas, en qué fallas y con qué debilidad, ni pierde ocasión de hacerte saber que las conoce, para no perder ocasión al fin de asegurarte su amistad a pesar de ellas, y siempre a pesar de ellas, así que ¡qué suerte tienes de tenerlo como amigo!, diciendo en voz baja cosas bonitas de ti a tu espalda.

O en otra parte, nunca vivas al final de una carretera recta a menos que estés siempre mirando hacia ella. Allí en la distancia dos se encuentran y entablan combate, ¿dónde estás tú? Combaten por ti, borrosos, borrosos. Uno dice: «Ése es mi amigo, pero tú y yo somos tan diferentes que Ese no puede ser también tu amigo»; entonces cada uno dice en secreto: «Si Ése es su amigo Ése no puede ser también mi amigo», y luego se miran el uno al otro y dicen esto: «Nosotros somos tan diferentes (dicen eso porque no se conocen) que Ése no puede ser amigo de ninguno de nosotros, sino que ha de ser nuestro común hipócrita, y a pesar de todo una vez reconocido como tal debemos agradecerle que nos haya unido y nosotros, siendo diferentes como somos, hemos de ser amigos pero amigos honestos, pues ya ves que hay cosas que no compartimos».

Oh doctor, cómo presumen los mansos.

Entonces, ¿por qué no me ha contestado después de tanto tiempo?

Está prohibido entrar en el jardín con flores en la mano. Eso decía un letrero en francés en la puerta de un jardín francés, ya ve, léalo bien y entenderá. ¡Como si entender fuera perdonar! Encontramos a aquellos con quienes no podemos compartir nada. Oh, cuídelos y mímelos pues ellos nunca vendrán diciendo: «¡Te he descubierto!». Oh. Oh. Lo harán, doctor. Hasta ellos vendrán diciendo: «¡Te he descubierto!», pues sabías desde el principio que no teníamos cada que compartir, y eso es lo que compartimos, no la nada sino el saber que no teníamos nada. Eso es lo que compartí contigo, pero tú, qué me diste a cambio sino la nada: «¡Te he descubierto!». Te asesinarán por eso, lo harán. De modo buen doctor que haga un favor a sus amigos y desaparezca y muérase para poder así unirlos.

Todo se va a poner mucho peor antes de que empiece a ponerse mejor, doctor. Con todo entusiasmo te dan cosas que no quieres, su tesoro más escaso. No lo diremos, no lo diremos, hasta que un día lo toman todo y lo clavan trabajosamente en otro, y tu traición será otro clavo en el féretro del amor.

La satisfacción de ser descubierto. Es una satisfacción muy relajante. Oh, he leído tanto, doctor. Tantas cosas sensibles, qué sensibles son los que no sufren. Se desean lo mejor, son gente sincera. No con trompetas, doctor, pero veo al Señor de los Ejércitos asomar su enorme cabeza por un promontorio del lado nordeste de la Isla donde una punta se eleva del agua, y aquí estamos todos nosotros en la playa, un poco protegidos. Todos sabrán qué hacer, los otros que están en la playa, pues ellos Lo reconocerán y seguirán algún precepto satisfactorio, pero usted y yo, doctor, qué haremos sino poner cara de sorpresa, levantar la vista de alguna edición de bolsillo de un libro que se vendió bien hace veinte años, o de la historia por entregas sin principio ni fin de una revista encontrada en el porche, o de la suela de una zapatilla que necesita un remiendo, de eso o del mechero que no funciona por la arena que tiene dentro o de la esfera del reloj de un dólar que siempre llevamos allí porque indica la hora con arena dentro y todo, y levantar la vista y poner cara de sorpresa pero no excesiva. Usted y yo, doctor, en la playa.

Habla de ti y se pregunta dónde estarás. Te llama Indy, con su voz egoísta que la decepción vuelve dulce. ¿Por qué son tan egoístas los mansos?

Le sorprendería lo importantes que son los bares para la gente que no lee libros, doctor. A veces podría echarme a llorar, y otras veces lo hago. Me acuerdo de *El desertor*, un drama interpretado por perros y un mono en Sadlers Wells en 1785, y podría echarme a llorar. Me acuerdo de los Perros Futbolistas de Freddies, y podría echarme a llorar. Me acuerdo de la ronda de nombres, nombres sacados de libros populares para bautizar a niños, y tomados de ellos una vez adultos para utilizarlos en libros que nadie lee, y podría echarme a llorar. Creo que en algún lugar de África hicieron una sirena con un mono y un bacalao, he visto su fotografía.

Recuerdo la humedad que había allí. Recuerdo cerezas en un plato de cerámica azul, moteadas de agua y moho; los cigarrillos eran difíciles de fumar: a medida que se consumían aparecían motas marrones en el papel

blanco, y dejaban una línea húmeda en el cenicero de piedra y durante todo el tiempo crecía el verde fuera como un manto, la hierba, la madreselva, la clemátide, los helechos, malas hierbas talludas como los encajes de la reina Ana, el rosal y la zarzamora lujuriantes sin flores ni frutos, tan ocupados en crecer, y tomates caídos entre la alta hierba, telarañas que se pegaban por la humedad y los zapatos sin medias dilatados y húmedos. Todas las superficies necesitaban una mano de pintura, y los cables húmedos dejaban escapar la electricidad por las farolas. El polvo se acumulaba en las páginas de los libros dejados abiertos para ellos. Los invitamos, no vinieron pero recordaron el gesto.

Doctor, finalmente la importancia de la educación.

¿Recuerda la rue Gît le Coeur?

¿Qué dijo él? ¿Qué dijo ella? Allí hay tres de ellos, lo que resulta insoportable. El testigo tres debe salir de la habitación para que pueda entrar la ambigüedad, y en semejante compañía uno habla confiadamente a dos pues ahora están a salvo a solas con el recelo.

Los nombres son muy importantes.

«¿Cómo puedes tomar en serio a una persona que se llama ***?», me preguntan.

Si yo le debiera dinero, entonces se interesaría por mí, seguiría con interés mi carrera. Se me ha ocurrido eso, doctor. Pues cuando contraes deudas, debes esperar pagarlas. Tendrás que hacerlo, y probablemente de peor forma en proporción a la soltura y la fe con que fueron contraídas. ¿Usted la entiende, doctor? Violada mientras cruzaban las fronteras de tres estados, en el asiento de atrás del coche de su tío porque su tío con quien vivía estaba muerto en el suelo de la cocina; violada en un cine vacío y en un campo de maíz donde la policía lo acorraló al fin y lo mató con una lluvia de balas y la rescató, ella protestó: «Yo sólo quería Romance, doctor». Y aun así por mucho que ames no puedes liquidar las deudas contraídas en el pasado del ser amado, ni interferir en la forma en que el ser amado intenta liquidarlas. Pero debes pagar, debes hacerlo aunque no puedas.

Doctor, su honestidad salta a la vista.

Bueno, entonces ¿sabe lo peor? Cuando él confirma tus acusaciones. Tú lo has acusado, entonces con qué violencia te acosa para demostrar lo contrario, entonces lo único que puedes hacer es quedarte parada y mirar cómo prueba a su pesar todas las cosas de las que le has acusado, ¿y tenías la esperanza, durante todo el tiempo, de que te demostrase que estabas equivocada? Mirar cómo es incapaz de abandonar la escena sin empeorarlo todo, y cuanto más insiste en su derecho más lo desintegra hasta que la cosa acaba como más se temía, lo recrea y demuestra que tenías razón.

Qué impotente eres cuando tienes razón.

Pues las épocas duras y las dificultades no fortalecen a una persona, como nos decían de niños, la fortalece la buena suerte pero los demás la vuelven más débil y más astuta, entiende, y crean sus circunstancias a las que se opondrá cuando llegue la buena suerte creando circunstancias que la harán lo que es, ni buena ni fuerte. Eso es lo que pasa con las épocas duras y los desastres. Esas malas circunstancias son las únicas en las que podemos reconocernos, y cuando la buena suerte viene y no podemos encararla, vernos arrojados a la buena suerte sin alternativa, no hay otra que no sea huir ante la buena suerte, y en el consuelo aterrador de la soledad hallar los recursos para construir el paisaje familiar de la mala suerte por donde avanzamos con seguridad, así que aumenta, empeora y mal que nos pese nos vemos más enteros y entonces volvemos a ser valiosos.

¿Qué habría hecho yo en su lugar? Eso dice la gente, y lo dice en serio porque no lo entiende. A veces hago una limpieza de mi bolso, y es una sensación maravillosa aunque cueste trabajo. Por eso no le llamo por teléfono, los teléfonos son cosas peligrosas, nos separan de los demás, ¿y es simplemente porque los utilizamos mal? Humanos, los tratamos como tratamos a los demás, damos por supuesto servicios que no pretenden ofrecemos. Pero obligamos a los teléfonos a corromper la intimidad mientras que ellos pretenden preservarla manteniendo vivos sólo sus peligrosos síntomas inmediatos. Diga una palabra, dígame mil por teléfono y yo elegiré la más errónea para aferrarme a ella como si la hubiera dicho tras una larga deliberación cuando sólo yo provoqué que la dijera, me aferraré a ella entre mil, para sentirme provocada y lanzársela de vuelta con algo que digo tan poco en serio como usted dijo eso, algo a lo que pueda aferrarse y retirarse con ello. ¡Ve, ya estamos distanciados! ¿Doctor? Por eso no le llamo por teléfono, no le envío con mi voz un mero fragmento sintomático de mí adonde no me puede ver la cara sino que se queda mirando asuntos de su propio yo íntimo ordenados como muebles pero no mi cara que he tardado tanto tiempo en formar para este preciso instante, en que le escribo una carta donde verá mi cara, doctor, y toda yo desplegada, ¿qué más puedo darle para que me perdone?

Es cierto, los tratamos mejor de lo que creen, aunque sólo existamos para ellos de rechazo, pues ellos no lo entienden como usted y yo, doctor, y para estar seguros de aceptar una cosa deben rechazar otra. Lo recuerdo, los tratamos bien. Muchos de ellos deben hacerte infeliz para que los tomes en serio, son tan honestos. ¿Recuerda cuando la envidia se hacía llamar admiración?

Los tratamos bien, iconos que ellos mismos fabrican ociosa y desesperadamente, y ¡oh!, cuando los traicionamos siendo otros, y el icono se rompe, ¿acaso crecen, doctor? O más bien lo vuelven a modelar en otra parte, tan detalladamente el mismo, sólo lo bastante diferente para evitar que lo reconozcan como aquel que los traicionó una vez. Los tratamos bien, doctor. Eso es lo que hice yo, extendí mi vanidad hasta donde creí que la recibirían con franqueza, y descubrí que se la tomaban con desesperada seriedad, con toda la confianza que engendra la envidia. Entonces has aceptado una confianza, y preparado el terreno para el recelo. ¿Sigue leyendo, doctor? ¿Me sigue leyendo aún? ¿También usted está siempre seguro de haber encontrado la respuesta a mano,

exigiéndola así, articulada y encarnada?, ¿y luego se siente traicionado?, ¿y quién le traiciona? ¿Cuántos tiene a su alrededor que nunca le hayan temido?, ¿ni desconfiado de usted por miedo a que sea más de uno? Cuántos que estén dispuestos a compartir lo que se pueda compartir pero no teman exponer, simplemente exponer sin confianza, no como el copartícipe secreto, esas otras cosas que deben resolverse a solas en la intimidad, sabiendo que existen pero respetándote por respetar esa intimidad como el hecho por supuesto que en realidad es, doctor, ¿le he atrapado?

Estás ahí, una isla en su pasado, a flote, o un escollo, y cuando vuelven viento en popa ¿te divisan con gritos de felicidad y reconocimiento? En realidad, ¿vuelven capeando sólo para llegar a ti, para desembarcar y entrar en el mismo vergel con reconocimiento e incluso deleite, para compartirlo con otros que languidecían allí, o se encuentran con esos otros en la playa y entablan combate? O cuando pasan navegando hacia otra parte y te ven por casualidad, advierten tu presencia con una sonrisa, o bien te señalan adústamente en la carta y pasan de largo a sotavento y se pierden de vista, para encontrarse más adelante con otros que van rumbo al frente y prevenirlos contra tus peligros allá en el pasado donde estás aunque ellos van rumbo al frente hacia el futuro y ésa es la derrota que seguirán. O cuando vuelven pasan de largo cerca o lejos de la isla con un encogimiento de hombros y una ojeada de rechazo recordando sólo una costa árida. O flotas, como nos contaban que flota el Mar de los Sargazos parcialmente bajo la superficie y nadie sabe a ciencia cierta dónde, por lo que hace falta estar ojo avizor y otear con inquietud e incertidumbre.

¿Ha pensado alguna vez en esto, que en este preciso instante todos y cada uno de ellos son reales en alguna parte? El papa y el presidente y también ciertos reyes supervivientes, la gente cuyos secretos sabemos y aquella otra de la que sólo sabemos lo que nos revela el periódico, toda la gente que has conocido y toda la gente que conocerás, y todos los que nunca has conocido y nunca conocerás, todos y cada uno de ellos son reales en alguna parte en este preciso instante. Aunque no estés hablando de ellos, ni pensando en ellos, quizá ni siquiera recordándolos a pesar de estos insultos, son reales en alguna parte. ¡Como si no les importase! En este mismísimo instante son reales ahora mismo. Es demasiado para comprenderlo, aunque ellos se atreven, pero es demasiado.

Por la ventanilla del tren veo lugares donde nunca he estado, la esquina de una calle con una farola una tarde en Nueva Bretaña, Connecticut, y lloro. Porque es peor estar a solas sin nadie que estar a solas sin más. Bueno, recuerdo el verde, ese color, cuando el color era más que sí mismo, el verde en la puesta de sol tras la lluvia, cuando refulgía cegadoramente de vida, doctor, ¿debería haber sido borracha o monja?, pues no nos amarán como queremos que nos amen, ¿y monja o cantante, cantante o niña, doctor, o solamente nonata? Pues cuando ella yacía a solas haciendo el amor, cree usted que mientras aquel anillo se le salía del dedo, y respirando en la oscuridad febril, ¿cree usted que imaginaba su aliento sobre ella?, ¿que veía como en sueños su belleza?, o la suya propia, y sólo la hermosa mujer que sería: «¡Ahora me ha engañado usted!», entrando de ese modo en el jardín, con flores cortadas en la mano. A pesar de la prohibición que ni siquiera usted podía dejar de ver, ¿así que lo ha hecho adrede? Sí, lo entiendo, por qué no me puede perdonar, amar y perdonar, si perdonar nos devuelve la inocencia y ser amado confirma las cosas hermosas que queremos ser, y amar es siempre perdonar que no las seamos. Por qué el amor es divino, porque sólo la divinidad puede devolver la inocencia. Usted sabía mi secreto, claro, entrando con un ramillete, amor-en-la-bruma, amor-en-el-ocio, amor-que-sangra, usted sabía lo peor claro. Pero no había tiempo. La madreselva crecía y lo cubría todo como un manto y lo asfixiaba. El emparrado se venía abajo, no por el peso de la fruta pues los pájaros se habían comido las uvas, sino bajo el peso de las parras. Recuerdo los acebos, la hembra erguida en solitario en el césped delantero, y el macho doblado por el viento, ¿sabía eso, doctor? Todo crecía entonces demasiado deprisa, era inútil tratar de contenerlo. Todo crecía demasiado deprisa.

Pero mientras la leía, la mano había reprimido su intención: pues hacía falta tiempo para interpretar aquellas líneas escritas con prisa frenética; mientras que se tardaba poco en entender aquellas otras escritas con pausas concienzudas y laboriosas, escritas despacio, para obligar al lector a leer despacio y con atención, un hábito que quizá había adquirido en la conversación.

—¿Morfina pura, doctor?

—Mejor póngale medio gramo.

—No creo que quede nada en esta planta. Hemos estado usando Pantopón.

—De acuerdo. Una dosis de cuarenta miligramos. —Cirugía recomendó Trilene, ¿con un inhalador…?

—Al infierno con Cirugía.

—Sí, doctor. Y ahora… —siguió la enfermera, volviéndose—, señorita Deigh, o señora Deigh, ¿señora o señorita…?, ¿qué es? Apuesto a que es señora —dijo tímidamente, al ver una carta en la mesita de noche dirigida a Sra. Era una carta de una compañía de seguros, en la que le comunicaban que al recibo de su firma en la renuncia adjunta le harían pagadera la suma de veinticinco mil dólares (
25 000,00
dólares) correspondiente al seguro de vida de su marido, que se había caído del taburete de un bar en

Hollywood.

—¡Y mira que era interesante ese joven que ha venido a visitarla esta noche! Vaya, creo que hasta yo podría convertirme en budista si me hablara. ¡Las Cuatro Verdades Nobles!, ¡y la Senda Ocho Veces Noble! Bueno, la vida es sufrimiento, claro… ahora intente quedarse quieta. —La enfermera terminó de hacer la cama y salió de aquella habitación privada, adonde acababan de trasladar a la paciente, murmurando mientras pasaba ante una sala—: Pero decir que el sufrimiento lo provoca el deseo… y esa historia que ha contado sobre el obispo… ¿Whutley…? —la cual repitió a la enfermera del botiquín—: Así que ese obispo va y le dice al hombre que está rezando ante esa ruedecita: «¿A quién estás rezando y qué estás pidiendo, buen hombre?», y el hombre dice: «No estoy rezando a nadie y no estoy pidiendo nada…».

Pero aquella enfermera se encogió también de hombros, entregó el Pantopón prescrito y se echó hacia atrás para arreglarse el vistoso pañuelo que llevaba prendido en la blusa y desenredar la crucecita de oro cuya cadena se había enganchado en un botón.

La enfermera de noche se detuvo en su camino de vuelta para reñir a una figura informe que asomaba medio cuerpo fuera de la cama para recibir esta confidencia de una radio con el volumen bajo: «Otro caso de homicidio. De modo que si quieren pasar un rato estupendo manténganse a la escucha…».

—Vale ya, señor Jenner, mañana será otro día.

Y volvió con su alegría, la droga y un vaso limpio a la habitación privada. Encendió una luz brillante y empezó a hablar, pero la sirena de un barco, muy cerca en el río, la sobresaltó, y esperó, echando agua en el vaso limpio que había dejado en la mesita de noche, junto a las flores.

—¡Y mira que es preciosa esa planta! —dijo, y su paciente se volvió: hasta aquel momento el anturio le había parecido en realidad bastante obsceno.

Prácticamente la única persona a la que los toques de la sirena no redujeron a un silencio intimidado fue Arny: lo hicieron volver en sí sólo lo suficiente para levantar la cabeza y hablar por primera vez en dos horas. Dijo que se estaba haciendo tarde y que creía que debía llamar a su mujer. Pero no hablaba con claridad, y los toques de partida abogaron todos los demás ruidos.

Formaba parte de un vistoso grupo reunido en una cubierta de paseo, al que alguien se acercó correteando para preguntar:

—¿Dónde está Ruu-dy?

—Cariño, encontrarás a *ése* en la *suite* nupcial.

La sirena volvió a reducirlos al silencio. Arny se espabiló y habló.

Más arriba, la mujer alta dijo: «Dios mío, quién crees que llevamos de vecinos en *este* viaje… ¿no oyes esa… fiesta desenfrenada?».

Su marido dejó su copa y miró la lista de pasajeros de primera clase. «Dos senadores de los Estados Unidos», dijo al fin, y volvió a coger su copa.

En popa, todo lo cerca que podía estar de su mujer y de los dos que habían venido con ella a despedirlo, Don Bildow volvió a agitar la mano y se enderezó. Su mujer le gritó algo. Él agitó la mano. Era medianoche pasada.

—Si no puedes ser bueno, ten cuidado —repitió ella. Él agitó la mano. Luego—: ¡Oh! ¡Oh! ¡Oh! ¡Mirad…! Se ha olvidado sus pastillas de metiltestosterona, no podrá hacer nada sin ellas. Mirad, se ha dejado sus pastillas de metiltestosterona…

Él agitó la mano. Con la otra sostenía sus gafas de plástico. El viento hacía ondear su corbata amarilla y marrón. Desde abajo parecía que lo estaban secuestrando.

Volvió a sonar la sirena.

—Cariño, has sido un encanto viniendo a despedimos, pero será mejor que vuelvas a
tie-rra
… vamos a *zarpar*.

—Pero si yo *también* me voy.

Soltaron las amarras y el barco, tan grande como un pueblo, inició un grotesco movimiento de retroceso, como azorado ahora por su tamaño, igual que un jugador de fútbol americano saliendo de una casa de muñecas. Finalmente, orientado en la dirección correcta por seis remolcadores, recobró su dignidad con imperiosas bocanadas de humo y un agudo silbido de vapor que se volvió lo bastante grave para resonar, para penetrar en los abismos de la costa y volver reducido a partículas, cada vez más débiles, como si la isla se mostrara reacia a dejarlo partir.

Muy por debajo de la línea de flotación, Stanley abrió la puerta de su camarote y asomó la cabeza al

pasillo.

—Está bien —dijo—, sal.

Habían aparecido ya otros peregrinos, y minutos antes Stanley había conocido a un cura que enseguida le cayó bien, un hombre de cara mofletuda que mostraba una despreocupada jovialidad, pero podía recuperar al instante una severidad medieval que, uno se daba cuenta, estaba allí durante todo el tiempo. Se llamaba Padre Martin y era responsable del gran número de peregrinos, a algunos de los cuales llevaba a las inminentes ceremonias de canonización en Roma, a las que Stanley esperaba asistir de algún modo. Tuvieron toda una charla en aquellos dos o tres minutos.

—Sal… —volvió a decir, y la cogió del brazo—. ¿No tienes abrigo? ¿No te has traído ningún abrigo?

Ella se le quedó mirando y meneó la cabeza, sus ojos imposiblemente grandes según le pareció mientras los suyos se dilataban. Luego, como si notara la calidez de su codo en la mano, la agarró de la mano, que estaba fría, y la llevó escaleras arriba hasta una cubierta.

Ella no había traído equipaje, sólo una especie de hatillo, y él no tenía idea de lo que llevaba dentro, a excepción de un libro de bolsillo que llevaba sujeto fuera. Se titulaba *La historia de Bárbara Ubrick*. Tenía una ilustración en la cubierta con el pie: «Asfixiando a un bebé». Y debajo: «Por qué tienen los conventos de monjas muros altos, ventanas enrejadas y puertas con cerrojos».

—Pero… ¿de dónde has sacado esto?

Se lo había quedado mirando con aquellos ojos como platos, instantáneamente asustada de su ira pero sin hacerle frente, sin cuestionar que debía estar justificada. «An-selm», le contestó; entonces él había apartado rápidamente la vista, había dejado aquello con la cubierta boca abajo y se había quedado mirando hacia otra parte, incapaz de encarar la triste esperanza que había bañado su cara vacía durante aquel único momento, y el vivo placer que casi habían mostrado sus ojos por aquello que iban a compartir, adonde la había traído.

Apenas hablaba, salvo cuando él le hablaba, y aun entonces sólo si le dirigía una pregunta, que solía responder muy despacio, con reflexión y brevedad. Aunque una vez había saltado con: «Entonces, ¿también los peregrinos necesitan un pasa-porte? O debo llevar una concha y él me reconocerá y me reconocerá bien…». Lo cual había desarmado a Stanley: ¿qué podía saber ella de Santiago de Compostela?, o cuando le había preguntado, con la misma luz a punto de asomar a los ojos, esperando sólo su confirmación, si era verdad que ¿se comieron los ratones el corazón de santa Gertrudis? «Porque es su santa patrona…».

Ahora le soltó la mano y se quedó parado, mirando las luces de la costa de Jersey, sin poder creer que aquello era Nueva York y se estaba marchando de allí, y al tiempo convencido con el mismo espanto de que así era.

Todavía le daba vueltas la cabeza con el nombre de Anselm, tanto más si era verdad lo que habían dicho hacía unos días, lo que había dicho Hannah y ellos habían aceptado: y si aquello era verdad, entonces todo lo demás era verdad.

Con una mano en el bolsillo apretó la muela envuelta en gasa y papel de periódico, mientras recordaba el sueño de Anselm: «Anoche soñé contigo… Estoy seguro de que eras tú…», y la muela estuvo a punto de abrirse paso para morderle en la palma. Entonces la otra mano se alzó maquinalmente para cogerla del brazo, y falló, aunque el brazo no se movió en absoluto de la barandilla: sólo falló de tal modo que los nudillos le rozaron el brazo desnudo y ella volvió hacia él aquella absorta belleza expectante, con ojos que no parpadeaban aunque se estaba levantando el viento y ahora soplaba por las cubiertas superiores embistiéndolos de lleno, mientras ella esperaba, aguardaba su mal genio, y Anselm persistía, con más fuerza aún, en el suelo, *ritu quadrupedis:* «Súcubo…».

El atrevido instante de una sonrisa en su cara lo provocó: «¿No tienes frío?». Hasta que se lo preguntó podía haber estado en cualquier lugar; ahora, con su apremiante pregunta, la sonrisa y la calidez, si lo había sido, la abandonaron. Se estremeció tres o cuatro veces, bruscamente, como para aplacar una multitud de temblores ligeros.

Él desvió la vista, no hacia la costa o hacia donde debía estar la costa, sino hacia arriba, y sólo vio a un hombre apoyado en la barandilla de la cubierta superior, un hombre con un Chesterfield con el cuello subido, un flexible negro y una cara alargada que parecía vaciarse por la barbilla triangular, eso y un destello de oro: ¿era en el puño?, ¿en un dedo?

—¿No quieres entrar?

Un momento después la dejó allí, y con un escalofrío bajó. Vaivén tras vaivén, el movimiento del barco se estaba haciendo familiar e inevitable para centenares de personas, la única reciprocidad que las unía.

Habían atravesado ya los estrechos y entrado en la Lower Bay, pasado Sandy Hook y alcanzado diez brazas de fondo cuando Stanley se dio cuenta de que hacía tiempo que la había dejado en cubierta, y echó a

correr de vuelta por escaleras y pasillos con una expresión de inquietud en la cara.

No estaba donde la había dejado. Pero estaba demasiado confuso por lo desconocido que le resultaba todo aquello para estar seguro de que era allí donde la había dejado, y cuando se paró ante la barandilla y empezó a llamarla, una ola golpeó el costado del barco y lanzó una rociada de espuma, apagando su voz al momento. Giró en redondo y se quedó mirando el agua, aterrorizado.

Oyó que lo llamaba, y pareció más alarmado aún.

Estaba en la cubierta superior y le hacía señas con la mano. La vio allí con gran alivio, por fin, y vio a una sombra que había estado junto a ella volverse y desaparecer en la oscuridad. Cuando bajó no podía reñirla por el susto que le había dado, así que la regañó: «No deberías subir ahí, eso es primera clase…», y abrió la puerta con más esfuerzo del que habría creído necesario.

—¿Había alguien ahí arriba contigo…? ¿Estabas hablando con alguien?

—Sólo con el hombre frío.

—Bueno, no… deberías tener más cuidado, no puedes ir por ahí hablando así con la gente.

—Eso es lo que dijo él, cuando la oyó cantar.

—¿Quién?

—El Hombre Frío.

Al pie de la escalera que llevaba a primera clase, Stanley vio al padre Martin que bajaba, y le soltó el brazo. Luego lo volvió a coger con la misma brusquedad por arriba, adonde le llegaba la manga, y se adelantó con decisión, retrasando su paso y, por tanto, el de ella, dispuesto al saludo, la presentación, las explicaciones: pero el padre Martin pasó de largo, mirándolo directamente a la cara, sin una palabra, sin un asomo de reconocimiento, los rasgos medievales de su cara lívidamente marcados como si hubiera visto un fantasma.

Más allá del Faro de Ambrose hubo cierta agitación. El barco estuvo a punto de echar a pique un bote de remos en el que un chino, equipado con tres mapas de carreteras de Nueva Jersey, se dirigía confiadamente a casa, y ya había logrado llegar a aquella distancia de la tierra en la que hacía tantos años había desembarcado clandestinamente.

Pero Stanley no se enteró de este incidente hasta uno o dos días después. Mientras caminaba por un pasillo delante de él, ella empezó a cantar en voz muy baja.

—La Virgen María salió a pasear… Por el río Jordán…

—¿Dónde has aprendido eso? —preguntó.

—¿La canción que tú le enseñaste?

—Pero yo… nunca te he enseñado eso.

—Stephen se encontró con ella, empezó a hablar…

—¿Quién es ese… hombre frío? —volvió a interrumpirla.

—El Hombre Frío, y lleva el brazo como lo llevaba el chico.

—Como… qué quieres decir, ¿en un cabestrillo?

—En uno negro.

Una vez dentro, Stanley se quedó mirando distraídamente *La historia de Bárbara Ubrick*. Luego quitó su hatillo de la silla donde tenía la intención de dormir.

—La Virgen María salió a pasear…

—Ven… —dijo él, arrodillado ahora junto a la cama donde ya estaba colgado el crucifijo amarillento, murmurando ya el *Pater noster qui es in coelis* que pretendía enseñarle, raspándose las rodillas con el suelo de metal. Las máquinas vibraban con un esfuerzo propulsor constantemente renovado, mientras su rodilla se doblaba a su lado, vencía su peso contra su brazo, y se apartaba, y luego cayó contra él con más fuerza cuando a lo lejos la proa se hundió con una sacudida en una sima, en veinte brazas de agua, y sin decir palabra la hizo arrodillarse.

III. LA ÚLTIMA VUELTA DE TUERCA

«¡Así por la calle pasa quien debe amor!».

LOPE DE VEGA, *Amar sin saber a quién*

España es una tierra para cruzar huyendo. Cada pueblo y cada capital es un destino, y los nombres que suenan como un refugio para el fugitivo prestan finalidad al que viaja incansablemente sin que nadie lo persiga, fijándose un destino tras otro cuyas razones de ser cesan nada más llegar, y debe seguir adelante, para proporcionar ese intermedio de propósito con el que cada nuevo destino dota al viaje por corto que sea, y escudriñar cada pausa con razones ansiosamente equivocadas a medida que se acerca, con cada destino, al final.

Los trenes no salen: se ponen en marcha, y avanzan a un paso calculado para realzar el paisaje y agrandar la tierra que atraviesan, siguiendo laboriosamente sus rutas con el esfuerzo de viajes nunca antes hechos, forzando a la atención a soportar los minutos que pasan por separado hasta que la concentración se agota, y ningún otro paso es concebible. Las mismas distancias se vuelven mayores, a través de un paisaje irreemplazable por la agotada fantasía, inalterado por la imaginación más viva, haciendo al fin imposible cualquier otra tierra, oprimida por cualquier otro cielo.

Cinco millas atrás quedaba Gibraltar, agazapado al otro lado de la bahía de Algeciras, alto de grupa y mudo, la mole de un animal con una inmensa malformación y luces brillantes amontonadas en su base como velas petitorias en torno a un ídolo monstruoso.

En esta época del año el levante soplaba frío del este, velando el peñón, trayendo humedad y encapotando el cielo. Algeciras no mostraba más luz que la que quedaba del día, y cuando también esta se extinguió aparecieron al fin luminarias difusas en las callejuelas empedradas que llevaban a la plaza donde los árboles daban naranjas entre bancos con azulejos de color naranja y blanco y azul en torno a una fuente seca. Allí, cuando la iglesia manca dio el toque destemplado de su campana y las débiles luces de la plaza, que llevaban ya una o dos horas encendidas en deslucida iluminación de la calma, parpadearon y se apagaron, aquella calma se reveló muy distinta de lo que había parecido, no una cosa inmanente en absoluto, sino una imposición: al fondo de aquellas calles estrechas, tras las persianas bajadas, la ciudad hervía de música y con la violencia de voces forzadas a grito herido, arrastradas por el ritmo frenético de las palmas, punteadas por el repique disciplinado de las castañuelas. El café Pinero se adivinaba a casi dos manzanas de distancia por el estridente golpeteo de los tacones de la chica sobre el frágil tablado de madera. Un idiota mudo dio un respingo en la única puerta cuando un hombre sin afeitar con una pelliza de piel de cordero y un sucio turbante blanco lo apartó para entrar, y lo dejó entregado a gestos masturbatorios dirigidos a la bailarina más allá de los veladores redondos y las tazas de café, volviéndose cuando ella acabó, torcido, con un gemido, dando la espalda a los vasos y el humo, frenéticamente desesperado de vuelta a la callejuela, arrastrado por los tacones de un transeúnte que resonaban en el empedrado zigzagueando cuesta abajo, haciendo un alto afligido para sacudirse de la manga una mancha de luz lunar, perseguido una vez más por el lamento «sangre negra en mi corazón…», cuesta abajo, hacia la bahía otra vez y un hotel cuyas habitaciones de techo alto ahogan la noche pasajera entre gruesas nervaduras de muebles recargados, para bañarle rápidamente con el alba entre azulejos de intención diversa, exagerados según van subiendo, distorsionados en grosor discordante y luego no como reflejos bajo el agua, lisos por abajo como en un servicio público, consumidos al adelgazar en morisca intrincación mientras la luz divide las persianas y el tren se pone en marcha antes de que salga el sol hacia Madrid.

Se interna en la superficie de un mar interior, que así es esta tierra, tan desierta y aparentemente intransitada y vasta, atracando brevemente en puertos indistinguibles a lo largo de una ruta trazada sobre áridas oleadas, pasando junto a árboles que aquí son tan extraños como cosas a la deriva, y apariciones de ruinas aisladas, condenadas como los buques fantasmas del mar a navegar eternamente sin llegar a puerto.

Hacía frío, y uno de los soldados sentados junto a la ventanilla rota del viejo vagón de segunda enrolló un capote y lo embutió en la abertura. El asiento que habían elegido también estaba roto, y cada vez que uno de ellos lo arreglaba volvía a hundirse, hasta que metieron debajo dos maletas de madera. Luego uno de ellos pasó una bota de vino y otro sacó una trompeta. Tocó «Dinah» dos veces, saltándose cada vez el verso «Ella me mira con otros ojos…», mientras el tren se detenía en un pueblo y seguía adelante entre

alcornoques descorchados. Pasó un vendedor por el pasillo con un canastillo de cacahuetes y dulces de aspecto incomible. Lo paró un niño muy guapo de unos doce años, que compró tres cacahuetes con una moneda de diez céntimos extraída con cierta dificultad de un bolsillo hondo. El niño llevaba un trozo de tela negra cosido en la solapa. Dio un cacahuete a cada una de las niñas más pequeñas y ofreció el tercero a su madre, que le había estado observando durante todo el tiempo, sus ojos graves animados y brillantes con una sorpresa forzada que los niños reflejaban al mirarla, y los cuatro se sumieron en el silencio de quien se queda a solas, que ninguno intentó romper con gracias fingidas o falsa alegría. Pero al niño le preguntaban la hora con bastante frecuencia, para provocar el solemne ejercicio de sacar el reloj cuya esfera examinaba con una atención tan seria que le echaba años encima; y la mujer, apartando los ojos de él con un destello feroz y orgulloso, los clavaba un instante violento en el hombre que iba sentado a solas al otro lado del pasillo, mirándolos a todos con una expresión que no era ceñuda sino que había sobrevenido como una brusca ruptura de sus rasgos, aparentemente moldeados de forma definitiva basta aquel momento, pero que ahora, con esta nueva constricción, renovaban una impresión de permanencia, como metales fundidos que súbitamente vaciados se endurecen al instante en impredecibles formas de rotura. Ella le mantenía la mirada, con la cara de alguien que observa una herida, hasta desalentarse, y al volverse se llevaba una mano a las sienes. No tenía más de treinta años e iba vestida de negro. El tren avanzaba ahora tan despacio que cada alcornoque descorchado que dejaba atrás se destacaba nítidamente en su desnudez, retorciendo la roja angustia de su tronco desollado hacia el yermo del cielo.

Entre la tierra y el azul y blanco quietos y brillantes del cielo bogaban nubes grises de bordes deshilachados.

Al fondo del vagón entró un viejo con una guitarra maltrecha. Sabía dos canciones: una, un pasodoble vagamente reconocible; la otra, una desventurada «La Tani» que sólo se oía en su inmediata vecindad, tal era el cuidado meticuloso con que tocaba las cuerdas que le quedaban. El soldado tocó «Dinah» en otro tono, con la trompeta, y el viejo intentó acompañarlo con su pasodoble. «Oye…», le pasaron la *bota,* [3] *y* bebió sin derramar una gota.

Pasado el mediodía, la mujer preguntó la hora, y esperaron con orgullosa paciencia hasta que concluyó la grave ceremonia de encontrarla. Entonces se levantó hacia el equipaje que llevaban en la rejilla, todo bolsas de tela y paquetes de papel, cestas y botellas, y un pájaro silencioso en una jaula. Ya se había sentado y abierto un paquete de queso, mientras el niño partía una barra de pan, cuando al alzar la vista vio al hombre al otro lado del pasillo mirándolos a todos febrilmente. Al momento puso un trozo de pan bajo el queso y lo ofreció sin vacilar: *«¿Quiere comer?»* [4].

Él hizo una mueca, musitó algo y pareció intentar sonreír, meneando la cabeza. Parecía ansioso, y sin embargo sorprendido, incluso pasmado por su invitación, incluso por el reconocimiento, que ella le retiró y devolvió a los niños, el pan, el queso y el pescado.

Volvió la cabeza y se quedó mirando un rato por el cristal, o quizá no más allá de la imagen que el polvo del exterior del cristal hacía fugazmente discernible, inalterada; hasta que al fin apareció su comida, por partes, naranjas, un plátano, pan, una botella de vino, un pepino, una cebolla. Luego fumó, hasta que el cigarrillo se le deshizo entre los dedos.

Al atardecer aparecieron a lo lejos montañas de aspecto infranqueable.

—*Una y una dos… dos y una tres…* [5] —cantaban al fondo los soldados, «La Tani», aunque el viejo de la guitarra maltrecha se había ido—. *No sale la cuenta…*

Las montañas se oscurecieron, aplanando sus accidentes y ennegreciendo sus contornos en dos dimensiones contra un cielo bañado de verde pálido: y de pronto el tren irrumpió en la abierta meseta azul, penetrando en una neblina que todavía retenía la avidez gastada del sol suspendida sobre la árida llanura de Castilla la Nueva, por donde el tren se lanzó en la creciente oscuridad hacia su destino, Madrid.

La neblina que cubría la ciudad a primera hora de la mañana trasmitía ese frío singular que, según dicen, mata a un hombre y no apaga un candil, un frío inmóvil que parece venir de dentro y difundirse por el cuerpo desde la misma médula de los huesos. A aquella hora temprana las calles tenían un aire desolado. Aquí y allá algunas viejas avivaban fuegos de astillas en braseros, con un pie en la calzada que entonces estaban barriendo. Unos hombres regaban, como hacían siempre, hiciera el tiempo que hiciese; y los que pasaban caminaban deprisa, dejando ver sólo el destello de unos ojos entre la boina calada y el cuello subido de una capa. Sobre todo esto vacilaba el sol español, que no quería salir basta verse obligado por una actividad expectante, y entonces, con un gran arrebol rojo, surgió de la neblina por detrás de la estación de Atocha.

Y enseguida se llenaron las calles de gritos, de hombres que vendían escobas o compraban botellas, de mujeres que vendían *España, Arriba, ABC,* tabaco, billetes de lotería, «¡Dos iguales para hoy…!». [6] Sus gritos se elevaban como lamentos de gente afligida por grandes dolores. Y enseguida apostaron al chico ciego en la esquina de la plaza de Santa Ana, con billetes de lotería prendidos del gabán, para que pasara allí el día y recogerlo por la noche.

En un callejón cercano, identificado en una pared de azulejos como de Alfonso del Gato, un hombre granujiento y sin afeitar, con quemaduras de cigarrillos en la bata en que se había envuelto, miraba desde un estrecho balcón las figuras que pasaban por debajo en zapatillas, apretando el paso sobre la fría acera. Aparecieron dos guardias civiles y se retiró rápidamente, cerró sus ventanas y siguió con su trabajo ante el espejo. Sobre la cómoda que tenía delante había un pasaporte abierto contra un frasco de ácido oxálico, que había utilizado para hacer unas cuantas alteraciones en la tinta lavanda del sello, y ahora se estaba recortando el bigote teñido con arreglo a la fotografía del pasaporte. En realidad había dos pasaportes, uno suizo y este otro abierto, que era rumano. Había estudiado la cara suiza y sus datos con frecuencia y pesar, y al final la había descartado en favor de la otra, aunque había, como sabía, ciertos inconvenientes en el hecho de ser rumano. Uno era que no entendía una palabra del idioma (aunque en alguna parte, entre el revoltijo de periódicos y frascos de productos químicos, había un ejemplar de los cuentos cortos de
I. Al
. Bratescu-Voinesti *In Tuneric si Lumină,* que llevaba encima de vez en cuando y fingía leer en lugares como edificios de aduanas y comisarías de policía). Añadiendo diez años a la vida del señor Yák (en cuyo pasaporte, junto con el del suizo, había estado trabajando en Nueva York antes de su repentina partida) y, con el bigote teñido y un peluquín negro, restando diez años de la suya, cuadraba bastante con el rumano desconocido en quien recientemente se había convertido. De hecho, con el hábito que años de aplicación le habían inculcado, pensaba en sí mismo como el señor Yák, y cualquier otro nombre o vida que hubiera llevado antes estaban casi olvidados; casi, es decir, a excepción del asunto que le había empujado a este discreto retiro de su anterior profesión, en el asilo histórico de Iberia. Entre las publicaciones esparcidas ante él había una especialmente manoseada, arrugada y manchada, un número reciente del *Detector Nacional Mensual de Falsificaciones.* La página primera, titulada *Las nuevas falsificaciones,* era la más manchada, arrugada y manoseada: «Letra de registro A, plancha anverso n.º 95, plancha reverso n.º 475, serie 1942B… El retrato de Jackson es excepcionalmente bueno…». «¿Cómo?», murmuraba cada vez que lo leía, «¿cómo lo descubrieron?». Luego seguía leyendo las otras reseñas de actualidad: «El retrato de Hamilton aparece tiznado… Líneas de la nariz discontinuas, ojo derecho demasiado rasgado… Tosca reproducción en papel barato… Es una falsificación de calidad media… Ojos oscuros e inexpresivos…», pero siempre volvía a la primera, y murmuraba: «¿Cómo?».

Todo esto le tenía bastante desasosegado, como revelaba el caos de periódicos, *ABC, Oggi,* el *Continental Daily Mail,* en cuyas páginas buscaba un nuevo reto que pudiera borrar la indignidad de aquella derrota reciente. Eran las primeras vacaciones que había tenido en su vida, aparte de algunos períodos de recreo forzoso pasados en Attica, Atlanta y otros complejos donde lo conocían bien. Tenía mucho dinero, y en moneda local, pues había vendido los paquetes que le quedaban de su último trabajo a un levantino que tenía negocios en Tánger. Pero no podía descansar. Empezaba a parecerse a un pensionista expatriado, aunque intentaba, con cierto éxito, fundirse con la gente que le rodeaba y parecerse a los demás hombres alojados en aquella pensión, [7] vestido con pulcro desaliño, como iban ellos, nerviosamente alerta, como estaban ellos, y hasta con un cuello de plexiglás, como llevaban ellos. Todo estaba en orden. Hasta su estómago se había asentado después de sus primeras y espantosas aventuras con la comida de la pensión Las Cenizas.

Pero no podía descansar. Lo incomodaban pequeñeces. El bigote, por ejemplo: no estaba acostumbrado a llevar uno durante todo el tiempo, y cuando entraba solo en la habitación y echaba el cerrojo a la puerta se lo arrancaba de golpe y lo arrojaba a un cajón. Y la habitación estaba fría. Cuando se quejaba de ello al dueño o a las chicas de la cocina, adonde iba a calentarse las manos, se comportaban como si el invierno hubiera llegado por primera vez a Madrid, y hablaban del frío en términos de un vago asombro que se las ingeniaban para mantener anualmente hasta la primavera. Había un radiador, un mueble frío, absurdo y burlón en un rincón, pues había muy poco carbón en todo el país; así que al fin le dieron un brasero cuya superficie de ceniza gris se conservaba caliente al tacto durante algunas horas. Pasaba buena parte del día sentado con una rodilla a cada lado de él, limpiándose las uñas con el diente de la punta de un peine. Había intentado leer, algo más largo que los periódicos, pero había sido inútil. No había nada allí para él. Lo mismo le había pasado con los cuadros de Velázquez y Goya, Durero, El Bosco y Brueghel, pues hasta había ido al Prado en busca de un reto, pero no había nada allí para él.

Cogió el *Daily Mail,* y bajo el titular «Gran victoria del Teddington», volvió a leer la crónica de un lejano partido de hockey. Volvió a leer la noticia de la visita de cuatro raros cisnes (de Bewick) al Estanque de Penns, en Richmond Park. Volvió a leer sobre reformas de la ley de apuestas, y sobre una niña de siete años muerta por un escopetazo. Bajo «Convocatorias para hoy», sobre un recital de órgano del señor W.
J. Tubbs
en Holy Trinity, Marylebone; una reunión de los Jóvenes Conservadores de Victoria, la Sociedad Johnson de Londres, la Sociedad de Amigos de Uruguay. No había nada allí para él, y tiró el periódico, pero sin más alternativa que coger otro.

Un minuto después, sus cejas se fruncieron sobre una página abierta. Se inclinó hacia adelante, y el Dígame le tembló en las manos. Levantó la vista de él, y durante un minuto entero se quedó mirando con aire absorto una escena de amor andaluza colgada de la pared; luego volvió a la página, los ojos vivaces y penetrantes brillando de excitación. En la revista aparecía la foto de una cara rebosante de malicia sobre una barba negra, identificada como el señor Kuvetli, un destacado egiptólogo de paso por la capital en el curso de su trabajo, que ahora estaba centrado en la búsqueda de la momia perdida de una joven princesa, la cual podría hallarse quizá en algún lugar de España, traída hacía siglos como talismán por una banda fugitiva de gitanos.

Dejó el periódico y empezó a pasearse por el cuarto. Luego se sentó ante el brasero y empezó a limpiarse las uñas. El residuo de su tarea caía sobre la superficie de ceniza gris, donde se hundía y quemaba con un hilo de humo y un olor malsano que se elevaba hacia él, hasta que de pronto, como inspirado por un flato divino, se puso en pie de un salto, y en cuestión de minutos se afeitó, vistió y guarneció en general para salir a la calle.

Sin embargo, antes de abandonar su cuarto se demoró a echar una ojeada al Baedeker de España y Portugal, que tenía en dos volúmenes, pues el original se había rajado en dos, y luego fue a buscar al *dueño* [8] por los sombríos pasillos de la *pensión,* tras retocarse el peluquín negro con su peine roto. Cuando se inclinaba para cerrar la puerta, Marga se acercó corriendo por el oscuro pasillo, le dio un empujón, y con un destello de sus ojos, pelo rubio y suéter de angora azul, le pidió disculpas y se metió en su habitación.

Ahora bien, hay mujeres de carácter reservado y comportamiento pudoroso a las que si se las ve, digamos, con un abrigo de paño guarnecido de piel, se las recuerda después vestidas con el sencillo abrigo de paño del color que fuera; y hay otras que, vistas con el mismo abrigo, se recuerdan enfundadas lujosa y enteramente en la piel, y Marga era una de éstas. Estaba alojada allí, y aunque nunca había importunado a aquel exótico vecino suyo, que ahora se arreglaba el pelo en el oscuro pasillo, el mero hecho de su origen declarado le hacía interesante, y ella se mostraba siempre de lo más radiante con él, como hacía con otros huéspedes que sabían más de sus costumbres privadas de lo que se podía esperar del señor Yák, encerrado como estaba rigurosamente en su habitación, menos cuando salía al comedor, y hablando sólo cuando le hablaban, en un torrente de español que resultaba difícil seguir, pues en realidad era italiano atiesado del que podaba sobre la marcha los rizos lujosos y los zarcillos napolitanos, aunque hasta la fecha ni Marga ni el *dueño* habían estado nunca en Italia, y ninguno de los dos había visto en su vida a un rumano vivo.

En cuanto al que acababa de dejar en el frío pasillo, aquella mañana estaba bastante activo, siguiendo ahora a una chica cargada con dos orinales hacia la cocina, donde había otras dos chicas sentadas, limpiando un montón de lentejas sobre la mesa metálica, y aquella a la que había seguido entró por la puerta siguiente para vaciar sus cargas, y enjuagarlas en la bañera.

También encontró allí al *dueño* con unas zapatillas a cuadros, obtuvo enseguida la información que precisaba, y bajó por las escaleras cubiertas de linóleo, cerrando con tanta fuerza la pesada puerta que hizo sonar el timbre, moviéndose con una viveza tan enérgica que habría resultado sorprendente hasta en alguien de la edad que aparentaba ahora, con el peluquín bailando sobre la frente mientras andaba a buen paso hacia la Estación del Norte, adonde llegó a tiempo para coger el expreso matinal de Segovia, en cuya ruta y a no mucha distancia quedaba su destino.

San Zuinglio apareció de repente en una curva de la vía férrea, un pueblo hecho de roca contra roca, con calles que corrían entre las casas como lechos de ríos agostados, y casas descuidadamente amontonadas unas contra otras como cantos rodados a lo largo de arroyos de montaña. Las golondrinas se lanzaban en picado y pasaban rozando con pasmosa seguridad la torre de la iglesia, mientras el visitante matinal subía la colina hacia el pueblo, tocándose de vez en cuando el bigote, como para asegurarse de que lo llevaba derecho. Caminaba con brío, y con una luz en los ojos que rara vez se ve hoy si no es en manicomios y en algún púlpito, la mirada de un hombre con un propósito.

Con aquel paso elástico se vio pronto a espaldas del pueblo, donde el rumor del agua corriendo en las cercanías, los rebuznos de los *burros,* [9] el repique intermitente de las campanas y las voces distantes de la gente le llegaron desde abajo cuando se detuvo a respirar, y entonces se quedó inmóvil aspirando el olor de los pinos que le rodeaban y la deliciosa frescura del estiércol de vaca, como un hombre redescubriendo sentidos largamente olvidados bajo los abusos de las ciudades. Luego echó a andar de nuevo, y cuando llegó a la carretera flanqueada de cipreses apenas se detuvo a santiguarse en la primera estación que encontró, mientras apretaba el paso colina arriba hacia las tapias blancas del cementerio.

Cuando entró, el patio delantero estaba inundado por un torrente *de flamenco* procedente de la radio de la casa del guarda, que quedaba a un lado, casi oculta tras la tendida hilaridad de la colada semanal. Aun así oyó voces más allá de la verja siguiente, donde una pequeña crucifixión de piedra atrajo su mirada mientras se acercaba y pasaba, alzando brevemente los ojos y amagando una puñalada, más parábola que cruz, sobre su pecho, como saludo a la figura esculpida en lo que en aquel momento parecía entero abandono a un baile que la música acompañaba. Dentro, las *bóvedas* se elevaban a ambos lados, con tres, cuatro, cinco nichos de altura, adornados con flores de cuentas y coronas de metal, estampas y ramilletes marchitos, cristal roto protegiendo fotografías, y todos ellos numerados, con nombres, y edades que abarcaban la infancia y la niñez, muchas entre los catorce y los veinte, y unas pocas hasta los sesenta. Enfrente se erguía un mausoleo separado, rodeado por una cadena y con cuatro columnas en las esquinas coronadas por caras de piedra, la niña, la mujer, la vieja y la calavera.

—Ausculta…

—*Mira señor*… [10] oye…

La discusión que se desarrollaba en dos lenguas apenas habría sido inteligible en una, y al recién llegado le dio por intervenir con lo que sonaba como una tercera, pues uno de los hombres era el guarda a quien había venido a ver. El otro era un hombre de ojos febriles al que examinó atentamente por miedo, como confesaría más tarde, a que fuese rumano, pues la lengua que hablaba sonaba de tal modo que podía ser cualquier cosa. (Resultó ser latín tardío, enguirnaldado con todos los zarcillos y aderezos de que podía echar mano). Ambos agitaban los brazos hacia la *bóveda* que tenían al lado, donde había dos nichos contiguos, uno sin nombre y otro sin nada dentro más que la punta húmeda de una escoba.

—¡Mi padre no comete errores! —exclamó de pronto el hombre de ojos febriles.

—Ah… ¿habla inglés?

—Sí, yo… usted, ¿quién es usted? Escuche, ¿habla… puede hablar con él? Mi madre está ahí dentro, y yo… él dice que… Oiga, hable con él. Ella está aquí, he escrito su nombre, tome —siguió rápidamente, y tendió una tarjeta arrugada al hombre del peluquín, que se la quedó mirando—. Sí, sí, ése es su nombre, ella… ¿Qué pasa, no puede leerlo?

—¿Este… éste es el nombre de su madre?

—Sí, ¿no lo ve? Y ella…

—Pero… ¿qué hace ella aquí? ¿Cómo ha llegado hasta aquí?

La tarjeta tembló, y se humedeció en su mano. La levantó como si fuera a alisarse el peluquín negro, pero la mano alzada cayó y se santiguó mientras devolvía la tarjeta, y volvió a santiguarse.

—Bueno, eso es lo que quiero saber. Quiero decir, no hay ningún nombre en este nicho, no hay nada inscrito, no hay forma de averiguar…

Entonces terció el *sacristán,* [11] y habló como si no pudiera detenerse: «la guerra» [12] era la palabra que más veces salía; después de ésa, «los rojos». [13] Mientras tanto, el señor Yák examinaba atentamente la figura que tenía al lado, como si fuera un fantasma, o los restos de uno, los labios delgados y los nerviosos ojos parpadeantes, las manos a los costados abriéndose y cerrándose sobre nada. También el señor Yák parecía bastante agitado, tirándose del bigote mientras escuchaba al *sacristán,* y volviéndoselo a apretar ansiosamente en su sitio, escudriñando la cara que tenía al lado en busca de algún parecido que esperaba no encontrar, mientras el otro seguía allí parado, parpadeando ante el nicho sin identificar y luego hacia el cielo brillante donde nubes grises en vuelo bajo exageraban la vastedad del diáfano azul y blanco de más allá.

—*¡España… no hay más que una!* —irrumpió la música en el patio, mientras el jadeante *sacristán* recuperaba el aliento y el señor Yák se volvía para interpretar: «En esa guerra que tuvieron, esos rojos llegaron y lo pusieron todo patas arriba, en algunos sitios hasta abrieron algunos ataúdes y pusieron de pie los cuerpos por todas partes… hasta abajo en la iglesia dice que lo pusieron todo patas arriba; hasta al párroco, el cura del pueblo, también lo pusieron patas arriba…».

—*Coño, mira…* —El *sacristán* recuperó el aliento, y con él su torrente de entusiasmo andaluz; pero lo interrumpió una proposición que lo dejó con los ojos como platos y la boca abierta: después de todo, el

señor Yák había venido aquí a hacer negocios, y ahora, para demostrar su calma mientras hablaba de ello, alargó la mano hacía un nicho cercano para arrancar una *boutonnière.* La resultó un poco difícil romper el tallo de alambre, pero cuando terminó de hablar tenía ya en el ojal la rosa de papel moteado, y el *sacristán,* aunque miraba pasmado aquel vistoso adorno, parecía no verlo por el horror de lo que oía. Ni siquiera el fajo de billetes de cinco pesetas que apareció en su mano alteró la postura cataléptica del *sacristán,* aunque le soltó la lengua lo suficiente para decir—: ¡Ya no! ¡Ya no…! —y empezó a farfullar sobre el párroco, [14] y un cortejo fúnebre cuya llegada era inminente, a escuchar, mientras contenía el aliento, y luego, doblando rápidamente la esquina de la *bóveda,* [15] señaló—: ¡Ya viene! ¡Ya viene!

Ciertamente, por abajo, y más allá todavía de la primera estación del *via crucis*, se acercaba el cortejo. Pero el señor Yák no parecía tener ninguna prisa. Dijo unas cuantas palabras más al *sacristán,* y luego se puso a pasear entre las *bóvedas,* leyendo fechas y edades en las hileras de nichos como un hombre que va de compras. La rosa de papel, un poco deshecha y desteñida en algunos puntos por gotas de lluvia, añadía una nota garbosa a la elegancia general de su persona, que tan precisamente definía el cuello de plexiglás. Habría llevado sombrero de no ser por miedo de que al quitárselo se le cayera también el pelo, y ahora, mientras el *sacristán* los veía franquear la primera verja, el viento le puso el pelo negro de punta, y se lo sujetó con la mano. En cuanto a la figura que llevaba al lado, el *sacristán* había notado antes cómo abultaba a ambos lados la chaqueta de aquel hombre como una albarda, pero no dijo nada, sólo se quedó mirando, como hizo ahora mientras se alejaban: vistos por detrás, mientras pasaban la segunda verja, parecían dos viejos.

La pompa fúnebre era negra, y avanzaba lentamente por la carretera sembrada de rocas con el párroco a la cabeza, un viejo con un niño a cada lado llevando los estandartes. Los caballos llevaban plumeros negros en los arreos y una malla negra colgando a unos palmos del suelo, y la carroza abierta que arrastraban iba rematada por una cruz negra sobre el féretro descubierto. El hombre sentado delante, guiando los caballos, y el que iba detrás entre las anchas ruedas traseras, llevaban sombreros negros encasquetados sobre viejas caras sin afeitar, adornos negligentes como aquellos que les esperaban arriba. Los hombres que los seguían, con los sombreros y las caras inclinados, esquivaban al pisar las bostas de los caballos, que quedaban atrás humeando al sol. El señor Yák se santiguó, tres veces, mientras pasaba la procesión.

A media bajada apareció por la carretera llena de baches una niña con un vestido verde montada en una bicicleta, que hizo girar en círculos indecisos ante las dos figuras que bajaban, mirándolos con curiosidad antes de seguir lentamente cuesta abajo delante de ellos.

—¿Cuántos años cree que tendrá? —preguntó de repente el señor Yák, contemplándola con una extraña mirada calculadora.

—Diez, quizá.

—Sí. Más o menos. Más o menos. —Su compañero se estremeció a su lado—. ¿Qué le pasa…? No es su entierro. —Pasaron en silencio ante la sexta estación—. Qué es lo que lleva en los bolsillos, que le abultan de ese modo.

—Naranjas.

El señor Yák asintió con la cabeza, mientras las naranjas golpeaban contra su costado. En la segunda estación salió con:

—Así que su madre está ahí arriba, ¿y ha venido desde tan lejos para visitar su tumba?

—No había ninguna inscripción en el nicho. Debería haberla, pero no había ningún nombre en el nicho.

—Probablemente será ella quien esté ahí dentro, de todos modos no tendría ninguna forma de saberlo si no fuera así.

—Bueno… tal vez… podría…

—No querrá andar hurgando ahí.

—¿Qué?

—Quiero decir que no querrá mirar ahí dentro. Lleva ahí treinta años, no querrá…

—¿Cómo sabe que lleva ahí treinta años? —El hombre se detuvo a su lado, dándole de lleno con las naranjas—. Usted… qué es lo que…

—Lo he dicho por decir —contestó el señor Yák con pronto dominio, poniendo una mano en el brazo que tenía al lado para atraer al hombre hacia sí—. Ya sabe… oiga, ¿qué le pasa?

—No me gusta que me pongan las manos encima, eso es todo.

El señor Yák apartó la mano rápidamente, y se apretó el bigote con un dedo. «Qué anillo más bonito lleva ahí. ¿Diamantes?». No tuvo respuesta. Luego su compañero se detuvo tan bruscamente como antes, pero ahora miraba a lo lejos, hacia el este, donde los picos coronados de nieve de la Sierra de Guadarrama avivaban el cielo.

—¿Qué pasa?

—¿Pasar? Yo… no pasa nada. Aquellas montañas. Acabo de verlas.

—Oh, aquéllas. —La voz del señor Yák sonó aliviada—. Llevan allí mucho tiempo.

Un organillo sonó con alegría desafiante en una calle lateral mientras entraban en el pueblo y se acercaban a la iglesia.

—Es bonito que haya venido a ver la tumba de su madre. —El señor Yák se detuvo ante la pesada puerta, cuyo vano estaba cubierto por una colgadura que una niña apartó al salir, quitándose el pañuelo de la cabeza—. ¿No va a entrar?

—¿Ahí dentro?

El hombre alzó la vista por primera vez desde que se había detenido a contemplarlas montañas lejanas, pero con la misma expresión en los ojos, como si estuviera mirando algo distante.

—A encender una vela. Ya sabe. Puede hacer que digan una misa por ella. Si ha venido desde tan lejos…

—Pero yo… oiga, ¿qué es todo esto? ¿Quién es usted, a fin de cuentas? ¿A usted… qué le importa si yo… si enciendo una vela o quemo la iglesia entera por ella?

—¡Muy bien! —El señor Yák dio un paso al frente—. Si nos ponemos así, ¿cómo sé yo que ésa es su madre…? Ese nombre en esa tarjeta que me ha enseñado.

—Maldita sea, pero qué…

—Mire, ¿no entiende ese letrero? —El hombre del peluquín señaló un letrero junto a la puerta. Más allá, pegado a la pared cerca de la esquina de la calle, había un cartel en tiempos lleno de colorido de una película americana de hacía siete años—. «Hace años que los Prelados de la Iglesia vienen reprendiendo la bochornosa…», ¿ve? No debería maldecir…

—Maldita sea…

—«Que ya no se respetan ni la santidad del templo, ni los misterios más augustos y sagrados en cuya presencia…».

—Adiós.

—Ya que está aquí podría al menos mandar que dijeran una misa…

—Dios santo, yo… ¿qué le hace pensar que ella está todavía en el purgatorio? Usted… mire, esto… esto es absurdo, ni siquiera era… Espere, creía que iba a entrar ahí, en la iglesia.

—Acabo de acordarme de que el cura está ahora ahí arriba, en el cementerio.

—Sí, yo… ya volverá. Adiós.

—¿Va a tomar un café? Podemos tomar un café.

—Voy a tomar una copa.

—No querrá ponerse a beber tan temprano.

—¡Dios… santo! Si quiero una copa, maldita sea…

—¡Cuidado…!

La carroza fúnebre vacía dobló una esquina a la carrera. Los dos hombres montados en ella llevaban los sombreros echados hacia atrás, e iban fumando.

—Ése ha estado a punto de ser su entierro.

—Sí, bueno… escuche, cada vez que pasa un entierro, es el tuyo el que pasa. Ahora suélteme. Gracias. Ahora suélteme, ¿quiere?

El señor Yák retiró la mano del brazo del hombre, pero echó a andar rápidamente a su lado. Siguieron al organillo hasta un bar llamado La Ilicitana.

Dentro, el señor Yák pidió dos cafés. A su lado el hombre entrelazó en silencio las manos sobre la barra, mientras el camarero se alejaba con el pedido. Luego, mirando directamente a las botellas tras la barra, sacó un arrugado paquete de papel verde y negro, y de él un cigarrillo de papel amarillo.

—No irá a fumar eso. Aquí el tabaco tiene un tercio de monda de patata. Tome…

La mano del hombre tembló levemente mientras encendía el cigarrillo de papel amarillo, alzando el codo para rechazar el paquete cubierto de celofán que le ofrecían.

—Aquí se pueden conseguir cigarrillos de verdad. *Rubio,* [16] los llaman. Tabaco *rubio*… tome.

El hombre arrojó una nube de humo acre, y cuando apareció el camarero con dos tazas de café empezó a gesticular y murmurar: «Vino… *albus. Bianco*…».

—Oiga, ya he pedido café…

—Maldita sea, yo no quiero café, yo…

—No puedo beberme dos tazas de esto. Una de ellas se enfriará…

—Ahora escuche…

—De acuerdo, ¿qué quiere? ¿Vino? ¿Vino blanco? *Un blanco* [17] —dijo al camarero, le observó hasta

que un vaso estuvo medio lleno y entonces le interrumpió, agitando una mano—. *Manzanilla.*[18] —El camarero se detuvo, y devolvió a su sitio lo que había servido—. ¿Ve? *Manzanilla* —dijo el señor Yák al hombre que tenía al lado—. Le estoy pidiendo lo mejor.

—Sí, yo… ¿cómo he podido olvidar ese nombre? —susurró entre dientes.

El excelente producto apareció en una copa estrecha, que fue enseguida vaciada y empujada de nuevo hacia adelante.

—No debería beberlo tan deprisa, un vino como ése se toma a sorbos…

El hombre alzó la vista, como a punto de hablar, o gritar; pero su anfitrión estaba sorbiendo su café, con cuidado de no mojarse el bigote. Apareció un platillo de sangre frita y patatas, y ninguno de los dos lo tocó. Fuera, en la puerta, el organillo desgranaba esforzadamente los compases de «La Sebastiana». El camarero complació la mueca silenciosa del hombre a su izquierda con otra copa de *manzanilla,* y recogió un billete azul del hombre a su derecha.

—Oiga, no pague esto, yo…

—Le he invitado a un café.

—Bueno, no estoy tomando café. Usted no me debe nada, no…

—Cómo lo sabe, puede que sí.

—¿Qué quiere decir?

—A veces a uno le gusta simplemente deber algo a alguien. —El señor Yák se sacudió el polvo de su *boutonnière.* Uno de los pétalos moteados se desprendió. El camarero le devolvió el cambio, en monedas apenas más pesadas que el papel y trozos de papel que parecían un puñado de hojas secas—. Esto es lo que me deprime de un país pobre —dijo, intentando doblar los billetes marrones de una peseta—. Todos los valores pequeños se ponen tan sucios que apenas puedes reconocerlos. —Luego extendió uno de los billetes con el pulgar sobre la barra, y meneó la cabeza con desaprobación profesional—. Fíjese en eso. —Sobresaltándolo, la mano con los diamantes le arrancó el billete bajo los dedos—. ¿Qué pasa?

—Nada. Esto. Acabo de darme cuenta. —Se inclinó sobre el billete—. Esta cosa hermosa —susurró.

—¿Qué…? ¿Eso? —preguntó el señor Yák—. Bueno, yo… un crío podría hacerlo mejor.

—No, sólo esto. El dibujo que tiene, la Dama de Elche. Es una… una cosa hermosa, esa… esa cabeza, la Dama de Elche.

Luego devolvió el billete con la misma brusquedad con que lo había cogido, y apoyando un codo en la barra se tapó los ojos con la mano, cuyas uñas del pulgar y el cordial se pusieron blancas donde apretaban las sienes.

El señor Yák volvió a tomar el billete y lo examinó con desabrida curiosidad; luego se encogió de hombros y lo dobló, el anverso hacia fuera y el lado derecho hacia arriba, con los otros. «Un trabajo de grabado barato», murmuró, guardándose el fajo en el bolsillo. Luego volvió en redondo la cabeza y dijo: «Qué anillo más bonito lleva ahí. Son diamantes auténticos». No hubo respuesta, y la mano no se apartó de los ojos. «¿Por qué lo lleva en el dedo de en medio?».

La mano bajó y estuvo a punto de darle en la cara. «Porque es demasiado jodidamente pequeño para colgármelo al cuello. Y ahora quiere usted… quiere usted…». La mano del anillo quedó suspendida en el aire, tiesa y medio cerrada entre ambos; luego se apartó lentamente y el hombre se la pasó por los ojos febriles, y volvió otra vez la cabeza para clavarlos en un plato de sardinas.

El señor Yák cogió el tenedorcito de la sangre frita y las patatas frías, y empezó a limpiarse las uñas con un diente afilado.

—No tiene muy buen aspecto —dijo.

—Yo… no me visto para agradarle.

—No me refiero a su ropa, no tiene buena cara. Ni siquiera me ha dicho su nombre, su nombre de pila.

—Mi nombre cristiano.

—Sí, ni siquiera me ha dicho eso. Yo me llamo Yák. Mi nombre de pila… —Se detuvo para apretarse el bigote con aire pensativo—. Da igual, digamos que no es un auténtico nombre cristiano. Llámeme sólo señor Yák.

—Muy bien, usted… señor Yák, usted… —La cara se alzó de pronto con una expresión de terror en los ojos, que se extendió rápidamente desde las arrugas de los ojos por toda la cara contraída—. ¿Por qué me… por qué está tan jodidamente interesado en mí?

—Vamos, vamos —dijo el señor Yák, alargando una mano hacia el brazo, que se apartó al instante—. Me doy cuenta de que no es un holgazán.

—¿Y qué si lo soy? ¿Qué le importa eso… a usted?

—Da igual, no es un holgazán. Me doy cuenta. ¿Entiende? —La voz del señor Yák era casi dulce, y esta

vez, cuando puso la mano en la muñeca que tenía delante, no se apartó, sino que se quedó allí temblando —. Quizá pueda hacer algo por usted.

—Usted… usted, ¿qué se cree que es, mi ángel de la guarda? Escuche… —La voz vaciló, sonó exhausta, aunque seguía mirando el plato de sardinas—. Escuche… —repitió roncamente.

—¿Le andan buscando? —le preguntó el señor Yák en voz baja.

—¿Buscando…? —repitió débilmente—. ¿Buscando?

—¿Por qué le buscan?

—¿Por qué me…?, ¿por qué me busca quién? ¿Por qué me busca usted?

—La policía. Tiene a la policía detrás, ¿verdad? Yo sé cómo es eso, ¿entiende? ¿Verdad? ¿Por qué le buscan?

El hombre se quedó mirando las sardinas un momento más, luego levantó la cabeza de golpe y se echó a reír. Se soltó el brazo de un tirón, mirando al señor Yák directamente a los ojos por primera vez.

—Asesinato. ¿Eh? Maldita sea, apuñalé a un hombre y lo dejé allí por muerto. Bueno, ¿es eso lo que quería?

Dejó de reír, y se quedó mirando al hombre que tenía delante, que enseguida dijo:

—Sí, pero no hace falta que lo sepa todo el mundo, baje la voz. No es algo para andar proclamándolo a los cuatro vientos. Nunca se sabe quién puede estar vigilándote, hasta en un cuchitril como éste.

—Sí… bueno, nos están vigilando. Nos están vigilando —la voz volvió a adoptar su tono apagado.

—¿Quién? ¿Dónde? ¿Quién? —El señor Yák volvió a agarrar el brazo del hombre, que quedó inmóvil sobre la barra.

—¿No los ve? —susurró—. ¿Ve sus ojos, vigilándonos?

—¿Se refiere a esos… esos peces de ahí? —El señor Yák aflojó la mano, mientras miraba hacia donde estaban clavados los otros ojos.

—Sí, ¿los ve vigilándonos?

—Mire, Jesús… no vuelva a darme un susto como ése, ¿quiere?

—¿Los ve vigilándonos?

—Vale ya, olvídelo. —Apretándose el bigote, el señor Yák dio un paso atrás y escupió en el suelo. Luego alzó la vista, y estudió atentamente el perfil que tenía delante, como si estuviera mirando por encima de unas gafas—. Todavía no me ha dicho cómo se llama —dijo al fin.

—Sam Hall. Ahora… déjeme. Déjeme.

Pidió por señas otra copa. Luego sintió un toque en el codo.

—¡Lárgate! *¡Vaya! ¡Fuera!* [19] —exclamó el señor Yák. Al volverse, el hombre que tenía al lado se encontró con el andrajoso de mirada asustada que acompañaba al organillo, tendiendo un sombrero que era la única prenda entera que llevaba encima.

—Espere… espere un momento. Tome.

—¡Espere! —El señor Yák intentó detener su mano—. Cinco pesetas, no puede darle tanto, ¿cinco pesetas?

La figura encorvada agarró el billete y se escabulló.

—No hace falta darles tanto cada vez que…

—Me gusta la música, eso es todo. Ahora déjeme en paz.

—Escuche, ahora domínese, relájese —dijo el señor Yák, pegado de nuevo a su codo—. Quizá sea su ángel de la guarda, como dice usted. Quizá pueda ayudarle a salir de ésta.

—¿A salir de qué?

—Necesita papeles. Necesita un pasaporte, ¿no? —siguió el señor Yák en voz baja.

—No.

—Sí, lo necesita. No puede moverse por aquí sin uno. ¿Le gustaría ser suizo?

—Menos que cualquier otra cosa que pueda imaginar.

—Usted sería un buen suizo, se me acaba de ocurrir.

—¿Un buen suizo? —El hombre dio un bufido con la mano en la boca. Agarró la *manzanilla* en cuanto se la pusieron delante, y se bebió media copa de un trago—. Las mujeres se santiguan al cruzarse conmigo por la calle. Los perros callejeros me ladran. ¡Un buen suizo!

—Se lava y se afeita y quedará bien. Se me acaba de ocurrir. Tengo ese pasaporte, ¿entiende? Ese pasaporte suizo, no me dio tiempo a cambiar nada de él antes de marcharme, ni siquiera he cambiado aún la foto, ¿entiende? Y se me acaba de ocurrir, por eso lo digo, ¿entiende? Esa foto se parece a usted, ese suizo, tiene el pelo corto y la cara cuadrada, como usted, llena de arrugas alrededor de los ojos. ¿Entiende? No le estoy tomando el pelo, es tal cual, ese suizo. Y usted puede ser él, ¿entiende? —El señor Yák hablaba

con mayor rapidez, pero en el mismo tono bajo y confidencial. Tenía una mano en el brazo del hombre, y siguió el medio paso que el hombre se apartó de él, mirando directamente al frente—. ¿Qué dice? Escuche, yo sé cómo es, ¿entiende? Y así estará seguro de todas todas. —Siguió sin obtener respuesta, pegándose más, de modo que el hombre abrió otro hueco de medio paso entre ambos, que el señor Yák llenó, hablando ahora en un tono ligeramente diferente—: Puede que yo esté en el mismo aprieto que usted, ¿entiende? —dijo—. Sólo que yo estoy haciendo de rumano. Usted puede ser un suizo tan bueno como yo soy rumano.

El hombre se apartó otro medio paso para volverse y mirarlo, hablando por primera vez con algo parecido a interés en la voz:

—¿Ha matado a alguien?

—No, nada de eso. No me verá a mí haciendo un disparate como ése. —El señor Yák llenó el espacio entre ambos, y estiró la garganta separándola del cuello de plexiglás—. Cualquiera puede apuñalar a alguien. Yo no soy un holgazán para hacer algo como eso, ese disparate. Yo soy un artesano, como un artista, ¿entiende? Eso es lo que me ocurrió, ¿entiende? —terminó, con los ojos relucientes.

—No.

—¿No qué?

—¿Qué le ocurrió?

—Acabó de decírselo. Vaya, ¿ve? Sabía que acabaría por interesarse. Yo tampoco soy un holgazán.

—No he dicho que lo fuera. ¿Qué ocurrió?

—Ya se lo he dicho. Yo soy como un artista, un artesano, ¿entiende…? Y tuvieron celos de mi trabajo.

—¿Quién?

—Bueno, da igual, eso ya da igual ahora. —Y el señor Yák soltó un bufido, y empezó a tamborilear con los dedos sobre la barra, mirando también hacia abajo. Tras unos momentos de silencio, durante los cuales su compañero acabó su vino, el señor Yák respiró hondo y volvió a hablar con brío, como abordando un nuevo asunto—. Ahora ya da igual quien fuera —dijo.

Otro medio paso, y rebasaron las sardinas mironas.

—¿Qué dice? —preguntó el señor Yák a su compañero, en quien al fin había logrado despertar cierto interés; pero había desaparecido otra vez, había empujado la copa hacia adelante y miraba con aire ausente, con un codo apoyado en la barra y la barbilla sin afeitar en la mano. El señor Yák parecía a punto de subírsele al hombro—. ¿Qué dice ahora? No estoy bromeando, puedo arreglar ese pasaporte para usted. Eso es lo que le hace falta, ¿entiende? Como desprenderse del hombre viejo, ya sabe lo que quiero decir, ¿entiende…? Como dice la Biblia, eso es, ¿entiende…? Eso es lo que le hace falta, vestirse el hombre nuevo, como dice la Biblia. ¿Qué dice…? Muy bien, escuche. ¿Quiere entonces que le deje aquí sin más…?

—Sí.

—Escuche, me doy cuenta cuando un hombre no es un holgazán, ¿entiende? Escuche, puede quedarse con ese pasaporte suizo. Puede quedárselo. Se lo regalaré, ¿entiende? Entonces estará seguro de todas todas. El nombre de ese tipo, ese suizo, he olvidado su nombre. Pero da igual. Es nosecuántos Stephan. Stephan nosecuántos. ¿Entiende? Vale, te llamaré Stephan, ¿vale? Eso te ayudará a acostumbrarte a él, ¿entiendes? ¿Entiendes, Stephan? ¿Entiendes…? Ya te estás acostumbrando a él, ¿entiendes? ¿Entiendes, Stephan? Y así dentro de poco te tendrás por Stephan como yo me tengo por Yák, por el señor Yák, ¿entiendes? Por si acaso intentan pillarte por sorpresa, ¿entiendes? ¿Entiendes, Stephan?

Ya se habían desplazado tres pasos enteros, y estaban a punto de llegar a la pared.

—¿Entiendes, Stephan?

Y Stephan se volvió finalmente hacia él.

—¿No tiene otra cosa que hacer?

—Estoy aquí por negocios —contestó inmediatamente el señor Yák, y aprovechó al momento lo que interpretó como una reanudación del interés de su compañero—. Escuche, sabe… escucha, Stephan, te llamaré así para que te vayas acostumbrando, sólo por curiosidad, ¿sabes algo de momias?

—Me siento como una —dijo Stephan con la espalda contra la pared.

—¡Bien! Escucha… entonces, ¿sabes lo que son? ¿Sabes algo sobre ellas? Escucha, ¿cuánto sabes? Sabía que no eras un holgazán. Stephan.

—¿Qué quiere saber de ellas?

—¡Bien! Escucha, tómate otra copa de vino. Stephan. Escucha, sabes… Escucha… —El señor Yák bajó la voz con esfuerzo—. Imagina, ahora escúchame, imagina nada más que alguien quisiera hacer una, ¿entiendes? Una auténtica obra de artesanía, crear una. Bueno, yo sé algo de eso, ¿entiendes?, no habría que utilizar uno reciente… no habría que utilizar a alguien que acabara de morir… —El señor Yák metió la cara en la que tenía delante para decir en confianza—: Un médico desenterró una en Viena y empezó a oler,

¿entiendes?

—¿Qué antigüedad quiere que tenga?

—Realmente antigua, que parezca realmente antigua.

—¿Qué dinastía? —preguntó Stephan de mala gana.

—¿Qué qué? Oh… espera. Espera un momento, era, espera… —El señor Yák se apretó el bigote con todo el índice, mirando hacia abajo. Al ver su pie en el suelo, empezó a dar golpecitos con él—. Espera. La Cuarta. ¿La Cuarta? —repitió, alzando la vista.

—Esa es bastante primitiva.

—Sí, es realmente antigua.

Stephan había encendido otro acre cigarrillo amarillo, y el humo que echaba les separó un poco. Dejó que el humo se asentara, y entonces dijo:

—Si se lo digo, ¿se marchará?

—Sí, tengo que… tengo aquí un negocio del que quiero ocuparme cuanto antes —dijo el señor Yák con impaciencia—. Sigue.

—Bueno, me imagino que…

—Stephan.

—¿Qué?

—No, no, sigue. Sólo te he llamado así para que te vayas acostumbrando. Sigue —dijo el señor Yák, entrelazando las manos ante su compañero—. Stephan.

—Si es tan primitiva… ¿se marchará si se lo digo?

—Sí, sí, sigue. Sigue, Stephan.

El señor Yák retrocedió un paso y escupió en el suelo; luego alzó con entusiasmo sus ojos relucientes, aunque la voz que oía era monótona, incluso forzada, y las palabras brotaban rápidamente, trabadas de forma tan distraída como en una recitación.

—Se extiende el cuerpo, se hace una incisión en el costado izquierdo y se sacan los órganos internos, excepto el corazón. Se rellena la cavidad con lienzo y resina, se empapa de resina la envoltura externa y se amolda a la forma del cuerpo, luego se resaltan los detalles por fuera con pintura.

—¿Eso es todo?

—Eso es todo.

—¿Y qué hay de la envoltura, todas esas vendas de lienzo con que se lía?

—Eso es bastante complicado, la serie de vendas. Y deje el cerebro dentro, no sacaban el cerebro hasta mucho después. Y el corazón, no se olvide del corazón, deje el corazón dentro.

—¿Y qué hay de las vendas?, ¿sabes ponerlas?

Stephan no dijo nada, pero asintió distraídamente con la cabeza.

—Y la pintura, ¿con qué pintura se pinta?

—No lo sé. Ocre rojo, supongo —respondió con aire cansado, como si la recitación lo hubiera agotado. Se volvió hacia su copa vacía.

—Vale, vale por ahora —dijo el señor Yák con prisa repentina—. Pero después podemos arreglarlo tú y yo. Tú y yo… —dejó de hablar. Los ardientes ojos verdes estaban clavados en él.

—Tú y yo… ¿qué?

—Da igual, ahora da igual, Stephan. Lo arreglaremos, tú y…

—Dios santo… quiere… ¿es que no se va a ir?

—Sí, pero después…

—Espere.

—¿Qué pasa?

—Oiga, hágame un favor, ¿quiere? Consígame uno de esos… consígame un billete nuevo limpio de una peseta, si es que tienen alguno, ¿quiere?

—¿No tienes dinero? ¿Quieres algo de dinero?

—Sí, maldita sea, tengo dinero. Sólo quiero echar un vistazo a un billete nuevo de una peseta, quiero ver el dibujo.

—Escucha, te voy a prestar…

—Maldita sea, da igual. Da igual. Márchese.

El señor Yák examinó el fajo sucio que tenía en el bolsillo; luego llamó al camarero y explicó lo que quería su amigo, «por el dibujo, ¿sabe…? *Quiere ver el dibujo*». [20]

El camarero no cambió de expresión. Encontró el billete de una peseta más nuevo que tenía, y lo puso ante el hombre acodado en la barra; observó cómo le daba una palmadita en el brazo el de la rosa de papel,

le oyó decir: «Hasta luego, Stephan, volveré, no tardaré mucho, ten cuidado…», y cuando aquél hubo salido estrepitosamente por la puerta, apretándose el bigote con un dedo, alisándose la mata de pelo negro con la otra mano, el camarero logró adoptar un gesto un poco aliviado, pues no había entendido la amenaza de la despedida. Se cruzó de brazos y suspiró, como si acabara de salir por la puerta un grupo de veinte, dejando allí a un miembro aturdido, que ahora tenía la vista fija, no contemplando el mal grabado de la Dama de Elche, sino devolviendo la mirada ausente de las sardinas.

En aquel pueblo tranquilo, apiñado a tres mil pies de altura sobre el mar contra la vertiente sudoeste de la Sierra de Guadarrama, en la provincia de Madrid, y con el reino de Castilla la Nueva áridamente extendido a sus pies, hay treinta y siete bares, en los cuales, cómo en la mayoría del país, el visitante puede disfrutar libremente de ese privilegio que lo distingue con gran ventaja de los nativos, y acabar morbosa, desvalida, bulliciosa o furiosamente borracho. A nadie le importa. Se lo mira como una curiosidad, alguien a quien, quizá, se le ha ocurrido una solución ingeniosamente obvia para problemas innecesarios, y que está hipotecando un presente que es insostenible para asegurarse un futuro que no existe. Antes de que acabara aquel día soleado, todos menos tres (que sólo conocen los entendidos) se familiarizaron con el hombre desaliñado cuyo saludo, y entera conversación, consistía en la palabra «manzanilla»; con la tonadilla «La Tani», interpretada por el organillo local, al que al principio seguía de uno a otro bar y que luego, al encontrar un *duro* [21] arrugado esperándolo en cada parada, lo seguía a él; y por último, con la figura desgreñada y vociferante cuya *boutonnière,* cuando al fin encontró a su camarada en Mis Niños, no era más que un garabato de alambre con un ondeante jirón de papel rosa moteado, y cuyo bigote aparecía siempre torcido, como pegado a toda prisa, pues se lo retocaba ante cada umbral que cruzaba. También llevaba ahora un cordón amarillo y morado anudado bajo el cuello de plexiglás, en prenda, como se apresuró a explicar a su vidrioso amigo tras sus primeros saludos recriminatorios, de una promesa hecha a san Antonio a cambio del auxilio del santo en aquel proyecto inminente.

—No. No. Dios santo.

—¿Dónde te habías metido? Te he estado buscando por todo el pueblo, toda la tarde. Dijiste que ibas a esperar a que volviera…

—Creía que se había envuelto en vendas… como una momia.

—¿Qué?

—No.

—Escucha… ¿qué pasa, te estás escondiendo de alguien?

—Sí.

—¿De quién? ¿Dónde? ¿Dónde están? —El señor Yák miró frenéticamente a su alrededor—. ¿Ejem? Vamos. ¿Stephan? Vamos, Stephan. ¿Ejem? —En la puerta sonaba «La Tani» con atronadores acordes desafinados. El señor Yák volvió por fin los ojos en redondo para encontrarse los dos turbiamente verdes clavados en él—. Muy bien. ¿Estás bien?

«La Tani» acabó con un chirrido espantoso, algo se escurrió entre ellos, arrancó un *duro* [22] verde de la mano que colgaba de la barra, salió diciendo «Dios se lo pague, señor…» [23] en una palabra, y desapareció.

—Ahora escucha, es casi de noche, y nos…

Se oyó un chirrido trémulo en la puerta: era el acorde inicial de «La Tani».

—Escucha… ¡Jesús!

El señor Yák bajó el puño, se plantó en la puerta en dos pasos y empezó a gritar por encima de la música, que siguió sonando, saltándose notas que había perdido durante el día, pero luciendo las que quedaban con frenética exultación. El señor Yák logró por fin detener el manubrio, y volvió un minuto después con un aspecto aún más extenuado, tras una discusión que había resultado tan inconexa como la música que había mandado a paseo.

—*Una y una… tres.* [24] ¿Qué quiere ahora?

—Escucha, ya es casi de noche, ¿lo sabías? ¿Qué estás haciendo aquí, a todo esto?

—Intenté marcharme. No había trenes.

—No, quiero decir en este cuchitril. —El señor Yák miró a su alrededor. Era un lugar modesto, sin duda alguna. Había barriles, botellas y vasos sucios temerariamente ordenados tras el camarero, que les puso delante un platillo de aceitunas y se quedó esperando el pedido del señor Yák. Al darse cuenta de que había alguien con la oreja puesta, el señor Yák giró en redondo—: ¡Nada! ¡Nada…! *¡Niente! ¡Nada…!* —Estaba bastante agitado, y se volvió hacia su camarada, apoyado ante él—. Debería dejarte aquí tal como estás.

—De eso se trata.

—Ahora escucha —dijo el señor Yák, acercándose un paso, y puso una mano en el brazo apoyado sobre la barra. Un gesto taimado asomó a su cara mientras sus ojos penetrantes se entrecerraban sobre la expresión que tenía delante, que era casi una sonrisa—. ¿Te gustaría asegurarte? —preguntó con su tono bajo y confidencial.

—¿Asegurarme?

—Asegurarte, escucha… ¿qué te parecería subir conmigo, a lo alto de la colina?, ¿entiendes…? Y mirar dentro para asegurarte de que… de que es el lugar de descanso… de tu madre.

Cierta recrudescencia asomó a la cara que tenía delante: en cualquier caso la sonrisa se extinguió, dejando evidencia de una aguda conciencia dispersa en fragmentos de completa confusión, que los músculos de la cara parecían tratar de reunir en una sola pregunta.

—Escucha, ¿entiendes…? Yo tengo que subir allí de todas formas, por negocios. Puedes venir conmigo. Entonces tú y yo podremos…

—Maldita sea, deje… ya de decir eso. Ese tú y yo. ¿Quiere? Maldita sea. ¿Qué quieren de mí? ¿Qué quiere usted de mí? Maldita sea, ¡¿qué quieren todos de mí?! —exclamó.

—Escucha…

—Maldita sea. Malditos sean. Y usted… usted…

—Vamos fuera, tomaremos un poco el fresco fuera.

—Todos ellos… todos ellos… quieren de mí, quieren… ¡maldita sea! ¿Qué es lo que quieren? —gritó.

—Vamos. Vamos.

El señor Yák le pasó un brazo por los hombros, y le llevó hacia la puerta. El camarero les llamó, pero no en voz alta: «Señor… se olvida…» [25] Sostenía en alto un billete nuevo de una peseta, y el señor Yák se lo cedió con un gesto munífico de su mano libre.

Grupos de luces se destacaban en las faldas de la montaña como las luces de puertos arracimadas cuesta arriba junto al mar, pues todavía quedaba bastante luz para ver la árida llanura extendida a lo lejos, uniformemente azul bajo la neblina. Empezaron a subir por detrás del pueblo, y mientras ascendían por las calles empedradas sacudidas de conciencia, y consiguiente revulsión, traspasaban la figura que sostenía el señor Yák, que se apartaba de él, para volver a caerle encima con más fuerza. Mientras tanto, el señor Yák hablaba. Explicó el cordón morado y amarillo que le colgaba del cuello lustroso, y la deuda contraída por san Antonio. Dijo que había hecho una confesión general, pero en rumano, de modo que el viejo *párroco,* que no había entendido una palabra, le había impuesto una penitencia leve, «no como en Roma, en San Pedro pueden confesarte en media docena de lenguas, te tienen yendo y viniendo». Dijo que había entregado el tres por cierto de su dinero a la iglesia, «para dedicarlo a usos devotos, como está escrito, ¿entiendes?». Y dijo que el párroco era muy viejo, «no costará mucho hacerlo marchar por donde queramos, ahora mismo se me ocurren unas cuantas ideas, ¿entiendes…? Porque ya le he hablado de una idea que tengo sobre los sagrados misterios, ¿entiendes? Pero también está ese tipo al que tengo que vigilar, tenemos que vigilarlo, lo conocí allí en el último momento», y mientras avanzaban penosamente hacia la carretera sembrada de rocas que subía por detrás del pueblo, el señor Yák pasó a describir al señor Hermoso Hermoso, que «tiene esa actitud tan devota hacia todo, ¿entiendes? Porque van a conseguir esa santa patrona y él actúa como si lo hubiera arreglado todo, y ni siquiera es cura ni nada, tiene una especie de droguería, y esa es una razón por la que tenemos que vigilarle de cerca, ¿entiendes? Y habla inglés, así que me ha contado todo sobre esa santa patrona que van a conseguir. Cuando la sacaron de ese nicho para meterla en otra parte cuando la beatificaron pensaron que parecía un poco grande para ser una niña de once años, pero la forma en que estaba conservado el cuerpo después de casi cuarenta años, eso les confirmó que es una santa. Pero tanto tiempo, por muy bien conservada que esté probablemente harán una nueva cabeza de cera. De todas formas no es tanto tiempo, si no comes nada más que judías durante toda tu vida como esta gente de aquí que no tiene dinero para comer nada más que judías durante toda su vida, entonces no te pudres tan deprisa». El señor Yák se interrumpió, pero siguió hablando casi inmediatamente, como espoleado por el silencio de su compañero.

—El caso es que me ha contado todas las curaciones que ha hecho, por su intercesión, ya sabes, como ese viejo que llevaba sordo seis años, así que rezó pidiendo su intercesión y se curó de buenas a primeras, qué era, era una tijereta que había tenido en el oído durante todo el tiempo, ¿sabes…? Y cuando salió de repente ya pudo volver a oír. Y luego lo de ese viejo que violó a la niña, o intentó violarla, ¿entiendes…? Cuando era joven, ahora es muy viejo, salió de la cárcel y se fue a ese monasterio donde es una especie de penitente, ¿sabes? Es como un portero allí…

El señor Yák se calló por fin, más *que* nada por el esfuerzo que la caminata le estaba costando. Había oscurecido ya cuando llegaron a la colina y empezaron a subirla. Entonces el señor Yák oyó algo a su

espalda, y se detuvo. «Qué demo… bueno, que me… ese organillo, nos han venido siguiendo». Un bulto cuadrado, con dos guías informes, se había detenido en la última esquina a su espalda, y volvía de mala gana a las calles del pueblo. «¿Ves? ¿Ves?». El señor Yák sacudió a su compañero mientras subían. «Te dije que no les dieras dinero de ese modo, ahora te seguirán por el mundo entero».

A media subida, tras sacar el pie de un montón blando en medio de la accidentada carretera, el señor Yák se detuvo.

—Escucha, ¿por qué no me esperas aquí? No hace falta que subas, siéntate aquí un minuto y espera. Volveré dentro de un minuto, ¿entiendes?

Al oír esto, el hombre al que sostenía volvió de pronto a la vida, y retrocedió un paso, cayéndose casi.

—No, no, no —dijo con claridad—. Yo voy. Yo voy ya.

—Escucha, no hay ninguna razón para que te molestes en venir, ¿entiendes? Y lo de antes lo dije en broma, no querrás ponerte a hurgar ahí arriba, tú siéntate y espérame aquí un minuto, tú… espera…

Pero la figura se había alejado ya unos pasos colina arriba, en la oscuridad, y el señor Yák echó a correr para alcanzarla.

En la verja brillaba una luz, sostenida por una figura en sombra. Era el sacristán, que gemía. «¿Quién es?», [26] preguntó a los espectros, aunque lo sabía muy bien, y volviéndose sin esperar respuesta los guió adentro. Franquearon la verja interior, y la luz del farol bañó las blancas *bóvedas* descubriendo aquí y allá una corona de cuentas, la Virgen rígida en una estampa que parecía una carta de una reina de la baraja, el Niño con una mano alzada como si estuviera llamando a un taxi.

El *sacristán* se había detenido con aire indeciso, esperando una palabra del señor Yák, que avanzaba encorvado para mirar las edades y las fechas de los nichos, cuando ambos se dieron cuenta de que el hombre que iba con ellos había seguido adelante. Lo encontraron donde se habían reunido todos a la luz del sol.

—Mira, no hace falta que andes hurgando ahí dentro… —empezó el señor Yák, pero demasiado tarde, pues ya había empezado a arrancar por su cuenta la tapa del nicho sin nombre cuando la luz reveló dónde estaba. El señor Yák también estaba temblando, y volvió la cara como si no quisiera mirar cuando lo sacaron; y todos se sorprendieron de lo poco que pesaba mientras lo bajaban al suelo. De los tres, el *sacristán* se mostraba ahora el más aturdido, tratando de levantar la tapa con una mano, sosteniendo la luz en alto con la otra, y alzando la vista sin cesar como si temiera que alguien, o algo, apareciese. Cuando se abrió, no con un giro, sino con la rotura de la tapa de madera, fue el primero en romper la suspensión del sobresalto que les tenía agarrotados por igual, mirando de hito en hito el contenido oscuro, ajado y de traza infantil.

—*¡Coño…! ¡Dios! ¡Válgame Dios!* [27]

Cerró de golpe la tapa rota, y se quedó así, temblando de rodillas junto a la niñita que había quedado abandonada. Alzó los ojos lentamente, clavándolos más allá de ellos donde sus sombras se quebraban sobre los vanos de los compartimientos vacíos, pegados unos a otros en lo alto de la *bóveda.* Y el señor Yák, todavía inmóvil, sintió un estremecimiento a su lado, que persistió en la sombra mortecinamente proyectada más allá de la escoba rota, en el hondo hueco, privado de la presencia extraña que había esperado tanto tiempo incontestada por la tierra, a lo largo de la guerra, y el asalto sacrílego, y la destrucción de nombres más adornados que el suyo, entre marchitas ofrendas florales y coronas de cuentas, para ser al fin sacada de este dominio de fachadas de vidrio roto e imágenes maltrechas, y guardada como reliquia, para obrar milagros.

El *sacristán* se santiguó: y la sombra agitada quedó prendida y se reflejó dos veces en los brazos de los hombres que estaban de pie sobre él. El señor Yák se volvió, sobresaltado por aquel movimiento a su lado. La mano que puso en el hombro de su compañero no fue rechazada, y susurró: «Vale, Stephan. Te dije que no eras un holgazán».

El *sacristán* se estaba levantando con esfuerzo. De pronto, los ojos del señor Yák relucieron de nuevo. «Ahora, ¿entiendes?, de vuelta al trabajo. Ella… esto», señaló la caja sin fijarse en el papel que desgarraban manos temblorosas buscando un cigarrillo a su lado. «Esto es justo lo que necesitamos. ¿Entiendes? ¿Stephan? ¿Estás bien?». El señor Yák se lo quedó mirando.

A la luz intermitente y movediza de la cerilla y el farol, su cara aparecía más oscura, y todo parecía moverse en ella, aunque nada en absoluto se movía, líneas que partían de la nariz y sostenían rígidamente erguida la mandíbula, líneas que separaban las mejillas hundidas de los pómulos altos. El *sacristán* los urgía ahora pidiéndoles ayuda, para devolver la cosa a su sitio antes de que los descubrieran, y el señor Yák agarró uno de los extremos, pero el tercero de ellos se quedó mirando sin más el espacio vacío donde no había más que la punta húmeda de una escoba rota. Cuando terminaron de meterla en su sitio, se había ido.

Le encontraron minutos después, sentado en una piedra junto a la verja exterior, comiendo una naranja en la oscuridad, y mirando a la luna, que acababa de salir por detrás de las montañas.

—Vamos, Stephan. Hace frío —dijo el señor Yák, llevándole del brazo colina abajo—. Tenemos que coger ese tren. —Su voz sonó alta en el aire nocturno, y la bajó como hablando consigo mismo para añadir —: Nos ocuparemos de esto mañana, cuando tengamos al *viejo párroco* en el bolsillo, ¿eh?

Sintió encogerse de hombros a la figura que llevaba al lado, y no dijo más, planeando atareadamente en su cabeza el futuro inmediato. Ninguno de los dos habló mientras atravesaban el pueblo, donde luces solitarias proyectaban nítidas sombras separadas, recortando verticalmente los umbrales, ninguna de las luces lo bastante próxima a otra para confundir la noche con tintes múltiples y exagerados, o las sombras que seguían a aquellas dos figuras en movimiento con las que las precedían.

Llegaron sin hablar a la estación de ferrocarril. En el andén vacío, el señor Yák se estremeció mirando al cielo.

—Mira eso, esa luna —dijo, encorvado y con las manos hundidas en los bolsillos.

—Sí…

—¿Qué? —Tras una pausa, el señor Yák murmuró—: Aquí parece tan cercana, verdad… —Luego volvió a estremecerse, y miró por encima del hombro hacia donde una débil bombilla iluminaba el letrero Urinarios—. ¿Eh, Stephan? Tengo que ir ahí un momento —dijo—. ¿Stephan?

—Oh, sí, ¿sabe…? Con hechizos se puede hacerla bajar…

—¿Qué?

—¿Bajar del cielo?

El señor Yák esperó, vuelto a medias, y luego sus hombros se relajaron un poco y dijo: «Olvidé decirte, ¿eh? Mandé decir una misa por tu madre, ahí en la iglesia». Esperó un momento más, balanceándose con las rodillas juntas. «¿Entiendes?», añadió. Pero desde donde estaba le pareció que aquella figura solitaria, retirada al fondo del andén vacío, estaba intentando sacudirse un rayo de luna de la manga, y el señor Yák se volvió y siguió en la dirección en que había echado a andar. Cuando llegó y se sumió en su ocupación, mirando al cielo que lo cubría, el silencio del campo, ese silencio que mantiene en vela, alerta, los oídos urbanos, lo incitó a hablar en voz alta, como para oír lo que decía confirmado. «Ese pobre tipo, está más loco que una cabra…». Luego sorbió por la nariz, ladeó la cabeza, y le pareció oír el estruendo del organillo martilleando en su interior. Pero todo estaba en silencio, y de hecho, desde aquel día soleado no se ha vuelto a oír «La Tani» por aquellas calles.

A la mañana siguiente, la doncella andaluza contemplaba desde su balcón, por encima de su pretendiente, una escena de considerable actividad. El aire estaba saturado de olores, murmullos y alguna que otra bocanada de humo, mientras el señor Yák iba y venía entre el revoltijo de periódicos, tan ensimismado en su trabajo que estuvo a punto de dejar caer los tubos de ensayo de cristal que sostenía en cada mano cuando el *dueño* llamó a la puerta.

—*Su amigo, señor*… [28]

El *dueño* se apartó para dejar entrar a la desaliñada figura que aguardaba en el pasillo a su lado, y el señor Yák, que había dejado los tubos de ensayo y se había puesto el peluquín negro ligeramente torcido, se acercó, y dijo: «Pasa, Stephan. Pasa. Siéntate… aquí, déjame quitar esto… aquí. Siéntate. Ahora mira. Mira esto». Y volvió a coger los tubos de ensayo. Empezó a verter el líquido claro de uno de ellos en el otro, que estaba aparentemente vacío, pero el peluquín resbaló sobre un ojo reluciente. Levantó la mano impacientemente, agarró la negra guedeja, se la arrancó de un tirón y la arrojó sobre la cómoda, al otro lado de la habitación. Luego, su mano volvió a su cara de forma maquinal y dio un fuerte tirón al bigote. Gritó y estuvo a punto de soltar los tubos de ensayo, pero recuperó rápidamente su propósito. «Mira…». El líquido claro cayó en el tubo de ensayo vacío, donde se volvió de un rojo brillante. «Ahora dime, ¿qué te parece eso?».

—Es muy bonito, pero dígame…

—Espera. Mira… —Vertió el líquido rojo en otro tubo de ensayo, y se volvió incoloro de nuevo.

—Dígame nada más…

—Agua en vino, vino en agua. También puedo transformarla en leche. Se añade un poco de bisulfato de sodio…

—Por favor, quiere decirme…

—Aquí tienes otro. Este es aún mejor. Agua transformada en sangre, sangre en un sólido. ¿Recuerdas el milagro de Bolsena? Mira. Un poco de sulfato de aluminio disuelto, unas gotas de fenolftaleína, y ahora…

mira. Silicato de sodio. Mira. ¿Ves? Mira eso, sangre. Mira. ¿La ves? ¿La ves coagularse?

—Sí, sí, pero…

—¿Qué te parece eso?

—Lo único que quiero saber es…

—También puedo tragar fuego, si hace falta. —El señor Yák cruzó a saltos el babel de periódicos para mirar unas bolitas de papel secante que se estaban enjugando en el lavabo—. ¿Ves?, dijo, cogiendo una. No tienes más que encenderla y envolverla en algodón. Y entonces, ¡buf!

—Si pudiera nada más…

—¡Buuuft! Chispas por todas partes. ¿Eh? —Los ojos del señor Yák brillaban ansiosamente al fondo de la habitación, mientras esperaba alguna confirmación de su entusiasmo. Pero su huésped se limitaba a mirarle —. ¿Eh, Stephan? ¿Qué te pasa?

—¿Quiere decirme nada más dónde estoy?, ¿y cómo he llegado aquí?

—¿Dónde estamos? Estamos en Madrid, dónde vamos a estar. Ésta es la *pensión* donde vivo, anoche te alquilé una habitación aquí. Anoche estabas borracho, no deberías beber tanto. Le di tu pasaporte al *dueño*, tiene que presentarlo en la comisaría, ¿entiendes? Le dije que eras un amigo mío de Suiza rendido por el viaje, y que por eso no podías andar, ¿entiendes? Ahora todo está en orden, estás seguro de todas todas. Stephan.

Llamaron a la puerta. El señor Yák agarró bruscamente su pelo y se lo puso. La excitación había devuelto el color a su cara, y aunque no fuera el rubor de la juventud, aquella mañana parecía realmente más joven, y capaz de casi todo.

—Está al revés.

—¿Qué?

—Su pelo. Se ha puesto el pelo al revés —dijo su huésped, hundido en el rincón entre los periódicos, hablando en un tono que reflejaba la expresión de sus ojos, una de curiosidad paciente, pero cautelosa. Sacó un cigarrillo amarillo del paquete verdinegro de Ideales.

—¡Oh! ¡Oh! ¡Oh!

El señor Yák dio la vuelta al peluquín sobre su cabeza, y abrió la puerta una rendija.

—¿*Señor* [29] Asche? —dijo el *dueño* desde el oscuro pasillo. El señor Yák empezó a hacer señas frenéticas detrás de la puerta. Su huésped se le quedó mirando—. *Su pasaporte*…

Finalmente, el señor Yák sacó la mano por la rendija para coger el pasaporte, murmurando «Gracias» [30] al dueño, y luego cerró la puerta y echó el cerrojo. «*Señor* Asche, ese eres tú», dijo cruzando la habitación. «Quería que vinieses a cogérselo, tu pasaporte. Stephan Asche. ¿Ves?». Tendió el pasaporte suizo por encima de la barricada de periódicos. «Toma, Stephan. Como te dije, ¿ves? Seguro de todas todas. Mira la foto que tiene, pasa la página. Es igual que tú, como te dije, esa cara cuadrada, toda arrugada alrededor de los ojos, ¿ves? Ahora no tienes más que lavarte un poco y afeitarte». Y volvió a alejarse a saltos por la habitación hacia el espejo del lavabo, donde las bolas de papel secante atrajeron su mirada. «¿Quieres verme tragar fuego?», exclamó, mirando de soslayo en el espejo la imagen del hombre a su espalda. La imagen de Stephan Asche no se movió. Nada se movía allí, más que el humo que se elevaba lentamente tras el desorden de periódicos, el rastro olvidado de un fuego que sigue ardiendo sin llama en un montón de desechos donde nada conserva su forma o propósito original, entre partes rotas y restos oxidados de objetos útiles, inidentificables ahora, indistinguibles de otros fragmentos del pasado, formas y ángulos agudos de curioso diseño e intención única, consumiéndose sin llama bajo el revoltijo de noticias que ya no son noticia, páginas de palabras desgarradas por el viento, empapadas de lluvia, palabras que conservan su separación, pegadas al trozo de papel, sin propósito, sólo palabras, y nada se mueve salvo el humo, alzándose de dos ascuas brillantes.

—¡Stephan! —exclamó el señor Yák, volviéndose desde el lavabo—. ¡Despierta…! Te… te has quedado dormido con los ojos abiertos, parecías… escucha…

—Mire…

—Escucha, no deberías fumar eso, ¿entiendes? Huele a rayos, hace que la habitación entera huela como un estercolero. Aquí el tabaco tiene un tercio de mondas de patata… ¿Entiendes? Escucha, necesitas lavarte y afeitarte.

—Pero no quiero.

—Sí, te hace falta. Vamos… ¿qué es lo que quieres hacer?

—Nada.

—No puedes no hacer nada. ¿Entiendes? Hay trabajo que hacer. ¿Entiendes? Todo esto… Todo esto… — La bata sembrada de quemaduras de cigarrillo se abre con un revuelo: el cuello del señor Yák es bastante

largó, brota de la tirilla de la camisa, ceñido, constreñido con ridícula dignidad en plexiglás, atado y ajustado con la prenda de san Antonio, el rehén de san Antonio se la aprieta con fuerza a la garganta—. El agua en vino, y el vino en agua, la sangre que se coagula y se vuelve piedra, todo eso es para el viejo *párroco,* ¿entiendes? Para metérnoslo en el bolsillo y conseguir que nos venda esa… que nos venda esa cosa para la momia. ¿Nada? ¿No quieres hacer nada? Así es como se mete uno en líos. Así se mete uno en líos, sin hacer nada.

—*Dies irae, dies illa, solvet saeclum in favilla*… Dígame, ¿cantaron eso allí?

—¿Dónde?

—En la misa, dijo que había mandado cantar una misa por los muertos. A veces cantan eso, en las misas por los muertos, balanceando el incensario para matar el olor de los vivos. Oiga, ¿quién era esa rubia que me he encontrado en el pasillo?

El silencio se somete al ruido sordo de una ceniza de Ideal que cae al suelo. Desde la pared, la doncella andaluza mira hacia abajo desde su sólido balcón, por encima del hombro del que abraza la guitarra, para coquetear con su huésped, que la desdeña en cuanto se encuentran sus ojos, volviéndose como si le tirara el cordón que lleva al cuello.

—Justo lo que has dicho, una rubia. Olvídala.

—Pero si ni siquiera la conozco aún.

—Eso te evita la molestia. No debes liarte con esa fulana llamativa. ¿Entiendes?

En alguna parte sonó un reloj. «¿Entiendes?», repitió el señor Yák, dando un paso hacia el rincón más oscuro, con la cabeza baja, la barbilla prominente, escudriñando el lugar de donde salía el humo como un hombre que hurga en un montón de basura, que encuentra entre las cenizas una corbata informe, raída y desechada, unos trapos, dos zapatos que nunca volverá a calzar nadie, pero siguió escudriñando aún, y sus ojos reflejaron un destello.

—¿Estás aquí para liarte con una rubia que te quitará los diamantes del dedo en cuanto te descuides? Entonces, ¿por qué estás aquí?

—¿Por qué estoy aquí? Estoy aquí porque no estoy en ninguna otra parte. Ahora mire…

—Ahora escucha, tú y yo… ¡Espera! ¿Qué estás haciendo? No debes abrir las ventanas…

Sin embargo, las puertas ventanas del balcón se abrieron de golpe, y los ruidos de Alfonso del Gato se elevaron hasta ellos, enmarcados por el estribillo de «Francisco alegre…», *¡olé!*

—No debes liarte con esa fulana llamativa del pasillo —repitió el señor Yák, hablando a la espalda de Stephan, ante las ventanas—. ¿Entiendes?

Sin embargo, poco después de que todos los demás terminaran el almuerzo de sopa de ajo, *cocido* [31] simple, pescado seco y una naranja, sin que el suéter de angora azul se dejase ver por el pequeño comedor, el señor Yák, deslizándose por el pasillo entre puertas cerradas por la siesta, se asomó al comedor, y vio allí a su amigo en una mesa, con la pelusa azul en diagonal encima. Le estaba mordiendo el pulgar.

Antes de darse cuenta el reproche embargó al señor Yák, y estuvo a punto de dar un mal paso; pero habría tiempo de sobra para todas sus palabras de reprensión, advertencia y censura: ahora había trabajo por hacer, y fue enseguida a hacerlo, sintiéndose helado y envejecido.

En cuanto a Marga, era una persona discreta. Había un edificio en la calle Ventura de la Vega donde, subiendo un tramo de escaleras, se encontraba una habitación en penumbra con las persianas bajadas y sin más mobiliario que el imprescindible: un espejo, colocado a lo largo de la cama, que aquella tarde reflejó con un vigor fértil no disminuido por la repetición libertades tomadas con todas las partes naturales de su cuerpo menos su peinado, aunque éste, sin duda alguna, era una cumbre de artificio cuya consiguiente fragilidad tenía buenas razones para proteger. Sólo al descender de la cima expuesta y cultivada demostraban los poderes remontadores de la naturaleza cuán estrechamente, como escribió el poeta, está aliado en la mujer lo natural con el arte.

—Te vi… —dijo aquella noche el señor Yák, enfundado en la bata agujereada, sosteniendo ante sí su pelo con aire agotado. Había tenido un día muy ajetreado, engatusando al viejo *párroco* por un lado, manteniendo a raya al molesto señor Hermoso Hermoso por el otro. Pero su aspecto revelaba algo más que la fatiga del día. En el instante en que se quitó aquella negra guedeja, una pesada década de años le hundió los hombros, y sus ojos, como si otro día de uso hubiera agotado su brillo, mostraban ahora una opacidad que, de no ser por los arranques impacientes de su voz, habría podido interpretarse como decepción—.

Escucha, tenemos… tenemos trabajo que hacer, y tú, portándote así, es como si tiraras piedras sobre tu propio tejado —dijo—. Tú no eres un holgazán.

—…

—Stephan.

—¿Qué?

—No, sólo… sólo lo he dicho, sólo te he llamado así para que te vayas acostumbrando.

El señor Yák bajó cansinamente los ojos hacia las tablas del suelo, cuyas longitudes diferentes formaban un entarimado inestable.

Si el paño naranja de aquel abrigo se veía tan rápidamente suplantado en la memoria por su cuello de leopardo hasta el suelo, ambos desaparecían tanto de la atención como de la memoria cuando se abría el abrigo y sólo Marga aparecía debajo, pues lo usaba como *robe de chambre*, o más bien *de couloir,* en aquel trayecto de última hora entre su habitación y el cuarto de baño, realizado, como todas sus apariciones públicas, con un decoro que realzaba grandemente su libertinaje en privado. Allí, en su habitación, aparte de la luna de cuerpo entero del armario del fondo, que habría exigido esfuerzos excesivos, si no antinaturales, para su pleno empleo, no había ningún espejo para confirmar a un sentido lo que hacían posible los otros cuatro, ninguna confirmación para aquel sentido más inmediato, el más usado, más fiado, más susceptible de ser engañado, salvo sus labios demasiado cerca, separados, dientes mordiendo el silencio, y ojos que exigían correspondencia al cerrarse.

—Te oí… —dijo el señor Yák al día siguiente—. Te oí ahí dentro anoche. Y ahora mírate, mírate los ojos, estás atrapando esa gripe francesa que está atrapando todo el mundo; deberías meterte en la cama y cuidarte, ¿entiendes? Porque dentro de uno o dos días vamos a ir por eso, para la momia, ¿entiendes?

Si ella oía el corazón latiendo en la oscuridad, o lo sentía sacudiendo el cuerpo entero que abrazaba, cada latido rajando la cabeza que sostenía entre las manos, y la mandíbula rígida temblando luego con boqueadas por respirar, mientras cada latido del corazón bombeaba el flujo más débilmente y lo menguaba para retener la vida que ella hacía brotar, no daba muestras de advertirlo en la oscuridad, la primera vez, la segunda, la tercera y su rodilla alzada para practicar suaves manipulaciones insistentes con los dedos del pie, para continuar el ensayo y luego en un arranque repetir la actuación, no más muestra que el preparador de animales entrenando a un perro enfermo.

Dos días después, cuando Marga se había ido al campo (una boda familiar), el señor Yák tenía casi ultimados sus preparativos. El *párroco* de San Zuinglio estaba debidamente atemorizado, el *sacristán* concienzudamente intimidado, y el señor Hermoso Hermoso convencido con tal feliz presunción de que sabía lo que estaba pasando que había dejado de intentar descubrirlo. Hasta había revelado al señor Yák, y de forma totalmente inconsciente, algo de lo más pertinente para el proyecto, en una charla casual de café en la que había salido a colación un método local para envejecer encajes finos, un proceso que ahora pensaba utilizar el señor Yák para añadir unas cuantas docenas de siglos al vendaje de lienzo, antes de cocerlo al horno finalmente.

—Así que lo que tenemos que hacer es enterrarlo en algún sitio, en el suelo, ¿entiendes? Escucha… ¿me escuchas, Stephan? ¿Cómo te sientes, te sientes mejor? Escucha, entonces, lo que tienes que hacer es ir adonde está enterrado y mojarlo, ¿entiendes? ¿Entiendes lo que quiero decir con mojarlo? Quiero decir que te… te pones encima y lo mojas, ¿entiendes? Haces eso un montón de veces, luego lo desentierras y lo cuelgas al sol, y así coge ese bonito color amarillo envejecido que le da ese aspecto realmente antiguo, ¿entiendes? ¿Me escuchas? Vamos, saca la cabeza de debajo de las sábanas. Tienes que venir conmigo a comprar esas vendas de lienzo para que nos den las que hacen falta. ¿Entiendes? Vamos. Te sientes mejor. Ya estás bien del todo. Vamos, saca la cabeza de debajo de las sábanas.

El bulto de la cama se agitó, pero siguió callado, y el señor Yák se inclinó hacia adelante para poner una mano afectuosa sobre lo que creía que era un hombro. Brotó un gruñido de dentro.

—Vamos, tienes que salir, el aire fresco te sentará mejor que estar aquí encerrado…

El señor Yák meneó el bulto, y el gruñido se hizo más fuerte. Finalmente apareció una abertura cautelosa, con un ojo detrás, y una voz clara dijo: «Váyase».

—Bien. En todo caso ya no deliras —dijo el señor Yák, soltando el hombro, y se sentó junto a la cama, aliviado. Aquellas dos ultimas noches, el señor Yák había vuelto bastante cansado del trabajo del día para afrontar las exigencias aún más extenuantes de aquella amistad que había cimentado desde lo más hondo de lo que ahora podía creer que había sido la bondad de su corazón. E igual que no había ninguna duda, tras tocarle la frente, de que Stephan había estado enfermo, aún cabía menos duda de su delirio tras escuchar su

conversación: salamandras y silfos, y sirenas, un auténtico Carnaval, pero espere, no *carne vale… Ave carne…! Salve…! Macte virtute* esto! «Entonces, ¿quería que acabara como Descartes? *Larvatus prodeo,* retirándose a demostrar su propia existencia, y tenía una salamandra. Vino a visitarlo como la mía hizo entonces. Pero ahora… *Copulo, ergo sum.* ¿Eh? *Came, O te felicem!».*

Y el señor Yák había meneado la cabeza, y murmurado algo sobre «esa fulana llamativa del pasillo», por lo que fue inmediatamente amenazado con ceguera como le ocurrió a Estesícoro «por calumniar a Helena».

—Qué desgracia —murmuró el señor Yák, pero para sí, y pensando en sí mismo, no en Estesícoro.

—Vaya, demostrar la propia existencia, le sorprendería saber de lo que es capaz un hombre para demostrar su propia existencia… —oyó a su espalda el señor Yák cuando salía la noche anterior, santiguándose—. Vaya, no hay ni un solo ardid que la gente desdeñe para demostrar su propia existencia…

—Duerme un poco, Stephan.

—Ni un solo ardid…

Ahora, el señor Yák se dio por vencido una vez más, y echando una mirada a la escena de amor andaluza de la pared de Stephan volvió a su habitación, donde ahora estaba colgada la estampa por la que la había cambiado, *Jesús del Gran Poder,* [32] que había encontrado de cara a la pared en el cuarto de Stephan. Se quedó mirando distraídamente la oscura cabeza de Cristo inclinada bajo el peso de la Cruz, y al cabo de un minuto ladeó la cabeza al oír un ruido en el pasillo. Un momento después descubrió a Stephan tratando de escabullirse de la *pensión.* Le dejó escapar, le siguió, y luego le alcanzó como por casualidad en la calle de abajo. Allí intercambiaron sus acostumbrados saludos contenciosos, y el señor Yák se lo llevó a comprar cuarenta metros de venda de lienzo, bajo la promesa de que inmediatamente después irían a un bar.

La camaradería entre estos dos hombres tenía a estas alturas algo de inevitable. Eran mutuamente dependientes en medios, y estaban constantemente en pugna de fines. El hombre mayor parecía interesado en lo que hacía el más joven sólo para desaprobarlo; y la absoluta falta de interés del más joven en la actividad del mayor sólo incitaba a este a redoblarla. Rara vez entraban juntos a un bar sin que el señor Yák pidiese dos cafés, y su compañero se quedase parado, conteniendo una mano con la otra, hasta que podía poner una de ellas sobre un vaso de vino o, ahora con más frecuencia, de coñac. Lo que es más, había momentos en que se parecían notablemente el uno al otro, aunque eso, quizá, era sólo por una expresión alrededor de los ojos, una mirada tensa, brillante de impaciencia, una especie de vacuidad alerta, lista para despegar.

Sus ocupaciones les resultaban a estas alturas tan recíprocamente misteriosas que ninguno se sorprendía de nada que el otro hiciera o dijera, pues en realidad cada uno dependía cada vez más del otro para darse ánimos, un arreglo en cierto modo similar a esa fórmula mágica del matrimonio moderno, cuyas partes se dan ánimos respectivamente mediante la desaprobación y el desinterés.

Sus presentes empeños estaban alcanzando las primeras cimas más o menos al mismo tiempo: mientras el señor Yák estaba listo para traer su adquisición del cementerio rural a la ciudad y empezar a trabajar de verdad en ella, su socio había concluido la última etapa de un maratón de bebida, y parecía estar escalando las cumbres de más allá.

—¿Con qué te has manchado de ese modo las solapas de la chaqueta? —preguntó el señor Yák, poniéndose al corriente de sus últimas actividades.

—Estoy aprendiendo a beber de un porrón, no se toca con los labios. Levantarlo es bastante fácil, es al intentar parar cuando te pones así.

—¿Y qué es eso, esas marcas que tienes en los hombros?

—Eso es de resbalar entre los barriles.

—No deberías derrochar el dinero de ese modo.

—Usted me dijo que está tan sucio que no es sano llevarlo encima.

—¿Por qué no viniste anoche a cenar?

—No después de esa alcachofa gris. Y esa mujer de nuestra mesa, no sé si se está santiguando o sujetándose la servilleta, se pasa así toda la comida. Y esa mujer de la mesa de al lado, dando de mamar al niño.

—¿Qué pasa con eso?

—No pasa nada, sólo que me distrae de la sopa de pan.

—Ahora no estás liado con ninguna mujer, ¿verdad?

—¿Qué pasa con las mujeres?

—No tengo nada en contra de ellas, sólo que ninguna le puede durar a un hombre toda la vida.

—¡Dios santo! Qué, ¿cree que yo he sugerido eso?

—No, pero ellas lo harán. Todavía no he conocido a ninguna mujer que nada más entrar en una habitación no esté esperando yo que se vaya. Intenta casarte alguna vez. Yo mismo tuve una vez una esposa.

—¿Qué hizo con ella?

—La mandé a paseo. Qué te crees que hice. Escucha, dime una cosa…

—¿El chiste de los cinco hermanos Jones? ¿Se lo sabe? *¿Los cinco-jones…?*

—Tenemos trabajo que hacer, ¿por qué te emborrachas de ese modo?

—Bueno, se lo diré, tengo cinco monos en el estómago y cuatro sillas en la cabeza, ¿se sabe ése? Con el primer coñac sube un mono y se sienta. Con la segunda copa sube otro y se sienta, con la tercera…

—Escucha…

—Con la cuarta…

—Escucha…

—Y cuando sube el quinto mono no encuentra sitio para sentarse, así que…

—¿Estás aprendiendo el idioma? ¿Dónde?

—Marga me ha enseñado todo lo que sé. Eso es amor. O digamos que estoy *encoñado.* [33]

—¿Qué es eso de *encoñado*?

—Es una invocación local para llevar a los hombres a la cama.

—¿Adónde crees que vas ahora?

—Me voy a dormir si puedo. Si no puedo bajaré a bailar con los gitanos.

—No te acerques a esa gente de ahí abajo. Mañana…

—Buenas noches.

—Mañana…

Pero el señor Yák estaba inquieto. Apenas eran las once de la noche, y le llegaba bastante ruido de Alfonso del Gato. Salió solo a tomar un café.

Las calles estaban abarrotadas de gente muy diferente de la de primera hora de la mañana, las chicas y las viejas de negro, la cola delante de la carbonería. Pero los gritos eran los mismos: *«¡Cien iguales me quedan…! ¡Cien iguales para hoy…!»*. El sonido del inglés en la calle resultaba sorprendente, un chico rubio del brazo de un hombre: «Pero si ni siquiera estoy seguro de dónde está España…». Pasó una mujer alta, hablando con su marido: «Ya me he acostumbrado a la pobreza». «¿Te refieres a la de los demás?». «Sí, ya no me molesta como antes, ¿te acuerdas cuando llegamos aquí ayer y me puse a dar dinero en todas partes…?».

El señor Yák descubrió que había descrito un amplio círculo, y vuelto al Villa Rosa. Entró en su interior morisco, pidió café, apartó la vista bruscamente de dos chicas, y estaba levantando su taza cuando oyó algo familiar en un cuarto del fondo. Era la *Tani.*

Encontró a Stephan presidiendo una *juerga.* Había botellas de vino en la mesa, tres personas comiendo, un hombre afinando una guitarra, y la chica que tenía Stephan en las rodillas sonrió indecisamente al señor Yák. Ahora bien, si Marga le había dado alas, Pastora le paró en seco. Su áspero pelo negro enmarcaba nítidamente su cara morena. Y sus grandes ojos oscuros estaban gravemente excitados. Brillaban con una sorpresa tensa, reflejada en la cara pegada a la suya, y los alzó con un gesto feroz y orgulloso. Tenía los dientes grandes, la nariz ligeramente chata, y el sombreado labio superior fruncido en algo que, en otra cara, habría podido ser un mohín, pero que en la suya estaba teñido de fiereza, y sugería los dones salvajes que prometía su voz, y confirmaban sus movimientos rápidos y escuetos. La blusa cereza desteñida se le había salido de la falda cuya cremallera estaba aparentemente rota, como lo estaba una de las tiras de sus sandalias de tacón alto, y no podía tener más de diecinueve años. A juzgar por la hostilidad de la sonrisa con que saludó la intrusión del señor Yák, su familiaridad con el hombre cuyo cuello rodeaba ahora con un brazo no debía ser demasiado reciente.

—¿Cuánto tiempo hace que tienes a ésta? —preguntó el señor Yák, sentándose. Ella lo miraba con recelo, sin entender nada más que el tono de su voz, y se amohinó penosamente cuando la dejaron en el suelo—. En todo caso veo que todavía tienes tu anillo de diamantes —dijo el señor Yák.

—*¿Es un amigo tuyo?* [34] —preguntó Pastora con voz áspera e insegura.

—Díselo, quiere saber si soy amigo tuyo —le retó el señor Yák—. Vamos, de qué te ríes, ¿ya estás borracho?

—Krisna sedujo a dieciséis mil doncellas.

—Escucha, mañana…

—Me creerá si le digo que… Krisna era el sol, y ellas… ellas eran gotas de rocío.

—Mañana tenemos trabajo, ¿me oyes? No deberías hacer esto, no deberías dejarte arrastrar al infierno

de este modo, ¿me oyes?

—No —susurró él, inclinándose bruscamente sobre la cara del señor Yák—. Es justo al revés —susurró, mirando astutamente a los ojos del señor Yák—. Ha oído hablar alguna vez del… estoy… *encoñado* [35] y ella… ella está *acara… acarajotada*, en… ¿entiende? Lo que se entiende en inglés vulgar por… por estar enamorado, ¿entiende?

—No me voy a quedar mirando cómo una furcia como esta…

—Dejan que el sendero siga sucio, en… ¿entiende? Para engañar a la gente, para engañar a la gente razonable, como usted. Pero yo… yo… —Su cabeza se bamboleó, y guiñó los ojos ante la cara del señor Yák —. ¿Entiende? —logró añadir.

De pronto Pastora se levantó y se puso a su lado. La guitarra inició un acorde al otro extremo de la mesa. Alguien empezó a dar palmas. Pastora le puso una mano en el otro hombro, más cerca del señor Yák, observando todo el tiempo al señor Yák con alerta animal, aun cuando se levantó y trató de quitarle la mano para ayudar a incorporarse a su amigo.

—*¡Déjame!* —gruñó ella por encima de los hombros hundidos, y luego, con su áspero susurro—: *¡Déjalo…!* —pronunciando aquella *j* con la intensidad gutural de la «ج» árabe.

—*Hoy los novios se van a casar…* —empezó a cantar alguien al fondo de la mesa. El señor Yák retiró lentamente la mano, y bajó los ojos hacia la figura vencida en la cabecera de la mesa, donde los posó un momento mientras Pastora le observaba sin moverse. Luego alzó la vista bruscamente hacia ella. «Ten cuidado» [36] dijo, previniéndola, y antes de que pudiera contestarle se volvió y desapareció, pasando junto a los comensales, la guitarra, las botellas, los tacones, la voz del cantante—: *No sale la cuenta porque falta un churumbel.*

Pastora, a cada instante con él tan cerca del gozo como del dolor, esperando que se lo dijera, para estallar de alegría a la menor promesa, de desesperación al primer desaire, en lágrimas de ira impotente ante la indiferencia, recuperándose con hosco desdén, pero esperando aún que se lo dijera: «¿Me quieres?». [37] Ella que no tenía nada propio, ni siquiera sus palabras salvo al preguntar, hasta verse al fin forzada a exclamar: «¡Yo te quiero y tú no me quieres!».

Se quedaron allí hasta que se acabó el vino. Entonces ella encendió uno de los acres cigarrillos amarillos y se lo puso en los labios. «Vámonos… ¡Esteban! ¿Vámonos…?».

Por la noche: «¡Vida…! ¡Cielo…! No termines… ¡mi vida!». E inmóvil en la oscuridad, y en broma por el tono en que lo dice: «¡Vamos a hacer un niño…!», que queda sin respuesta, Pastora escuchando en la oscuridad, sin más respuesta que el ruido de la cama y relaja todo su cuerpo delgado bajo el firme peso silencioso, o una mano en el pezón pardo de su breve pecho, y extiende los brazos para acercar más el peso, la cabeza echada hacia atrás, sollozando, sollozo que estremece su cuerpo ocupado y esa parte tan llena, todavía sin llenar, olvidada por esta angustia, su cara mojada, apartada de los labios callados que ha atraído hacia sí, esperando, para exclamar al fin: «¿Me quieres…? ¡Dímelo, aunque no sea verdad…!».

Pastora despertó sola en la cama húmeda, con las sábanas retorcidas, y llamó: «¿Esteban…?», y sólo oyó su propia respiración en la oscuridad. Se levantó desnuda y descorrió las cortinas, y la luz del día separó las tablillas de la persiana. Una manta y su falda yacían sobre las sucias baldosas gastadas del suelo. Se puso las bragas, la falda, las sandalias, agitó el jarro, lo encontró vacío, llamó a voces pidiendo agua, y cuando se la trajeron vertió un poco en la jofaina, se enjuagó la cara, se humedeció el pelo y se peinó sus ásperas guedejas con un peine que sacó del bolso. Mientras se ponía la blusa encontró en la mesita de noche un paquete de Ideales vacío, y otro billete de cien pesetas.

El señor Yák se levantó y vistió antes de que le trajeran el café matinal. De hecho no esperó por él, sino que cerró su puerta, llamó a la del fondo del pasillo, la abrió y encontró la habitación vacía, e interrumpió a una chica que venía con dos orinales por el frío pasillo de entrada. La chica le abrió la puerta principal, sonriendo: *«Vaya usted con Dios…»* y el señor Yák salió, bajó las escaleras y se vio en la calle, con el pelo bien centrado en la cabeza y el bigote resueltamente derecho.

Pasó junto al chico ciego con los billetes de lotería prendidos del gabán, junto a la cola de mujeres de negro delante de la carbonería, niños en brazos arropados como esquimales, hombres con zapatillas de casa, alpargatas de suela de cáñamo, boinas, bufandas ceñidas a la barbilla, capas goyescas cruzadas sobre media cara. El sonido del inglés en la calle resultaba sorprendente: pasó la misma mujer alta, señalando a un hombre andrajoso que iba delante. «Mira, quiero unas sandalias como ésas, ¿las ves?». «Eso no son

sandalias», musitó su marido a su lado, «eso son sus pies».

El señor Yák hizo una ronda, mirando en cada bar y café, desde la Puerta del Sol hasta la calle de Atocha. Se hacía tarde, y su expresión de impaciencia se volvía más severa por momentos, cuando llegó a la plaza de Tirso de Molina, observando, escuchando por si oía «La Tani», y entró en Chispero a tomar café, sin dejar de examinar cada cara por si era la que buscaba, examinando caras como si la gran ciudad fuera una mascarada perpetua, donde cada cara, como la suya, escondía otra, de modo que al final no era ya aquella cara concreta cuadrada y arrugada con leve sorpresa en torno a los ojos lo que buscaba, sino alguna familiaridad en aquel mundo de formas y olores, el color ambarino del coñac Génesis, el verde de las botellas, la mirada fija de los peces plateados en la barra, el olor a aceite, cubitos oscuros de sangre frita en un platillo, trozos de hígado, el asiento de las emociones asado, cortado en pedazos y servido junto a la copa de pie alto, observando, esperando que surgiera alguna familiaridad de aquel mundo de formas y olores, protegido contra la fría realidad del exterior con la blanda armadura de la embriaguez. Había un anciano apoyado contra la pared del fondo, tomando café bajo una foto de Adelita Beltrán, que aparecería más tarde en el escenario para bailar, taconeando, agitando la falda al son de «La Sebastiana», para cantar «La Zarzamora», y el señor Yák apartó rápidamente la vista de aquel viejo, consciente de que el parecido que había buscado y encontrado en aquella cara era el suyo. El café de su vaso tenía gotas amarillas de aceite flotando en el borde, y se lo bebió de un trago y salió, apretándose el bigote con la punta de dos dedos.

No fue en un bar donde al fin encontró a Stephan, sino tambaleándose en la puerta de uno, un lugar llamado La Flor de mi Viña, donde un coche acababa de pasarle por encima del pie, lentamente, tras rozarlo insistentemente por detrás como un animal desmañado que tratara de abrirse paso, dejándolo con aquella expresión de leve sorpresa confirmada en la cara. Y la única razón de que apareciese un policía fue que pasaba por allí, y un grupo de gente desocupada había armado un griterío. Había ocurrido tan despacio. Aquel blando roce podía haber sido de uno de los *burros* que se veían enganchados a carros de basura por las calles de la ciudad. El policía estaba siendo muy educado cuando apareció el señor Yák, rescató a su amigo y se lo llevó consigo camino de la Estación del Norte, andando briosamente y sin hablar después de los primeros reproches: «Por qué te empeñabas en decirle al poli que eres… ¿qué le decías? ¿Pelagiano? Sólo quería saber qué nacionalidad tienes, ¿es que no sabes decir simplemente “swisso”? ¿Y si llega a pedirte tu pasaporte pelagiano? ¿Llevas el pasaporte encima? ¿Y si no llego a aparecer yo en ese preciso momento?». El día estaba densamente encapotado, y caminaban sin levantar la vista hacia el gris uniforme e inmutable del cielo. «En cualquier caso, ¿cuánto tiempo piensas seguir así?», murmuró el señor Yák, sin esperar respuesta, y no la obtuvo. Caminaron un rato en silencio, y al fin comentó: «Este lugar nos está destrozando los nervios a los dos».

Llegaron a San Zuinglio sin novedad, y con muy poco gasto de conversación después de que el señor Yák hubiera bosquejado su plan. «No podemos llevárnoslo con la caja, abulta demasiado… pero si salimos al caer la noche…». Luego se había quedado mirando atentamente a su compañero, como para adivinar si sería capaz de cumplir su tarea cuando llegara el momento.

—¿Cuántos monos tienes ahora sentados en la cabeza? —preguntó finalmente, mientras subían la colina desde la estación de ferrocarril.

—¿Yo? No he tomado una copa en todo el día.

—Entonces, ¿dónde has estado todo el día? —El tono del señor Yák fue áspero, posiblemente para disimular la sorpresa que sintió ante aquella respuesta—. Te he estado buscando por todas partes —añadió con un murmullo, volviendo los ojos a las piedras de la carretera. Arriba, en el pueblo, sonó la campana de la iglesia, y ambos levantaron los ojos un momento; luego los bajaron inmediatamente, como azorados, mientras seguían repicando, y continuaron subiendo codo con codo la cuesta desigual, sin llevar el paso, y tan pegados que chocaban entre sí—. ¿Dónde has estado todo el día? —volvió a preguntar el señor Yák cuando chocaron por segunda vez.

—En el Prado.

—¿El museo de arte? —El señor Yák se encogió de hombros—. ¿Y qué has hecho allí? —Echó una ojeada a la cara que tenía al lado, y dijo—: No parece que te haya gustado mucho. El arte de allí.

—Bueno, los… los Grecos —empezó su compañero, como si le hubiera pedido un comentario, y se pasó la mano por los ojos—. Tienen tantos en una sola sala que casi están colgados uno encima de otro y es demasiado, es demasiada plasticidad, hay demasiado movimiento en esa sola sala… —De repente alzó la vista hacia el señor Yák, extendiendo una mano ante ellos que parecía intentar dibujar algo en el aire—.

¿Entiende… entiende lo que quiero decir? Con un pintor como El Greco, alguien lo llamó pintor visceral, ¿entiende lo que quiero decir? Y cuando encuentras tantas obras suyas colgadas juntas, se… las formas se ahogan unas a otras, es demasiado. Al fondo, donde tienen los pintores flamencos colgados juntos es diferente, porque todos están separados… las composiciones están separadas, y los… los Boscos y Brueghels y Patinires y hasta los Dureros no se molestan unos a otros, porque la… porque cada composición está hecha a base de separaciones, o más bien… quiero decir… ¿entiende lo que quiero decir? Pero la armonía de un lienzo de El Greco es toda una… una…

Ahora tenía ambas manos extendidas ante sí, con los dedos vueltos hacia dentro y los pulgares hacia arriba, como sosteniendo algo que contemplaba con una viveza que el señor Yák no había visto nunca en su cara. Pero se interrumpió bruscamente, y sus manos cayeron a sus costados. Al cabo de un rato, el señor Yák dijo con voz más serena:

—No sabía que hubieras estado allí.

—Yo… voy todos los días.

—¿Te pasas el día entero allí? —el señor Yák se volvió hacia él con asombro.

—Bueno, yo… hoy no, hoy… he tenido un sueño de lo más extraño, al… al volver. Y al despertar creí que… estaba casi oscuro, pero creí que estaba amaneciendo y que había dormido allí toda la noche, y lo único que oí fue… oí a un niño llorando en algún sitio, es lo único que oí. Pero creí que había dormido toda la noche y que estaba amaneciendo. Entonces intenté usar el brazo derecho, lo alargué para coger un cigarrillo y no se movió, mi brazo no se movió, se quedó allí colgando y luego cayó, y yo… y lo único que oí fue a un niño llorando en algún sitio.

Habían llegado al pueblo. El señor Yák le echó otra ojeada, al ver que no seguía hablando se encogió de hombros, y mientras se acercaban a las puertas de La Ilicitana murmuró: «Sólo espero que ese organillo no nos eche el guante hoy», mientras entraban, y su pedido de dos cafés no fue cancelado, ni siquiera enmendado, por su compañero, lo que, tras la revelación sobre el Prado, movió al señor Yák a decir con toda seriedad: «Ya decía yo que no eras un holgazán. ¿Eh, Stephan?».

Aquello hizo asomar una sonrisa por un momento en la cara de Stephan, aunque fue impersonal, y cuando se extinguió dejó una vaga expresión ensimismada.

—Esa chica con la que estabas anoche —empezó el señor Yák, apretándose el bigote y hablando con la despreocupación del que menciona algo olvidado hace tiempo—, me alegra ver que te has escapado de ella con tu anillo de diamantes.

—Pero usted… espere, usted no entiende, sepa que ella… no sé, da igual.

—Le has pagado, ¿no? Pues olvídala. —El señor Yák se encogió de hombros, dio un sorbo a su café y preguntó—: Esa rubia, ¿le pagaste algo?

—Bueno, yo… de eso se trata, entiende, yo…

—Olvídalo. No es nada, olvídalo.

—No, porque la rubia no pidió nada, al principio no pidió nada de dinero, creí que venía conmigo sólo porque quería… hacerlo. Pero luego, después de unas cuantas veces, entonces me pidió prestado algo de dinero poco antes de marcharse y yo creí, yo se lo presté. Se lo habría dado si no fuera porque seguía creyendo que había venido conmigo porque quería, y se lo presté.

—Da igual, olvídalo. Con la clase de furcias con las que vas ahora tienes suerte de conservar todavía los diamantes.

—¡No, no, pero de eso se trata!, cuando la rubia fingía que no venía conmigo por dinero pero todo el tiempo se… ¿no lo entiende? Y esta, esta… Pastora, ella… con ella fue cuestión de dinero desde el principio, y ahora, no podía permitirse fingir porque necesitaba el dinero, lo necesita de verdad pero ahora, ahora lo que quiere de mí…

—Sé lo que quiere… —El señor Yák se echó hacia atrás para evitar que los diamantes le dieran en la cara—. ¿Le regalaste tú esos pendientes que llevaba?

—¡Esas baratijas! Veinte pesetas. Cuando se los regalé le dije eso, lo baratos que eran, y estuvo a punto de echarse a llorar sólo porque…

—Sólo porque no fuiste a encargar que montaran tus diamantes en unos pendientes.

—No, escuche, mire, esa ropa barata que lleva con las costuras descosidas, no le importa, si está limpia, si yo… si yo le digo que está guapa, pero si le digo algo como…

—Menuda pareja debéis hacer por la calle —dijo el señor Yák.

—Sí —se rio entre dientes, bajando la vista—. Yo iba andando con las manos en los bolsillos, y de repente va y se para en mitad de la acera, estaba furiosa, «Si tú no me coges…», [38] no estaba dispuesta a dar un paso más conmigo si no la cogía del brazo.

Se quedó allí parado, mirando al suelo y casi sonriendo, hasta que el señor Yák dijo:

—Podrías buscar algo mejor, si vas a liarte con…

—¿Mejor? —levantó de nuevo los ojos, que habían recuperado su aire ausente.

—Si vas a pagar dinero del bueno…

—Pero no se trata de… ¡pagar!

—Ya caigo. Sólo le das algo de dinero después.

—Sí, pero escuche…

—Vas a coger algo, probablemente ya has cogido algo de ella. Esa clase de chicas duras que se conocen de ese modo…

—Dura, sí, las cicatrices en su vientre y en una pierna, escuche…

—Probablemente ya has cogido algo de ella.

—¿Cogido algo…? —Volvía a tener la mano alzada entre ambos, dedos cuadrados cerrándose sobre nada; y miraba hacia allí—. Estaba, tenía cogido su pecho y lo estaba… ella, de repente ella dijo: «No, son para la niña»,[39] no quería que… que cogiera lo que era… lo que no era mío.

El señor Yák se encogió de hombros.

—Si estuvieras sacando buen partido de tu dinero…

—¡Pero eso es lo que estoy tratando de decirle!, justo en medio del asunto, cuando me quedé quieto… —Su mano cerrada tembló entre ambos—. De repente gritó, se puso a gritar: «¿Me quieres?, ¿me quieres? ¡Dime… que sí!, aunque no sea verdad…»[40].

El señor Yák terminó su café y estudió la cara que tenía delante con la calma del que examina algo de forma inadvertida. Luego volvió a encogerse de hombros y dijo: «De vez en cuando te sale una así, tienen que gritar en medio del asunto. ¿Así que le dijiste que la querías?, ¿aunque no fuera verdad?». No recibió respuesta, dejó la taza que tenía en la mano y volvió a encogerse de hombros. «Deberías haberle dicho que sí. En un momento como ese es lo único que puedes hacer, si quieres sacar buen partido de tu dinero».

El pueblo estaba tranquilo a la caída de la tarde. Cuando salieron a la calle el señor Yák se metió el cordón morado y amarillo por dentro de la camisa, y reanudó la conversación con una nota más prometedora. «Espera a ver esa momia cuando hayamos acabado con ella, será tan terrorífica que te hará sangrar por la nariz».

El cielo no había cambiado, salvo porque parecía más cercano a la tierra, más opresivo sobre las montañas, mientras la luz del día se retiraba de él. Los dos hombres que se acercaban a la carretera sembrada de rocas detrás del pueblo lo hacían en silencio, uno balanceando los brazos mientras andaba, dejando escapar exclamaciones anticipatorias, el otro con las manos apretadas a la espalda, observando cada detalle de la calzada que seguían. Es cierto que el paso del señor Yák era un tanto irregular, que su cabeza se erguía ante el reto que le aguardaba, y luego bajaba, y caía a un lado, cuando amenazaba el pasado en el sombrío perfil absorto a su lado. Se preguntaba si aquella ascensión revocaría su punto de partida, cuando se habían encontrado por encima de un pasado más allá de ambos, si aquel prolongado gesto suyo de expiación se haría añicos de pronto entre ambos dejando el futuro en promesa, si debía mencionar algo de aquello simplemente para mantenerlo a raya, antes de que atacara por su cuenta.

—¡Dios santo…!

—¿Qué te pasa? —preguntó el señor Yák antes de mirar en busca de respuesta, encontrando, por primera vez, aquella mano sobre su brazo.

Una carroza blanca, toda blanca, arrastrada por caballos enjaezados con blancas mallas rotas, cargada con un pequeño féretro blanco bajo la blanca cruz que la coronaba, subía delante de ellos.

—¡Cristo!, ¿es que siempre los celebran a la caída de la tarde? Otro más, subiendo por esa carretera llena de baches hacia los cipreses, y los hombres detrás con sus sombreros, y esa niña de la bicicleta, con su vestido verde, trazando detrás por la carretera las estúpidas revueltas de la vida, y estará de vuelta al pie de la colina antes de que descarguen la caja… Como si ese crío hubiera… elegido esta hora para morir.

Su mano había caído, y el señor Yák le cogió del brazo.

—Escucha —dijo rápidamente el señor Yák—, vuelve allí y espérame, vuelve a ese bar y espérame, ¿entiendes?

—Bueno, yo… entonces tendrá que prestarme algo de dinero.

—¿Te has quedado… te has gastado… no tienes nada de dinero?

—*Point d'argent, point de Suisse*…

—Escucha, no quiero dejarte… ¿llevas encima el pasaporte? —El señor Yák había sacado un puñado de

billetes—. Si te…

—Dice que soy de Zurich. ¡Rápido! Les hablaré en alemán… *aber die jüngste war so schön, dass die Sonne selber*… ¡Rápido…!

El cortejo que se había perdido colina arriba iba tirado por dos caballos, y ahora, atravesando el pueblo cuesta abajo, apareció un carro tirado por uno, cargado de desechos de la fábrica cercana. Tras observarlo con el mismo interés aparente con que había observado el otro, una anciana se retiró de su balcón dejando a su marido en su silla, donde le habían puesto por la tarde a tomar el sol, a mirar y toser, con su trozo de pan, esperando. Y el sol, que se había mostrado tan reservado durante todo el día, antes de abandonarlo quiso llenar el cielo de color, un suave brillo rosado, y luego purpúreo, contra el puro azul, color que acrisoló las nubes en sus propias formas y luego se apagó, descubriendo en ellas durante unos minutos el entero material de la belleza, y dejándolas luego sin luz para parodiar al cielo, perdiendo forma, perdiendo bordes y volumen y definición, hasta que poco después se esfumaron por completo en la oscuridad.

—*Ahí se mueren* —dijo el hombre tras la barra de La Ilicitana. Puso en ella una copa, y bajó la botella de Génesis, respondiendo a una pregunta con su voz, y a un pedido con la botella de coñac—. *En invierno no, pero cuando les salen las hojas a los árboles, ahí se mueren.* [41]

Ya había caído la noche cuando el camarero de La Ilicitana se inclinó hacia adelante para dirigir la atención de su único cliente hacia la pareja que le esperaba en la puerta. El señor Yák estaba justo al borde del débil haz de luz, haciéndole señas. A su lado, en las sombras, una pequeña figura envuelta en un chal esperaba pacientemente; y un momento después, el hombre tras la barra vio marcharse a los tres sin la menor curiosidad recelosa en la cara.

—Agárrala del brazo —dijo el señor Yák en la calle—. Pero ten cuidado. No estás borracho, ¿verdad? ¿Verdad? ¿Tienes bastantes sillas para los monos? Vamos. Ten cuidado. Fingimos que es una vieja, ¿entiendes? Sólo que mucho ojo cuando subamos al tren, porque tiene las articulaciones muy tiesas, ¿entiendes? Pero estos españoles son muy respetuosos con una vieja, como si fuera la madre de alguien, ¿entiendes? Así que ten cuidado…

Tenía razón.

El revisor amenazó incluso con ayudar a la tiesa figura a subir al vagón de primera clase, pero el señor Yák se mostró enérgicamente filial, y pronto estuvieron sentados codo con codo en un compartimiento. El señor Yák corrió las cortinillas del lado del pasillo, pues la figura que tenían entre ambos estaba estirada cuan larga era, ocupando un espacio incómodamente excesivo para su tamaño, y no era cosa de obligarla a encogerse en su asiento, «porque no debemos romper nada».

La luna, en su último cuarto, no había aparecido aún en el cielo, esperando para salir más tarde, cada noche esperando hasta el último minuto posible antes del día, para asomar por la lejana puerta más ajada, sesgada, y ascender al fin de forma vacilante, como apocada por la vergüenza de que la vieran en aquel estado. Y así el tren se lanzó traqueteando en la oscuridad por la llanura sembrada de rocas. El señor Yák se levantó, abrió la puerta una rendija para echar una ojeada al pasillo, y luego quitó el cristal y sacó la bombilla de encima del asiento que tenían enfrente.

—¿Teme que la luz le haga daño en los ojos?

—No. Por si acaso entra alguien, para que no le dé en la cara —contestó el señor Yák con toda seriedad —. ¿Entiendes? —añadió, mientras volvía a sentarse y se inclinaba hacia adelante, arreglando solícitamente el chal negro, remetiendo sus largas puntas en torno a los pies extendidos. Luego se enderezó y dijo—: ¡Bueno…! —Se pasó la mano por el peluquín negro, se apretó el bigote y se aclaró la garganta con satisfacción. El humo acre de un Ideal empezó a elevarse del lado de la ventanilla del compartimiento, y siguieron avanzando, sentados de espaldas a la máquina, de cara al lugar de donde venían, con aspecto, a la escasa luz que se filtraba por el humo, de una familia cansada y no del todo respetable.

En cualquier caso, el revisor no mostró ninguna curiosidad grosera cuando dio un golpecito en el cristal, abrió la puerta y cogió tres billetes de manos del señor Yák, que se había levantado de un salto para recibirle, con tal premura, de hecho, que arrastró consigo parte del chal, revelando unas manos apretadas sobre el cuenco hundido de la pelvis, por encima de la ancha separación entre las extremidades inferiores, y la cabeza, ligeramente inclinada hacia adelante, con la superficie de la cara ininterrumpida por nariz alguna, los ojos hundidos, la mandíbula caída. Pero el revisor se había ido.

—¡Vamos…! ¡Tápala! —exclamó el señor Yák, cerrando la puerta, pero la cara que vio era un reflejo en el cristal. Envolvió rápidamente con el chal la tiesa figura, y se lo pasó a modo de capucha por la cabeza oscilante—. Tienes que estar alerta, cuando haces algo como esto —siguió diciendo cuando recuperó el

aliento—, no puedes quedarte ahí parado mirando por la ventanilla, no… ¿Estás borracho? ¿Eh? ¿Stephan? ¿Cuántos monos se te han subido a la cabeza mientras no estaba allí? ¿Es eso? ¿Lo estás?

Sin recibir respuesta, ni nada de su compañero más que la parte de atrás de su cabeza y la imagen fija de su cara en el cristal, el señor Yák dominó su impaciencia, se sentó otra vez y se volvió hacia la figura entre ambos.

—Quién diría que es sólo una chiquilla, ¿verdad? —Miró con aire absorto el liso regazo durante un minuto, parpadeó, se frotó las manos, dijo—: Ahora podemos ponernos a trabajar de verdad —y se recostó en el asiento.

Pero no podía estarse quieto. Su pie empezó a dar golpecitos en el suelo vibrante. «Lo primero que tenemos que hacer es encontrar un lugar para enterrar esas vendas por algún tiempo, para que puedas ir allí y mojarlas, ¿entiendes? Luego tengo que ponerme en contacto con ese tipo, ese egiptólogo, para que no pierda la esperanza y se marche de la ciudad. Luego lo único que tengo que hacer es quitarme de en medio hasta que todo esté preparado. ¿Entiendes? Luego nos… ¿Me estás escuchando?». El señor Yák se inclinó y tocó una rodilla apartada.

—¿Qué pasa?

—¿Me estás escuchando? ¿Qué pasa?

—Nada, yo… Nada.

—¿Nada? Tú…

—Nada. Sólo estaba pensando en una cosa.

—¿En qué?

—En nada.

El señor Yák soltó un bufido, y se puso a tamborilear con los dedos sobre su rodilla. Luego se volvió bruscamente y su cuello salió disparado del cuello de plexiglás.

—Escucha —dijo—, me siento como si estuviera solo aquí con esta… con esto. —Dio un ligero codazo a la figura que tenía al lado. La cara de más allá no se apartó de la ventanilla—. ¿Entiendes? Así que…

—¿Qué quiere que haga? ¿Ponerme a bailar?

—No. —Lo distraído del tono irritó al señor Yák—. Pero nos…

—*¿Quiere que cante algo?* Una y una dos, dos y dos son tres… [42]

—Escucha, nos…

—No sale la cuenta… Porque falta un churumbel. *¿Qué es un* churumbel?

—Es una palabra gitana —contestó el señor Yák, con voz todavía irritada, dirigiéndose a la nuca de su amigo—. No sale la cuenta porque falta un crío. Significa «crío». —Su tono era agresivo, pero prefirió contestar a no tener ninguna conversación—. ¿Entiendes? —añadió, hizo una pausa, y acució—: ¿Entiendes?

—No mueren en invierno —murmuró la voz desde el reflejo en el cristal, que contenía de lleno contra sí mismo la negrura de la noche.

—¿Qué?

—Pero cuando les salen las hojas a los árboles, me dijo el camarero, entonces mueren, *cuando salen las hojas*… [43]

—Eso es tuberculosis, tienen mucha tuberculosis aquí. Sobre todo los críos. Ahora escucha, cuando lleguemos a la estación… ¡Cuidado! ¡Mira lo que estás haciendo…! —El señor Yák se agachó tan deprisa que estuvo a punto de caerse—. Si le tiras la colilla a los pies de ese modo, lo más fácil es que arda como la yesca. ¿Entiendes? —Cuando se enderezó después de dispersarlas brasas, siguió diciendo—: A partir de ahora vamos a tener un montón de trabajo, ¿entiendes? Y tienes que sentar de una vez la cabeza y ser más… más serio, ¿entiendes? Toda esa bebida, y esas chicas, tienes que olvidar todo eso, tú no eres un holgazán. Todo eso —siguió, sin que le respondieran— es un desperdicio, es pecado, vivir de ese modo.

—Sí, lo sé. Lo sé…

—¿Qué? ¿Entiendes lo que quiero decir? Es pecado.

—Lo sé.

—¿Entiendes? Y si sigues así…

—Pero…

—¿Qué…? ¿Entiendes? Qué gracia tiene.

—Pero… no es el pecado en sí lo que es… Dios santo… —siguió la voz, sorda y distante—, andar dando tumbos de una a otra… y luego… y tumbado en la oscuridad, enredado entre sábanas húmedas, y…

—¿Lo ves? ¿De qué sirve? —preguntó el señor Yák, inclinándose y apoyando un momento el codo en el frágil regazo que tenían entre ambos, hasta que se dio cuenta y lo levantó—, siempre es lo mismo,

¿verdad?, así que por qué quieres volverlo a hacer.

—Sí, pero… no es la cosa en sí, no es el pecado en sí. Nunca es la cosa en sí, siempre es la posibilidad lo que… Siempre es la perspectiva del pecado lo que atrae… lo que nos atrae.

El señor Yák enderezó su tensa postura, atisbando como había estado por detrás de la nuca, tratando de ver la cara aunque sólo fuera en su reflejo contra la negra superficie de la noche.

—¿Lo ves? —confirmó—. Al cabo de un tiempo te cansas de ello, al cabo de un tiempo llegas a un punto en que ya no te sacia igual por dentro. Llegas a un punto —siguió, mirando al suelo oscilante— en que por muy a fondo que te metas en toda clase de cosas equivocadas ya no te satisface hacerlas, ¿entiendes? Y entonces tienes como que levantar la vista, y buscar algo más grande. ¿Entiendes? ¿Entiendes lo que quiero decir? —Levantó la vista ansiosamente hacia la ventanilla.

—Sí, pero… si has hecho cosas… si has hecho cosas a la gente, y ellos… y no puedes compensarles por… por lo que has hecho…

—¡No, no puedes! ¡No puedes…! No a ellos, pero… si has pecado contra una persona, entonces lo reparas con otra, es lo único que puedes hacer, nunca sabes cuándo… hasta que llega el momento en que puedes repararlo con otra. Como yo una vez… aquella mujer, yo…

Se quedaron callados, balanceándose juntos y mirando a un tiempo en distintas direcciones vacías del pasado.

—¿Qué?

—Nada.

—¿Qué mujer?

—Te… —El señor Yák irguió la cabeza de golpe, para ver solamente la cara del señor Yák en el cristal—. Voy un momento al servicio… —Titubeó un instante en la puerta—. Si entra alguien a sentarse, tienes que hacer como que hablas con ella, ¿entiendes…? —Luego se cerró la puerta, y les dejó juntos, mientras se alejaba por el pasillo agarrándose como un viejo.

Casi inmediatamente aparecieron luces en la oscuridad exterior, pasando lentamente junto a las ventanillas, luces tan débiles que no parecían sino iluminarse a sí mismas. El tren se detuvo.

—Bueno, *yo* habría dicho que el nombre de la ciudad era

URINARIOS

—dijo subiendo una mujer alta—, es la única palabra que se puede ver en esa estación. —Se calló mientras su marido abría la puerta de un compartimiento, y entraron. Se sentaron codo con codo, y ella se quedó mirando a la pareja sentada codo con codo enfrente de ellos—. Cuánto *humo* [44] —susurró a su marido. Él le ofreció un cigarrillo. El tren se puso en marcha—. Y si alguna vez se nos ocurre volver a una ciudad como ésa, si es que puedes llamarla ciudad, sólo para ver una iglesia o lo que fuese… No entiendo cómo has podido probar un bocado de esa comida. Ya te arrepentirás —añadió, tratando de colocar los pies a los lados de las piernas tapadas extendidas ante ella. La punta de su tacón se enganchó en el borde del chal, y dio un grito sofocado. Al oírlo, el hombre que tenía enfrente pareció recobrar un sentido perdido hacía tiempo, y lo hizo con una luz feroz en los ojos, bajándolos bruscamente como si fuera a agarrar los pies de la mujer alta y a arrancarla de su asiento. Pero remetió afanosamente las puntas del chal en su sitio, y luego, encendiendo un cigarrillo amarillo de fiero aspecto, empezó a parlotear con la figura encapuchada que tenía al lado. «Dímelo», dijo, «aunque no sea… dime que tú me quieres, aunque no sea…». [45] La mujer alta se aclaró la garganta, juntó los pies con cuidado, esbozó una sonrisa remilgada y agarró del brazo a su marido—. Salgamos de aquí —susurró—, esto… —Se puso en pie, estirando su sonrisa, manteniéndola hasta que se levantó su marido, forzándola con el prurito de ser educada, susurrando mientras se abría la puerta—: ¡Dios mío…! ¿Has visto su cara? «Sífilis», dijo su marido, «tienen mucha sífilis aquí, hasta en los niños, es heredada…», mientras cerraba la puerta, y el señor Yák, que venía por el pasillo a su espalda, la abrió y entró.

—¿Quiénes eran esos? —preguntó sentándose, centrándose el pelo mientras lo hacía.

—Ya se lo dije, la gente… la gente no desdeña ningún ardid, ningún ardid en absoluto para demostrar su propia existencia.

—Escucha, te…

Pero el señor Yák descubrió que estaba dirigiéndose otra vez a una espalda, y perdió el ánimo.

—Dios santo, qué desolación la de ese lugar, esa estación en la que acabamos de parar.

La ventanilla contenía de nuevo la negra superficie de la noche.

—Me siento como si llevara toda la vida viajando en esto.

—Sí, sí eso es, eso es, ¿sabe? Es como… como estar en el mar. Alguien dijo que un viaje por mar es el mejor sustituto del suicidio. Bueno, en este país… en este país…

—¿Suicidio?

—Oiga, ¿y si nos pillan?

—¿Con esto? —El señor Yák se encogió de hombros. Había recobrado la calma.

—No, me refiero a… lo que quiera que sea por lo que le… por lo que nos… buscan.

El señor Yák alzó la vista rápidamente, para verle volviéndose hacia la ventanilla.

—¿Qué pasa, ahora estás asustado? —dijo, y luego repitió—: ¿Buscan?

—Sí, lo… lo estoy. Estoy asustado.

—A veces pienso que debería haber ido a Brasil. Pero ésa es la cosa, un lugar como ése, Brasil, todo es demasiado nuevo, lo que tienes que hacer, siempre tienes que ir a la madre patria del lugar al que quizá deberías haber ido… —Su voz se apagó. Había recobrado la calma, pero parecía agotado, y envejecido, bamboleándose contra el respaldo del asiento, con el pelo ligeramente torcido sobre la frente, mirando ensimismado hacia adelante, mientras el traqueteo del tren le hacía asentir pensativamente con la cabeza—. Pero ahora vas a un lugar, y luego vas a otro… —También su tono era ahora distraído, mientras volvía la atención hacia el reflejo en el cristal.

—Navega, navega sin cesar, como el Holandés Errante. Dios santo, en este país…

—¿Quién?

—Era Herr von Falkenberg, navegando sin timonel por el mar del Norte, condenado a no llegar nunca a puerto, mientras él y el diablo se jugaban su alma a los dados.

De repente se vieron cara a cara, y el señor Yák encontró la mano con los dos diamantes aferrada a su muñeca. Los ojos a los que miraba eran de un verde ardiente, la cara estaba más constreñida aun que aquel primer día en que había visto su confusión en el cementerio, y la voz más tensa de desesperación.

—Sí, en este país puedes… navegar siempre así, sin salir nunca de sus fronteras, no es una tierra por la que viajas, es una tierra que cruzas huyendo, de un lugar a otro, de un puerto a otro, como la vida de un marinero donde un destino se vuelve lo mismo que otro, y cada viaje es el mismo que el anterior, porque cada destino es sólo otro lugar de donde partir. En este país, sin salir nunca de España, toda una odisea dentro de sus fronteras, toda una odisea sin Ulises. Escuche…

—Tú… en todo caso —lo interrumpió el señor Yák, tratando de rehuir aquellos ojos clavados en él y basta de soltarse de aquella mano que había buscado tantas veces—, en todo caso no te puedes ahogar en la tierra.

—¡No puedes! Bueno, es… es algo así. Es como ahogarse, esta desesperación, este… estar hundido en el vacío.

La mano que tenía agarrada la muñeca del señor Yák temblaba intensamente, como lo hacían los ojos y la cara entera como esperando alguna respuesta de él. El señor Yák rehuyó los ojos, bajando los suyos hacia aquella mano, con los diamantes brillando sobre el liso regazo que les separaba.

—Quizá lo que te haga falta —empezó— sería pasar una temporada en un monasterio, no tienes que hacerte monje, serías allí como un invitado, serías… —titubeó, mirando la mano, y los dos diamantes—, serías…

—¿Lo quiere?

—¿Qué?

—¿Este anillo, este anillo de diamantes? Es suyo. Ya es suyo, si lo quiere.

El señor Yák se soltó el brazo de un tirón y estuvo a punto de perder el equilibrio. Se quedó parado un momento con aire desvalido, y luego consiguió decir: «No, no… nunca he querido que me lo dieses…». Apartó los ojos de la mano, y los posó en diversos lugares antes de clavarlos en los pies extendidos entre ambos, donde el chal había vuelto a soltarse, y se agachó allí para remeterlo. «Ahora podemos ponernos a trabajar», dijo desde el suelo oscilante, «y entonces, cuando tienes tu trabajo todo está…». Estaba intentando anudar las puntas del chal, pero seguía soltándose. Oyó su voz hablando con el tono de otro: «Y entonces todo el amor que has atesorado toda tu vida, por tu trabajo… escucha…». Le temblaban las manos, y no terminaba de unir las puntas para anudarlas. «¿Tienes una navaja, para que pueda cortar esto y atarlo?». Siguió con la vista baja, consciente de que la figura estaba firmemente plantada ante él en el suelo movedizo, y que la mano cuadrada le tendía un cortaplumas. Alargó la suya para cogerlo, levantando ala vez los ojos. «Escucha», dijo, «escucha, ¿es verdad… que mataste…? ¿Es verdad que mataste a alguien?».

El tren dio una sacudida, y perdiendo el equilibrio cayó al suelo.

—¡Cuidado! ¡Cuidado con ella!

Estaban en Madrid.

En la estación, lo que tenían que hacer, según el señor Yák, que caminaba y murmuraba como un viejo hablando entre dientes, no tenían que darse demasiada prisa, y no debían actuar de modo sospechoso fingiendo que su carga era fácil de llevar, «porque si la gente piensa que tienes algún problema entonces no te molestan, intentan mirar hacia otra parte. Salvo aquí», añadió con fastidio, paseando la mirada por la estación. «En eso son mejores que en Nueva York, aquí alguien es perfectamente capaz de intentar ayudarte, eso es porque aquí están acostumbrados a los viejos, en Nueva York hacen como si no existieran…», y siguió murmurando, al compás de los pies que arrastraba, aunque ya no se entendían sus palabras.

Cerca de la consigna de equipajes se detuvieron, y el señor Yák dijo: «Espera aquí, voy por un taxi. No podemos llevar esto así por toda la ciudad». Sus ojos saltaban de un sitio a otro mientras hablaba, y luego murmuró: «Todos esos polis, esos *guardias civiles*…», y se alejó precipitadamente.

Y andaba con más precipitación, sus ojos saltando aún de un tricornio de charol negro a otro mientras esquivaba a los *guardias civiles,* cuando volvió. Con tal precipitación, de hecho, que pasó de largo ante la desconsolada pareja apoyada en la pared junto a la consigna. Un momento después volvió con aire más atribulado, alzó la vista, la desvió y paró en seco. Volvió la cabeza lentamente, para ver a la paciente figura envuelta en el chal justo donde la había dejado, pero ahora le hacía compañía, a respetuosa distancia, un ser no mucho más alto que ella, aparentemente no mucho más joven y, a pesar de su actividad, en un estado inferior de conservación. La chapa de metal numerada de su sucia gorra brillaba como una diadema en la ajada testuz de aquel mártir del desaliño, y lo identificaba como miembro de esa horda infame que, por cuatro perras, no regatea ningún esfuerzo para convertir los primeros momentos de la llegada del viajero a estas capitales en un fiel anticipo de las peores posibilidades de impotencia, confusión, abatimiento, cólera, blasfemia y odio feroz que le esperan allí. Un diente solitario aparecía y se perdía de vista en medio del sucio rastrojal de su barbilla, persiguiendo palabras que el incrédulo acercamiento del señor Yák hizo brotar con brío renovado. Tenía una correa para atar las asas de las maletas, y la agitaba en el aire, espoleado, aun sin dejar de mantener la debida distancia, por la tiesa reserva de la figura que estaba agasajando.

Afrontando la amenaza del zurriago, el señor Yák se metió entre ambos, rodeó con un brazo deferentemente protector, y estabilizador, los hombros cubiertos por el chal, y echando mano de su última chispa de energía se volvió a encarar a su oponente que, lejos de amilanarse, ascendió a nuevas alturas vocingleras estimulado por aquella duplicación de su público, y no paró basta quedarse sin aliento. Resultó que el *señorito* que lo había apostado allí le había encargado al marcharse que hablara con ella, «la vieja…», [46] y señaló con su correa la silenciosa figura del chal, en caso de que se acercara alguien. ¿Y el *señorito* se había ido? «Sí, señor». ¿Adónde había ido? «Yo no sé, señor, yo, mire usted…». Aquel torbellino de gestos que proclamaba una falta de responsabilidad triunfalmente total en los caprichos ajenos comenzó otra vez; e hizo falta algún tiempo, y algún esfuerzo, para que el señor Yák se enterase de que la policía andaba buscando a alguien: «Un extranjero, entiende, un norteamericano, sabe usted…». «Per ché?». «Claro, mire usted, un norteamericano…». «¿Por qué?», preguntó el señor Yák, apretando el hombro que sostenía, musitando: «¿Por qué…? ¿Qué…? ¿… por asesinato?». «Claro que sí, señor, un falsificador, ¿me entiende? Un norteamericano, sabe usted, un falsificador…».

—*Falsi-ficador*… —musitó el señor Yák, repitiéndolo—, pero…

—*Sí señor, mire usted*…

Resultó que el *señorito* le había hecho la misma pregunta, y había huido nada más recibir aquella misma respuesta, dejando allí al *mozo* para que charlara con ella, «con la vieja…», todo lo cual lo había aceptado el mozo, al parecer, sin que en ningún momento se le ocurriera preguntarse por el *señorito*, ni por su fuga repentina, como tampoco se le hubiera ocurrido desconfiar del *señor* al que servía ahora, tan acostumbrado estaba a las efímeras recompensas de la ciega lealtad, y a una vida sustentada por una fe ciega en la perversidad innata de la naturaleza humana. Y allí estaba ahora, apretando el primer billete de cinco pesetas que había visto desde hacía tiempo en las profundidades de la única parte entera de sus pantalones, mientras extendía la otra mano para recibir otro, sonriendo impúdicamente al señor Yák desde una cara que sólo la herencia de siglos de ignorancia podía redimir, pues había bastante astucia en ella para gobernar un imperio.

Hacía una noche otoñal, un frío entreverado en el aire de lluvia menuda, cuando el *mozo* instaló a la anciana pareja en un taxi, que parecía, y se puso en marcha, como algo de la edad de los tres y el conductor juntos, un Renault provisto de un gasómetro de carbón, cuyas pocas superficies impolutas podían aún dar fe, a la cruda luz del día, de que habían estado en tiempos pintadas de rojo. Resoplando y trepidando, este intrépido carruaje orilló los húmedos jardines del palacio y el propio palacio, cobró velocidad y pasó dando bandazos junto a la ópera, hacia el centro de la capital, ese ruedo edificado que es la Puerta del Sol, en

tiempos una puerta de la ciudad abierta al sol naciente.

A pesar de su cansancio, el señor Yák se las arregló para meter a su invitada en la Pensión Las Cenizas sin que le vieran, llevándola por los sombríos pasillos hasta su habitación, y tras dejarla encerrada con llave, se apresuró a llamar a la puerta del fondo del pasillo, aunque veía por el cristal esmerilado que el cuarto estaba a oscuras. Alas diez pasadas fue al comedor, hundió dos veces la cuchara en la sopa de ajo con su cuidado habitual para evitar los trozos empapados de pan rancio que flotaban en ella, aunque no tenía que haberse molestado porque no se comió la sopa, sino que se la quedó mirando hasta que se la llevaron y le pusieron delante cuatro pescadillas, que se mordían las colas con sus bocas quemadas, y no hizo más que romper con su tenedor uno de los espinazos retorcidos. La mujer que tenía al lado no dejaba de arreglarse la servilleta, o de santiguarse, era difícil saberlo, y él desvió la vista, y un momento después se santiguó furtivamente, pues había olvidado hacerlo al sentarse, la primera vez desde que guardaba memoria. Y después entró un nuevo huésped, miró con aire inseguro a su alrededor y se sentó en el asiento vacío al otro lado de la mesa. Era un hombre corpulento, que llenó su plato de sopa de ajo, cuya aguada superficie se reflejaba en glóbulos de color naranja, e inmediatamente empezó a comer. El señor Yák alzó la vista hacia su izquierda, donde el espejo del aparador había reflejado tantas veces el decoro vivaz de una cabellera rubia y un suéter de angora azul, y ahora estaba vacío como si no pudiera dar cabida a nadie más. Luego sus ojos se posaron en la madre lactante, que tenía la mitad de su edad, y se quedó mirando su pecho henchido. El hombre del otro lado de la mesa terminó su sopa y se recostó en su silla, y los ruidos de su interior, como un zureo de palomas al aire libre, hicieron volver en sí y levantarse al señor Yák. Sin repetir sus habituales cortesías a los comensales que dejaba allí, salió precipitadamente, recorrió los fríos pasillos, pasó ante su puerta y llegó a la del cristal oscuro del fondo, que abrió sin llamar, y tanteó por encima de su cabeza basta que encontró el cordón de la luz.

No era la brillante bombilla desnuda a la que estaba acostumbrado en su habitación, sino velada con la envoltura de papel traslúcido de una botella de coñac. Encima del armario había un bosquecillo de botellas, transparentemente verdes en su vacuidad. Su espejo alto reflejaba por completo uno más pequeño, al fondo de la habitación, sobre un lavabo con un solo grifo, donde había un vaso corroído de coñac sin terminar, cuyo olor flotaba en la habitación, y se elevaba hacia las molduras de guirnaldas de yeso que rodeaban el alto techo blanco. Encima de la cama plateada («una auténtica cama de casa de putas», la había llamado una vez), la doncella andaluza coqueteaba por encima de su balcón y del hombro del que abrazaba la guitarra, colgada a lo largo sobre un descolorido espacio vacío que le había cedido el Jesús del Gran Poder. Al notar el radiador frío, recordó que había pensado en pedir al dueño que pusiera allí un brasero. Se apartó de la alfombra, una superficie grisazulada y naranja de no más de un metro extendida sobre las tablas desiguales del entarimado, para acercarse a una mesa de mimbre que tenía arrimada una silla de mimbre con un cojín rojinegro de estilo indio, ante un tazón de café vacío y un mendrugo de pan, y al apartarse, su pie hizo rodar algo por el suelo, y se agachó a recoger un cartucho del 32. Lo sostuvo en la palma de la mano, mirando el borde de la vaina limado para utilizarlo en una pistola automática, y lo sopesó con una expresión confusa en la cara, una expresión que se sacudió con un bufido mientras se guardaba el cartucho en el bolsillo y volvía a la mesa. Junto al mendrugo de pan había media página de un libro, arrancada de *La vida es sueño* de Calderón, y arrancada limpiamente por el verso «El delito mayor del hombre es haber nacido…», [47] y también pareció sopesar aquello en su mano, antes de volver a dejarlo junto al mendrugo de pan y un billete arrugado de una peseta en la mesa de mimbre, deteniéndose como si oyera algo, aquella voz: «Oh sí, ¿no?, ¿el mayor pecado del hombre, haber nacido?, jejejeje…» y luego aquella risa cascada. «No, porque hay más que hacer, más trabajo, más trabajo si es verdad que ni los dioses mismos pueden retirar sus dones». Porque hay un momento, viajando. «¿Quiere comer?», [48] ofrecen, amparo. Acercándose a Madrid, es un destino, Madrid. Se adivina por el nombre. «¿Quiere comer?». Todo el mundo ofrecía amparo a un viajero, quién sabe si no sería un dios disfrazado. Toda la familia allí, comiendo, toda la… toda la familia… «¿Quiere comer…?». No, no, estoy fumando, hay todavía tanto trabajo que es necesario, estoy fumando, estoy solo porque, no tengo hambre, porque si es verdad, entonces el amor tenía que atesorarse para el trabajo, encerrarse, ¡eso es, eso es!, ¿hay un momento, viajando, en que el amor y la necesidad se vuelven lo mismo?.

Entonces sus ojos repararon en el pasaporte suizo, tirado y abierto en el suelo.

—*Ay no, que no lo comas, venga, no comas eso… son para la niña…* [49] dígame, por el amor de Dios, ¿me va a dejar en paz de una vez?

Las persianas estaban casi cerradas sobre el estrecho balcón, pero llegaban ruidos de Alfonso del Gato, el

ruido de voces y un organillo en algún sitio con la alegría coja de una melodía irreconocible, por las persianas y la imposición de alegría de las rojas cortinas floreadas que colgaban allí inmóviles. Ante él los espejos, del alto y estrecho del armario al pequeño y cuadrado sobre el lavabo de un solo grifo, y vuelta, abarcaban mutuamente sus imágenes, mientras la lluvia empezaba a tamborilear de nuevo contra las persianas, y llegaba al cristal, y se quedó allí quieto, helado, buscando frenéticamente en su memoria algo precioso abandonado bajo la lluvia, o una ventana dejada abierta, la lluvia entrando en la oscuridad, abismando una conciencia alerta ahora con toda la lucidez repentina del terror, hundiéndose a su alrededor de tal forma que parece haber estado cayendo todo el tiempo: los ruidos llegaban desde una gran distancia, una ciudad ajena, en tierra extranjera, y la sensación de que acababa de caer allí en aquel preciso instante, solo, y por primera vez abismado en la sensación de algo perdido. Giró en redondo sobre sus pies, para encarar a quien había entrado por la puerta a su espalda, pero no vio a nadie allí. Se quedó parado, torcido pero inmóvil por un momento, y luego se acercó cautelosamente a la puerta, como si ella estuviera esperando a que saliera para entrar, y una vez en la puerta salió como sale una multitud, dejando la puerta abierta a su espalda.

—*Vaya usted con Dios… y que no haya novedad* [50] —dijo Jacinta, abriendo la puerta principal para despedirle con sus mejores deseos, y el señor Yák repitió aquella frase mientras salía a la calle mojada, para quitarse otras cosas de la cabeza. *¿Novedad…?* Novedad, mudanza, cambio… Que fuera con Dios, y no hubiera… novedad. Recorrió a buen paso las callejuelas, y luego salió junto a las Cortes y llegó al Hotel Palace, para dejar una nota alentadora al señor Kuvetli, en la que decía que había localizado lo que buscaba el señor Kuvetli, y que por una suma razonable vería de traérselo dentro de unos días; pero se había olvidado el pasaporte y no recordaba su nombre completo, aunque sabía que la inicial del de pila era J, de modo que firmó J. Yák y volvió rápidamente a la calle.

Las calles estaban llenas de gente fuera adonde fuera, multitudes que desfilaban con tal animación que al principio podía pensarse que una fiesta señalada, o una gran catástrofe, las había hecho salir. Se encontró acercándose a la plaza de Tirso de Molina, vio pasar a un chico rubio del brazo de un hombre, y alguien dijo: «Los turistas, sí… pero los maricones…». [51] Compró unas pasas en un carro, una flor sin identificar para su ojal, y se detuvo en Chispero a tomar un café, mirando todo el tiempo a su alrededor, pero sin mucha esperanza en los ojos de encontrar a alguien que conociese. Oyó tacones repicando sobre el tablado de la sala al fondo de la barra, donde Adelita Beltrán cantaba «La Sebastiana», y se sorprendió musitando al hilo de la letra: «Aunque tiene siete colchones…» mientras volvía a la calle, más nervioso a cada minuto que retrasaba su vuelta a la *pensión,* [52] y a su trabajo. «¿Un falsificador?», [53] murmuró, chocando con la gente por la calle de Atocha, «aunque tiene siete colchones, ¿la Sebastiana no puede dormir…? ¿Cómo…?».

—*Adiós*…

—*Dios*…

La gente pasaba bajo la lluvia recomendándose unos a otros a Dios, en vez de Dios unos a otros.

—*Y que no haya novedad…* —repitió para sí, acercándose a la plaza de Santa Ana, y bajó un momento la vista en el haz de luz que salía del Villa Rosa. Lo que llevaba en el ojal eran los restos de una rosa. Levantó las manos para llamar dando palmas al *sereno,* y se quedaron allí inmóviles, como hizo él, parado con aire indeciso, abrumado bajo la fría lluvia al verse abismado en el tiempo de España, que al igual que la invitada que lo esperaba arriba no abandonaría jamás.

—*Adiós*…

—¿…?

Pastora estaba en la entrada del Villa Rosa, la correa de su sandalia de tacón alto todavía rota, la blusa cereza sobresaliendo de su falda por donde tenía la cremallera rota. «Buenas noches, señor», repitió tímidamente, el áspero pelo negro enmarcando su cara, y el labio fruncido sobre sus grandes dientes, ya no con la mueca de fiereza que recordaba, aunque era la misma expresión, pero ahora patéticamente desafiante, esperando, sola, mirándolo y esperando. Él movió los brazos con un rápido encogimiento de hombros, y dio palmas para llamar al sereno, que llegó tambaleándose con las llaves y su comentario habitual sobre su oficio: «Cuanto peor hago mi trabajo, más me aplaude la gente…», y la puerta de la calle se abrió.

—*Adiós*… —repitió Pastora desoladamente, sin recibir una sola mirada de él mientras entraba y subía las escaleras, murmurando contra el ruido hueco que hacían sus pies al pisarlas. Jacinta le abrió la puerta, y recorrió apresuradamente los oscuros pasillos hasta su habitación, murmurando aún algo sobre «el trabajo, el trabajo».

Encendió la luz y se quedó mirando la figura tendida en el entarimado desigual del suelo. «¿Por qué diría yo… una cosa como ésa?», musitó sin moverse. «El amor atesorado toda tu vida… por el trabajo», y

sus labios siguieron moviéndose silenciosamente sobre aquella última palabra mientras cerraba la puerta a su espalda, y no dejaron de moverse, repitiéndola, hasta que los vio en el espejo cuando se acercó a quitarse el peluquín, y dio un tirón a su bigote, y se alarmó al ver que no se desprendía. Se apartó del espejo para quitarse el cuello de plexiglás, aunque el cordón dorado y purpúreo siguió anudado a su garganta, y se santiguó cuando sus ojos repararon en el Jesús del Gran Poder colgado verticalmente en la pared sobre un claro descolorido, formando así una cruz. «Todo esto», murmuró, y se pasó la mano por la barbilla. «Y que no haya novedad…». [54]

Entonces dio un bufido de impaciencia. Asomó una luz a sus ojos, mientras cogía el cortaplumas y se arrodillaba junto al costado izquierdo de la figura tendida en el suelo. Cuando se puso a trabajar la luz se volvió más brillante, hasta que sus ojos destellaron como si echaran chispas. De abajo llegaban ruidos, el rítmico estruendo de palmas y tacones, una voz en un gemido constreñido, del Villa Rosa, y él siguió trabajando.

Luego la hoja se detuvo: ¿era el corazón?, ¿o el cerebro?

Hasta que al fin los únicos ruidos fueron los que venían de los extremos del callejón desierto, donde los bastones tentativos de dos ciegos se acercaban entre sí en la oscuridad, esos y el raspar del filo del cortaplumas, mientras la bruja de la luna, la oscura aventadora, se elevaba en su último cuarto.

IV

«Si el sol y la luna dudasen
Se apagarían al instante».

WILLIAM BLAKE

—La Virgen María salió a pasear…

La proa del barco remontó una ola, quedó suspendida y luego se hundió en el seno siguiente. Todo retembló.

—Por el río Jordán…

—Por favor, no cantes eso —interrumpió Stanley—. No aquí, no ahora mismo en todo caso.

Agarrado a la barandilla, miró incómodamente por encima del hombro hacia donde el padre Martin se paseaba por cubierta recitando el oficio indicado de su breviario. Ella dejó de cantar, y se quedó mirando al mar en silencio. Stanley la miró a la cara, la única (junto con la del padre Martin cuando estaba entretenido en pasatiempos supramundanos como el que ahora le ocupaba) que hasta entonces había conservado su ecuanimidad durante el viaje.

No estaba resultando una travesía fácil: el propio Stanley había sentido varias veces la saliva subiéndole al fondo de la boca, y había intentado fijar la mente en algo sublime y remoto, o al menos extracorpóreo; pero los signos y sonidos del sufrimiento adyacente le recordaban casi siempre la perspectiva inmanente del suyo, y tragaba saliva con gran esfuerzo. Así lo hizo ahora. A su espalda, detrás del padre Martin, un bulto de humana aflicción se balanceaba en una tumbona, aferrando una maquinita que hacía clic a intervalos regulares. Era una mujer que había formulado varias veces la categórica y razonable exigencia de que el capitán detuviera el barco. Era miembro de los Peregrinos; y como tal, estaba firmemente convencida de que el mar se había encrespado expresamente por ella y sus compañeros, a los que informaba solícitamente, en determinados momentos, de que manos infernales eran las responsables, actuando desde anfractuosas residencias del fondo para estorbarlos en su devota misión, mientras que en otros momentos parecía dispuesta a acusar a la mismísima Deidad para cuyo aplacamiento se había planeado aquel viaje. En ese caso, Él estaba de todo punto decidido a convertirlo en una excursión tan memorablemente incómoda como cualquiera de las que disfrutaron aquellos peregrinos medievales, que zarpaban de Venecia en las condiciones más deplorables que podían disponerse, lo que, para su época, es decir mucho. Ahora mismo, el cielo estaba azul y brillantemente despejado, permitiendo un momento de esperanza, hasta que el barco dio un bandazo y el mar hirviente se elevó ante sus ojos, que cerró en el acto tratando de engolfarse en la oportuna maraña de ideas falsas que, a lo largo de muchos años devotos, había logrado acumular sobre su destino. Al fin y al cabo, no se dirigían a Jerusalén y, una vez desembarcados, no correrían el riesgo de ser apedreados por sarracenos, o de que les ofreciesen en venta tales artículos de comercio como los cuerpos de los Santos Inocentes. No los impulsaba la posibilidad de conseguir una astilla de la Verdadera Cruz, o una urna con las lágrimas de la Virgen, o al menos los recortes de uñas de los pies de algún venerable eclesiástico, ocasiones todas que sus tempranos predecesores habían aprovechado plenamente: sino más bien la recompensa de indiligencias. Eso y el espectáculo de la canonización de la pequeña mártir española, cuya reputación trataban importunamente de acrecentar algunos de los Peregrinos, y aquella mujer la primera entre ellos, rogando su intervención en la presente desventura.

Es verdad que había otros a bordo, víctimas de supersticiones menos disciplinadas, que convenían en que aquella calamidad podía ser muy bien un castigo a los Peregrinos, y tendían a mostrarse bastante groseros por sentirse incluidos en él de modo tan gratuito. El sueco era uno de éstos. Vestido con un salto de cama muy favorecedor, yacía dentro chupando un limón, y rechazando objeciones. «Pero Anna, cariño…». «No, no discutáis conmigo ahora, son esos horribles y vulgares Peregrinos». «Pero, cariño, la razón por la que vienes *tú* es para unirte también a la Iglesia…». «Tú sabes muy bien por qué voy, porque la única forma que tengo de *hacerme* con el pequeño Giono es *adoptarlo,* y si no soy un padre católico, no me lo *darán».* «¿No quieres salir a tomar el aire un ratito…? Te sentirás *muchísimo* mejor». «No puedo salir con *esto».* El sueco levantó un dobladillo de satén rosa. «Cariño, ¿por qué regalaste *toda* tu ropa a esos polizones…?».

Y entre los estratos inferiores de la tripulación, los que uno se encontraba fregando pasillos y retretes,

aparecían sombreros de papel de oropel arrugado y colores desteñidos, restos de un carnaval apurado en alguna latitud perdida cuyas chanzas perduraban todavía en manchas y olores bajo la superficie.

—¿No queda más Dramamina? —La mujer alta levantó la cabeza de la almohada al ver entrar a su marido. Luego la dejó caer—. Pobre
Huki-lau
, se está mordiendo otra vez las uñas… echando a perder su psicoanálisis…

Y en cubierta, del bulto hundido en una tumbona que oscilaba contra el mamparo seguían brotando los clics a intervalos un tanto irregulares. Casi oculta en su mano estaba la Máquina, un «Rosario Anotador», con el botón bajo el pulgar para apretarlo cada vez que llegaba al Gloria, y una flecha («¡Tenga a la vista el Misterio!», decía el anuncio) que señalaba la siguiente cuenta que había que rezar.

—¿Por qué sigues cantando eso? —exclamó Stanley, agarrándola de la muñeca en la barandilla. Luego la soltó y se disculpó por sobresaltarla de ese modo; y un momento después se le escapó un grito, y se inclinó bruscamente hacia adelante. Debajo de él afloró un libro en la cresta de una ola, desapareció y volvió a asomar entre la blanca espuma. Se quedó mirando cómo arrastraba el mar aquella invitación al pecado mortal, y luego levantó la cara hacia el propio mar, como tratando de abarcarlo enteramente con la vista, y dijo algo así a ella, algo sobre su inmensidad. La miró. Estaba mirando al mar. Y entonces dijo, pero no a él:

—Para algunos peces el mar es un gran cielo gris.

Stanley siguió agarrado a su lado. Luego se volvió:

—¿Adónde vas?

—A dar un paseo.

—Sí, pero… vale, pero ¿no irás arriba a ver… a primera clase?

—¿A ver al Hombre Frío?

Le sonrió, y Stanley apartó los ojos de los suyos. No sabía quién era el «Hombre Frío», no había tenido más que un atisbo de una figura alta, y eso sólo de noche, parada ante la barandilla de arriba, la manga izquierda de un abrigo Chesterfield vacíamente remetida en el bolsillo, la cara inmóvil, oculta bajo el ala de un sombrero negro. Pues Stanley seguía aún el curso que se había marcado, sin hacer ninguna pregunta entrometida, sin reclamar nada de su buena disposición que era, siempre que estaba a su lado, tan franca en su expectación, tan solícita con sus deseos, como en el único pago que le exigía, las devociones que aprendía con tanto celo, y practicaba con tanta gracia.

Todo iba sumamente bien.

Y su avidez por aprender las iniciaciones que se había propuesto enseñarle resultaba a veces patéticamente conmovedora, y a veces le alarmaba: conmovedora, delicadamente absurda porque no había en ella ningún afán de burla cuando, por ejemplo, respaldaba el dogma de la Asunción de la Virgen con la de la pequeña Eva en *La cabaña del tío Tom,* como único paralelo histórico que conocía; alarmante, cuando se sacaba de la manga la imagen de san Simeón Estilita pasando un año a la pata coja y dirigiéndose a los gusanos que un ayudante reponía en su carne putrescente: «Comed lo que Dios os ha dado…». O su franca familiaridad con la carrera de santa María Egipcíaca: diecisiete años de prostitución en Alejandría, talentos de los que sacó buen partido cuando se convirtió y pagó así su pasaje de barco a Jerusalén, todo ello expiado vagando sin lavarse por los bosques durante el siguiente medio siglo. O cómo había llegado a saber de la niña siciliana del siglo XVII Ana Raguza, que se hacía llamar la Novia de Cristo y podía realmente, según decía, distinguir a los pecadores por el olor. O que el pie derecho de santa Teresa de Jesús se venera en Santa Maria della Scala en Roma. O que el pus de san Juan de la Cruz olía intensamente a azucenas de la Virgen.

Las cosas parecían ir sumamente bien, mejor de lo que habría imaginado Stanley si se hubiera detenido al principio de su empresa a considerar las dificultades prácticas que sin duda traería consigo. Su pasaje, por ejemplo: estaba dispuesto a pagarlo, pero nadie se lo había pedido. Y aunque le alivió la aparente falta de curiosidad por parte de los demás pasajeros, había empezado a preocuparle. Nadie, ni siquiera el padre Martin, había preguntado cómo se llamaba ella; y aunque la mujer gorda había esbozado en cierta ocasión un gesto de amabilidad miope para incluirlo en su propia generación, preguntando si aquella «encantadora jovencita» era hija suya, enseguida lo había contenido, agarrando un libro de bolsillo de cubierta satinada impreso con el *Nihil obstat* y el *Imprimatur,* y titulado *Un día con el papa,* y había olvidado por completo que aquella pregunta, o lo que la hubiera provocado, había entrado alguna vez en su atareada cabeza. Lamiéndose el dedo para pasar cada página de ilustraciones, se veía deambulando por los pasillos vaticanos, en el Patio de San Dámaso, ¿y quién sabe dónde?, cuando alzó la vista hacia la hirviente superficie del mar que se elevaba ante ella, y echó mano a una bolsa de papel que tenía junto a la tumbona.

A pesar de todo, estaba saliendo bien. Aunque Stanley, cuando se quedaba solo abajo con su rimero de palimpsestos, y las partituras en las que los estaba pasando a limpio, cometía más errores que nunca, algunos de ellos exasperantes, como copiar dos veces el mismo compás; otros extraños, pues se sorprendió insertando aquí y allá notas airosas que rompían las transiciones admirablemente severas, añadiendo a vuelapluma cadencias que no tenían nada que ver con nada, y aquella misma mañana, introduciendo un bajo trepidante que, según advirtió al detenerse, era la vibración regular de las máquinas.

No podía quitársela de la cabeza. Cuando estaban juntos, su sonrisa, o a menudo la tristeza vacía de su cara cuando no sabía que la estaba mirando, lo obligaba a bajar los ojos, y a buscar algo que tocar, o algo que decir; y casi siempre encontraba aquella muela en su bolsillo, y no decía nada.

De todas formas, todavía no había ocurrido nada malo. Incluso abajo, donde estaban tan cerca cuando estaban juntos; estar con ella en luminoso silencio o en oración resultaba, de hecho, menos difícil de lo que se había imaginado, pues nunca había conocido la tentación a la que habitualmente se sucumbe. Y ni siquiera al levantarse, o cuando ella se acostaba, sentía ninguna tentación de tocarla, o de decirle que era hermosa, aunque el cálido roce de un codo lo sobresaltaba a veces. Pero en cuanto se quedaba solo todo era completamente diferente.

En cuanto se quedaba solo se veía asaltado por simulacros de ella, en todos los estados de dolor agudo, o sonriendo, de completa abstracción o dolorida animación, de vestimenta o desnudez, como la había visto durante aquellos últimos días: en cuanto se quedaba solo acudían las imágenes para parodiar todo lo que había visto. Su tristeza se convertía en estridente aflicción, y su animación se volvía desenfrenada, impúdica si vestida y licenciosa en desnudez, dotada de numerosos miembros como algún salvaje avatar de la cosmología hindú que asediaba los días ocupados en pasar a limpio su obra, y las noches que pasaba solo en su silla, donde, en cuanto se apagaban las luces, todo se transformaba, y el cuerpo que había visto un momento antes, sin más sorpresa que la que permitían sus líneas sencillas y su movimiento desinhibido, se echaba sobre él con el pecho lleno y ondulando el vientre, con miembros indiscernibles hasta que se veía derribado entre ellos y sofocado en un húmedo colapso.

Por la mañana despertaba agotado, arreglando el desorden de su ropa húmeda, y allí estaba ella, fresca y respirando inconscientemente y a menudo destapada; y cuando era así la tapaba al levantarse, no más acuciado a tocarla con la mano que si hubiera sido un tono de carne en un lienzo, y salía sin lavarse, y subía, sin detenerse siquiera en cubierta a tomar el aire del día, directamente a desayunar. Pues así ocurría: tenía un gran apetito, y a veces entraba a dos turnos.

Hasta ahora, las cosas estaban aún bajo control, aunque se sorprendía evitando al padre Martin con tanto cuidado como evitaba a la mujer gorda que se pasaba por la lengua un dedo con la uña pintada cada vez que volvía una hoja de un libro de bolsillo de cubierta satinada impreso con el *Nihil obstat* y el *Imprimatur*, y con el título en amarillo *El Vaticano y el Año Santo*. (Lo había atrapado en el desayuno, iniciando el día con una ávida referencia a «la flor de su virginidad, blanca como la azucena» que había muerto protegiendo la inminente santita española). Ahora el padre Martin pasaba a su espalda, ensimismado en lo que sonaba en sus murmullos como un salmo de David. Con él, Stanley había tenido ya unas cuantas conversaciones interesantes: la etimología de «expiación» (expiación); la doctrina agustiniana (ésta no había llegado demasiado lejos) sobre la Crucifixión como un rescate pagado a Satán para liberar al hombre de su poder; la decadencia de Satán (ésta no había llegado a ninguna parte) de tentador oficial de Dios a Su archienemigo. Pero ahora Stanley le evitaba, como si temiera delatar algún signo de su estado mental, alguna imagen de su fantasía.

En cuanto a *La historia de Bárbara Ubrick*, lo había cogido a escondidas y lo había tirado por la borda, sólo para encontrarla después con *Mi vida en un convento*, de Margaret Shepherd. «Engañada por un cura que se valió del confesionario», leyó, «cuando apenas era una chiquilla, casada con un cura, encerrada en un convento con su bebé y abandonada por el cura brutal que había prometido protegerla. Le cautivará hasta que entre lágrimas y suspiros…». Aquello fue también por la borda, seguido por la historia de Rosamund Culbertson (una chica americana en manos de curas papistas en Cuba) y *Seis meses en un convento,* de Rebecca Reed. Y cada vez que ocurría esto, ella alzaba la vista hacia Stanley con la misma consternación con que sonaba su voz cuando preguntaba: «Pero ¿no es así como va a ser…?».

Tragó saliva con un esfuerzo de constricción que le llegó hasta la mano que apretaba en su bolsillo la muela envuelta, con la mirada fija en las agitadas superficies de espuma blanca, y dio un respingo al ver que no estaba mirando el *Paraíso perdido,* sino un sombrero de hombre que flotaba allí abajo.

El contacto de su mano sobre la suya agarrada a la barandilla le hizo retirarla con sobresalto, y la miró alejándose por cubierta, balanceándose con movimientos apenas afectados por el vaivén del barco, o aun incompatibles con él, sin nada en absoluto que ver con el mar, aquella brillante extensión ininterrumpida de

cielo y mar unidos sólo por sí mismos, ahora los únicos términos de la realidad: caminaba con el paso del desierto, con los andares de una gitana, o con la soltura de esas mujeres (aunque nunca había visto un grupo así) que siguen a los camellos, y acompasan por detrás la elegancia de los camellos, igual que comparten los rasgos por delante, con la suya.

Stanley la siguió. Fue una decisión repentina, y se mantuvo bien detrás y oculto, vacilando al doblar esquinas, detrás de ventiladores, demasiado acalorado para saber si temía que le viera, o si temía lo que vería al fin. En un recodo se detuvo demasiado tiempo, y la perdió. Dedicó un momento a felicitarse por abandonar una persecución tan censurable, y después la reanudó frenéticamente. Corrió hacia popa hasta llegar a las escaleras exteriores que llevaban a primera clase, y había empezado ya a subirlas cuando la vio. Estaba sola ante la barandilla de abajo y no lo vio acercarse, ni vio su vergonzosa retirada, porque estaba llorando.

Stanley entró dentro, y deambuló distraídamente por el salón de fumar de la clase turista. Se detuvo a leer de nuevo el parte meteorológico, y volvió a leer los mismos boletines de noticias que habían puesto allí por la mañana. Leyó dos veces el tercero, un buque mercante que se había partido en dos e ido a pique cerca de las Azores, antes de darse cuenta de que ya lo había leído, y de que estaba allí parado sin más, en vez de trabajar, esperando a que llamaran para el primer turno del almuerzo.

Por primera vez en el viaje, se bebió de un trago un vaso de vino antes de que apareciese un bocado; y durante la comida llenó su vaso cuatro veces con la jarra que había en la mesa. Al bajar la encontró tumbada. Le pareció dormida, con la cara vuelta hacia la pared. Su figura yacía completamente inmóvil sobre la cama, sin la menor muestra de su respiración ni la más leve respuesta aparente al movimiento del barco, que obligaba a Stanley a mover constantemente los pies mientras se inclinaba sobre ella.

En el suelo había una tarjeta doblada, profusamente adornada. Era algo que había pertenecido a su madre, usado aquí con el mejor de los propósitos, compensarla por aquellos libros malditos y absurdos que había tirado por la borda, y ahora se agachó a recogerlo: «Un recuerdo del venerable santuario de Santa María de los Angeles», con una estampa en la cubierta de san Francisco recibiendo la Indulgencia de la Porciúncula. Dentro, a un lado, había pegadas tres partículas infinitesimales, identificadas como un trozo de la puerta de la celda donde murió san Francisco en 1336, un trozo de la Porciúncula, la propia iglesia, y un trozo del púlpito donde fue proclamada la Indulgencia por san Francisco y siete obispos; a la izquierda había cuatro hojas de los rosales milagrosos de san Francisco de Asís, y debajo la maravillosa historia de cómo «Una cruda noche de invierno, cuando san Francisco estaba siendo sañudamente tentado por el Diablo para que suavizase sus austeridades, venció al maligno arrojándose a unas zarzas… revolcándose en ellas hasta que su cuerpo estuvo todo cubierto de sangre y arañazos…», momento en el que las zarzas se convirtieron en rosales en plena floración, y en medio de una claridad celestial aparecieron unos ángeles para llevar a san Francisco a la Porciúncula, donde Nuestro Señor con Su Madre y una Hueste Celestial otorgó la Indulgencia, una «Indulgencia Plenaria que, tras la devota recepción del Sacramento de la Penitencia, puede aún ganarse diariamente cada vez que uno entre en la Porciúncula… Esta indiligencia puede aplicarse a las ánimas del Purgatorio».

La tarjeta estaba ahora enrollada y todavía húmeda, como si la hubiera tenido apretada en la palma de la mano contra su cara, y cuando empezaba a levantarse el vaivén del barco le arrojó hacia ella, perdió el equilibrio y su mejilla rozó su pelo. Por un momento se quedó parado, tan inmóvil como ella; y luego movió la mejilla muy despacio, de un lado a otro, contra su pelo. Sentía en su pelo su propio aliento caliente. Su pelo lo retenía y le quemaba la mejilla, e hincó una rodilla en el suelo, volviendo la cara contra su fino pelo y respirando más hondo, con los ojos desmesuradamente abiertos. Tenía la cara entera ardiendo, pero sintió algo más; y luego nada más que el latir de su corazón, palpitando desigualmente en un bulto gigantesco que crecía desde el fondo de su pecho hasta su garganta, más despacio a cada latido.

Ella gimió, y se volvió sobre la espalda; pero él no pudo moverse. Gimió algo casi inarticulado, y luego sus labios quedaron abiertos, y se aflojaron, y el inferior se encogió hacia dentro. Apareció su lengua en una comisura de la boca, y sus labios se cerraron, mostrando todavía la punta de la lengua mientras la mandíbula se ponía rígida y la barbilla se alzaba, y su cuerpo entero se elevó de la cama y volvió a posarse delicadamente tenso, y ya distendido volvió a alzarse, y volvió a caer con blanda fuerza mientras respiraba tan hondo, la cabeza echada hacia atrás, que toda la parte superior de su cuerpo parecía vaciarse. Su aliento se sentía tan caliente como el de él, que ahora lo vertía sobre la oreja en contacto con sus labios: pero seguía sin poder moverse, seguía con la rodilla hincada, las manos agarradas al borde de la cama y los ojos desmesuradamente abiertos, todos los sentidos confundidos en el único que aguzaba, escuchando. Porque estaba escuchando el latir de su corazón, que no le había parecido que llenase aquel camarote entero hasta que advirtió que ya no lo hacía, y esperó, cada latido más fuerte, y separado del último por un intervalo

espantoso.

Nada se movía, y no oía nada. La plancha de metal bajo su rodilla estaba inmóvil, y no oía nada en absoluto, ni siquiera las máquinas; ni siquiera las máquinas que habían marcado el paso a su corazón día tras día y lo habían sustentado de noche mientras dormía, de modo que sus latidos habían vibrado por todo el barco, impulsándolos cuando iba más deprisa y marcaba de antemano el paso a las máquinas. Entonces el barco dio un bandazo, y se oyó hacia popa un tropel de gente que corría. Las máquinas se pusieron en marcha; y el corazón de Stanley dobló su compás mientras se levantaba, perdía el equilibrio y caía de espaldas contra la puerta.

Ella se incorporó sobre un codo, los ojos abiertos con alarma, como si nunca hubieran estado cerrados.

—¿Qué pasa? —exclamó.

—No lo sé… —jadeó él, aupándose contra la puerta.

Las máquinas habían dado marcha atrás, y ahora la moderaban con un ruido sordo y lejano, mientras el barco cabeceaba ligeramente y parecía detenerse.

—¿Hemos llegado? —gritó.

—¿Llegado…? ¿Llegado? ¿Adónde? —contestó él desvalidamente. Luego agarró el picaporte y abrió la puerta.

En el pasillo, la mujer gorda acababa de llegar a aquel punto. Su Máquina salió despedida a un lado, un librito de lance titulado *Una virgen y mártir moderna* al otro, y ella se desplomó a sus pies. «Acabo de enterarme…», chilló, «acabo de enterarme…».

Stanley se quedó parado, mirando aleladamente unas rodilleras de lana torcidas sobre unas rodillas del tamaño de su cintura. «Haga unas mangas y tendré dos bonitos suéteres…». Estuvo a punto de decirlo en voz alta, mirando ahora con la mirada vidriosa de la demencia pura. Luego la mano de ella le agarró la rodilla, que estuvo a punto de romperse, o ceder, y en vez de agacharse a ayudarla se aferró con ambas manos al marco de la puerta.

—Acabo de enterarme… —empezó a soltarse, y murmurando algo Stanley le cogió la mano antes de que volviera a agarrarle la rodilla. Todo parecía estar pasando muy despacio. Examinó el inadecuado anillo de la mano que sostenía, doblemente miserable por tener dos perlas mezquinas montadas en ángulo con la fina línea de oro que casi había sido absorbida por la carne: ¿se lo habían regalado cuando el anillo y su mano se complementaban aún entre sí?, o lo había comprado…

—*¡Agua…!*

Ciertamente, había como un cazo de agua en un charco tranquilo, sin fuente ni destino aparente, allí en el pasillo.

—*¡Mi rosario…!* —La Cosa brillaba junto a sus pies.

Stanley la recogió, finalmente cerró la puerta ante su visitante, y volvió y se sentó. Apenas estaban empezando a hundírsele los hombros cuando volvió a levantarse de un salto. «¿Qué ha pasado?», gritó, perdiendo el equilibrio otra vez y cayendo a su lado en la cama. La agarró de la mano, y salieron juntos corriendo.

La superficie del mar era cegadora a babor cuando salieron a cubierta, donde había ya otros pasajeros alineados ante las barandillas. Perdida a estas alturas la cuenta de los días, la gente miraba estúpidamente al mar. Las conversaciones tendían a languidecer y cesar, mientras los ojos se alzaban hacia aquella extensión de ondulante indiferencia, tan inevitable como novedosa había sido el primer día de travesía, y la cara de uno que hablaba, y la de uno que escuchaba ante la barandilla, se rehuían mutuamente y quedaban tan expuestas y carentes de pasado, o de futuro, o de algo que dar, como la cara inexpresiva de la realidad que miraban.

Stanley levantó una mano de la barandilla para sostener la mano blanca que había estado sosteniendo la suya. Miró su reloj, luego la cara de ella, y luego, mirando de nuevo hacia abajo, remedó su expresión, contenida pero inquieta, curiosa pero no por saber demasiado.

Largaron amarras, les llegaron voces de hombres, y justo debajo se abrió un portalón de carga en el costado del barco. Había seis figuras en el bote salvavidas que finalmente arrimaron al costado, hombres con camisas desgarradas y caras ennegrecidas que miraban hacia arriba sin la chispa de interés que animaba las caras asomadas para mirarles. Su bote cabeceaba mientras sujetaban las amarras y agarraban el extremo de una escala de cuerda, moviéndose con ágil aplomo, todos menos uno. Estaba tendido a través sobre una bancada, y cuando bajaron una eslinga de lona, dos de los hombres le pusieron en ella, y la sujetaron para evitar que golpeara el costado mientras la izaban. Subió lentamente hacia Stanley, que estaba justo encima, y entonces, casi junto al portalón, se enganchó una vuelta del cabo, el cabo dio un tirón y uno de los extremos de la eslinga se soltó. Los pasajeros que miraban sin respirar compartieron un

sonido sobresaltado, una brusca inspiración de aire cuando la cabeza cayó hacia atrás y quedó colgando de un extremo de la eslinga. La cara era morena, y estaba cubierta de aceite que brillaba al sol, resaltando, incluso a aquella distancia, las líneas marcadas de los pómulos altos, la mandíbula rígida, como sostenida por las líneas que partían de la nariz, surcando las mejillas hundidas, y los ojos, incluso cerrados en la inconsciencia, tensamente apretados como con esfuerzo.

—No parece que… —empezó Stanley, volviéndose hacia ella. Ella levantó la cara de la de abajo lentamente hacia la suya, palideciendo, sin rastro de color en los labios que temblaban en torno a una palabra, y se desmayó.

Stanley la sostuvo contra la barandilla, y alzó la vista en busca de ayuda. Se encontró de lleno con una cara en la cubierta superior, que miraba hacia abajo más allá de él con unos ojos que tenían el color y la textura del mar abajo pero ahora demasiado claros, y justo cuando miró Stanley, demasiado acuosos, pues el reverbero del mar bajo el sol poniente se había convertido en una vasta superficie de metal fundido. La cara de arriba estaba tan pálida como la que sostenía Stanley contra su pecho, y la figura, con un traje de rayas azul marino, un brazo en cabestrillo negro apoyado en la barandilla, se retiró y desapareció.

—Mira que es *mono*… —se oyó más al fondo de la cubierta de paseo superior, y Stanley, todavía estirando el cuello, distinguió entre la rejilla una alta criatura rubia con un abrigo, un dobladillo de un rosa subido sobresaliendo por debajo, unos dedos de un pie descalzo asomando por los imbornales—. Si al menos me hubiera traído sólo *uno* de esos *boy scouts*…

—Mi querido muchacho, ¿no es esto un milagro divino?

La voz de la mujer gorda volvió en sí a Stanley, haciéndole sentir el peso que sostenía. La apoyó otra vez contra la barandilla, y le levantó la cara. Aún tenía los ojos cerrados, pero una sonrisa le movía los labios.

—Bueno, hay algo —dijo la mujer gorda—, algo que quería preguntarte. —La mano de las perlas agitó una barrita de caramelo ante Stanley durante un momento tentador—. ¿Quieres una? —le preguntó como si estuviera allí parado con las manos vacías.

—No, yo… por favor, por favor, discúlpeme…

—Bueno, ¿y qué ha podido ser…?

Stanley se volvió hacia la cara pegada a él. «¿Estás… puedes andar ahora?», preguntó, y no recibió más respuesta que el tambaleante desasimiento del peso apoyado contra él. La sostuvo pasándole un brazo por la cintura. Andaba con la cabeza baja, y no alzó la cara hasta que llegaron al primer tramo de escaleras.

—¿Vamos a verlo? —preguntó. Stanley musitó algo: «Mmmmm», fingiendo que estaba absorto en el esfuerzo de ayudarla. Finalmente llegaron al pasillo donde el charco de agua se movía de un lado a otro con el vaivén del suelo, y hasta que no abrió la puerta y la cerró a su espalda no dio ella un gritito, y luego, mirando a su alrededor—: ¿Dónde está?

Lo preguntó con una sonrisa, como si Stanley estuviera jugando a algo con ella, pero él dijo:

—Ahora túmbate. Túmbate. Túmbate un minuto…

—¿Dónde está? —gritó.

—¿Quién? —preguntó al fin Stanley sin moverse, como si temiera acercarse a ella, pues estaba más agitada de lo que la había visto nunca, nunca, advirtió, salvo de noche cuando se apagaban las luces.

—El hombre… ¿que sacaron del mar? —Vaciló por un momento, apelando a él.

—Bueno, le… él… el que subieron en esa cosa estará probablemente en la enfermería del barco, él… pero tú…

—Oh sí… —susurró roncamente—, llévame. —Se acercó a Stanley, a la puerta que tenía detrás—. Llévame allí, llévame a él.

—No, tú… ahora túmbate.

La agarró del brazo y forcejearon. Tenía una fuerza notable, mayor que la suya, pero desesperada e incapaz de sustentarse, mientras Stanley luchaba por mantenerla apartada de la puerta, por contenerla y apartarla de sí, como si supiera por experiencia lo que estaba haciendo, aunque ni siquiera eso paliaba el terror de sus ojos, peleando con seguridad, y con la seguridad de que finalmente perdería: pues lo espantaba su fuerza, pero no con sorpresa, lo espantaba con familiaridad. Era la misma fuerza que combatía de noche: el mismo cuerpo que se retorcía de forma espantosamente familiar, los mismos dedos duros retorcidos entre los suyos, uñas que le arañaban el dorso de las manos doblándoselas hacia dentro, haciéndoselas bajar, la misma pierna enroscada a la suya, el hombro que se soltaba de un tirón y luego se hundía bruscamente en su pecho, el mismo brazo que le apretaba de repente el cuello, la misma cara caliente, y el aliento caliente, y el pelo cegándolo, sofocándolo, mojado con su propio sudor y quemándolo con su propio aliento, hasta que al fin metió los brazos bajo los suyos y, agarrándole los hombros por detrás con las manos, la mantuvo apartada, la cabeza echada hacia atrás, la punta de los dedos hundiéndose en sus brazos, y se tambaleó con

una pierna entre las suyas y su cuerpo retorciéndose aún contra el suyo donde se tocaban.

Se sentía débil, y se colgó de ella. Durante todo el rato los había mantenido en pie el movimiento del barco, pues aunque uno habría perdido el equilibrio y caído en un suelo estable aquí se veía levantado por detrás cuando el suelo se elevaba, pero ahora, con un nuevo bandazo de babor y sin ninguna lucha que les sostuviera, cayeron. Perdido el equilibrio, Stanley consiguió empujarla un paso más hacia la cama, y allí cayó encima de ella.

—Déjame… llévame… —susurró, traspasándole casi los hombros con las uñas, mientras seguía sujetándola sin poder soltarla. No podía moverse, aunque ella se debatía debajo de él; no podía respirar, aunque el aliento de ella le daba en la cara y se cortaba bruscamente, elevando su pecho sobre el suyo; y aunque los ojos de ella estaban cerrados, no podía cerrar los suyos, sino mirar fijamente todo aquello, familiar y espantosamente claro. Entonces los hombros de Stanley se estremecieron, y retorció los suyos por detrás con las manos. Sus codos se hundieron en la cama y su barbilla se alzó, sus piernas se endurecieron y sus pies entrelazados se pusieron rígidos hasta la punta de los dedos, el rigor de la muerte adueñándose de cada extremidad mientras la vida se le escapaba, disolviendo sus sentidos, fundiendo todo en él hasta que quedó enteramente vacío, y su cabeza cayó con los ojos cerrados sobre la almohada.

Volvió en sí de pronto, incorporándose con los codos, la misma sacudida de conciencia que le despertaba cada mañana. Pareció que pasaba un minuto entero hasta que su corazón empezó a latir, y luego palpitó implacablemente. Hundió la cara en la almohada y se tapó con ella la cabeza, estremeciéndose con todo el cuerpo. Luego alzó la cabeza y paseó la mirada por el camarote vacío. Con un movimiento brusco posó los pies al lado de la cama y se levantó, se apoyó en el respaldo de una silla, fue a dar un paso y luego, clavando los ojos en su obra sin terminar, palimpsestos a un lado de la mesa y partituras en limpio al otro, pero unos ojos ausentes, fijos, se quedó allí parado, suspendido: «Anatema…».

Después se movió despacio. Girando con las piernas bien abiertas, rodeó la silla y se sentó, se quitó los pantalones y luego, sin bajar la vista, los calzoncillos. Luego se levantó, humedeció una toalla y, apartando la vista de lo que estaba haciendo, vio primero su cara en el espejo del armario, se volvió rápidamente hacia la pared para evitarla y vio allí el crucifijo amarillento, oscilando levemente sobre su clavo. Cerró los ojos y se quedó quieto, con una mano en la frente, y entonces llamaron a la puerta. Esperó, los hombros tensamente encogidos, paralizado. Volvieron a llamar. Se acercó a la puerta, sin saber si iba a abrirla o a mantenerla cerrada.

—¡Mi querido muchacho…! —oyó en el pasillo, y esperó, sujetando la puerta, hasta que oyó un bufido y pasos pesados que se alejaban. Entonces abrió la puerta con espejo del armario, sacó unos calzoncillos limpios, se quedó mirando el traje azul que no se ponía desde el funeral de su madre, allí colgado, balanceándose suavemente como para recordarle su existencia, y enseguida volvió la espalda. Se puso los calzoncillos limpios, saltando de acá para allá con un pie y luego con el otro, de cualquier modo, como perseguido por rachas de aire que soplasen de direcciones distintas e inesperadas. Vaciló mirando los pantalones que se había quitado, se tumbó en la cama para ponérselos, y un momento después estaba fuera recorriendo el pasillo, los calzoncillos y la toalla húmeda envueltos en un lío que arrojó por la borda cuando llegó a cubierta.

Había oscurecido, la noche iba cerrando y caía a su alrededor, y había luna. Se quedó allí agarrado, mirándola. Y bajo su luz el barco parecía volar sobre la superficie rozando apenas el agua, pero rompiendo sus crestas, una irrealidad espectacular que hizo estremecer de excitación su entero cuerpo vacío, volando sin más peso que las débiles luces del barco por encima de él. Se agarró como para evitar pasar por encima, no caerse, sino simplemente pasar por encima de la borda y sumirse en aquella claridad centelleante donde todo estaría bien al fin.

Cuando más tarde volviera la vista sobre todo aquello, lo que había ocurrido, y lo que faltaba aún por ocurrir, éste sería el último momento del viaje que recordaría franca y claramente.

Una portilla con la cortina descorrida iluminaba de lleno la cara del padre Martin, apoyado de espaldas en la barandilla de la cubierta de primera clase. Escaleras arriba, Stanley estaba a punto de abordarlo cuando brotó una luz en la cara del hombre que hablaba con el cura, una luz protegida del viento con una mano, que mostró el perfil decidido de la cara, el ojo brillando desde su superficie. La luz descendió, arrastrada por un cigarrillo, se avivó cuando el hombre se encogió de hombros, y pasó por encima de la borda como un punto rojo.

—Claro que lo sigo siendo, mi querido amigo. Probablemente ahora estamos los dos trabajando en el mismo asunto.

—No has cambiado —dijo el cura tras una pausa.

—*Semper aliquid haeret*… ¿te acuerdas?

El cura volvió la espalda y se alejó por la cubierta. Si lo hubiera seguido, Stanley habría encontrado más pronto lo que buscaba, pues unas yardas más allá el padre Martin se vio detenido por un celador de la enfermería al que escuchó un momento y luego siguió rápidamente. Pero la sombra seguía parada en la barandilla y Stanley se alejó de ella, y no tardó en perderse.

En un bar, Don Bildow lo agarró de la chaqueta.

—¡No sabía que estuvieras a bordo…! Quiero presentarte a la señorita Hall. ¿Señora Hall? La señora Hall.

—Cómo está usted, perdone pero…

Don Bildow, con un raído traje marrón claro, corbata amarilla y marrón y gafas con montura de plástico, tenía un aspecto translúcido.

—Espera… —dijo, volviendo la espalda a la señora Hall.

—Pero no puedo, yo…

Don Bildow tenía en la mano un número reciente de la pequeña revista de tapas duras que publicaba, y a juzgar por las manchas de la cubierta, debía de llevarla consigo desde hacía algún tiempo. A juzgar por sus ojos, debía de haber bebido un buen número de copas. «La señora Hall» lo observaba críticamente por detrás.

—Escucha, Stanley, siempre te he considerado… alguien en quien puedo… alguien con quien tengo mucho en común… —dijo Don Bildow con una mano en el hombro de Stanley, sopesándole en busca de alguna debilidad mutua—, y yo… escucha, Stanley, ¿tienes alguna metiltestosterona? Estoy con esta chica, ¿entiendes? Esta señora… esta chica, y ella… ya sabes, quiere que suba con ella a su camarote, pero no tengo… no me he traído ninguna metiltestosterona, quiero decir que tenía algunas pero mi mujer… me las dejé… ¿Tienes alguna?

—Yo… perdona, ni siquiera sé lo que es eso, tengo que irme.

Stanley se soltó de la flácida mano, y se alejó unos pasos recordando, pensando que podía haber preguntado a Don Bildow si la había visto; pero Don Bildow estaba de nuevo sumido en la conversación, hablando a «la señora Hall» de «mi hijita, sólo tiene seis años y estaba toda hinchada cuando me marché, no debería haberme marchado, ya lo sé, tengo un terrible complejo de culpa por ello, toda hinchada en medio de…».

—¿Tú eres el joven que quería cambiar unas dramaminas por unos fenobarbitales?

Stanley se volvió hacia la mujer alta, tendiendo automáticamente la mano como tenía por costumbre cuando le ofrecían algo.

—Pero para qué las necesitas, tú estás bien —preguntó el marido de la mujer alta—. Tú puedes andar, yo ni siquiera puedo andar.

—No son para mí —le dijo ella—, son para
Huki-lau
… pero ¿dónde se ha metido ese chico?

En la puerta, Stanley tuvo que esperar un momento.

—Usted primero, senador.

—Usted primero, señor senador.

—Senador, me haría usted un gran servicio si pasase primero y me ayudase a salir, ni siquiera veo la puerta, señor.

Stanley la vio pasar por fuera, corriendo por cubierta.

—Perdonen, me…

—¿Qué…? ¿Senador?

—Perdóneme, señor, me…

—¡Eepa…!

—Lo siento, yo…

No estaba a la vista, pero Stanley echó a correr en la dirección en la que había ido. Se guardó las pegajosas píldoras en el bolsillo, encontró la muela y corrió apretándola. Al doblar otra esquina vio sus pies por unas escaleras; pero cuando llegó allí y las subió había desaparecido otra vez. Se detuvo a recuperar el aliento. Se acercó un hombre de esmoquin, y Stanley, recapacitando, lo detuvo para preguntarle por la enfermería del barco.

—No pareces enfermo, muchacho. Quédate fuera y toma un poco el aire, te pondrá en forma más rápido que todos los médicos…

Stanley siguió corriendo por las planchas de metal, y finalmente llegó a la enfermería del barco, pero no estaba allí. Al menos no la vio al entrar. Había pocas camas ocupadas, y en torno a una había una mampara

contra la que se movían sombras, y se dirigió hacia allí.

De dentro salía un murmullo incesante en español, interrumpido pero no detenido por palabras apagadas en la voz del padre Martin. Stanley se quedó escuchando la confesión, absorto, sin entender su sustancia, sino sólo lo que era. Luego el murmullo vaciló, se quebró en una tos, prosiguió con mayor rapidez y cesó bruscamente. Hubo un silencio. Las sombras se movieron en la mampara, y luego volvió a oírse la voz del padre Martin, un sonsonete que apenas interfería en los ruidos recíprocos que mantenían al barco en movimiento, no más apremiante o importuno, y no más titubeante, que el movimiento del propio barco en la oscuridad. Sonaron campanadas en alguna parte, tonos claros que atravesaron el *misereatur,* sonidos duros y separados que marcaban con relevancia las sílabas latinas: Stanley las estaba contando. Por alguna razón nunca había aprendido el sencillo sistema de campanadas de un barco, y siete podían ser cualquier hora; pero ahora cada una afilaba su tensión, esperando la siguiente, escuchando, mientras esperaba observando las sombras a que una de ellas cobrara forma y se moviera por sí misma. Entonces cesaron las campanadas y le dejaron oscilando sobre las firmes ondulaciones:

—*Per istam unctionem, et suam piissimam misericordiam…* —Olió a aceite, o se lo pareció, aceite ardiendo —. *Indulgent tibi Dominus…* —La sombra de un pulgar erecto se recortó alargada sobre la mampara—. *Quidquid deliquisti per oculos…* —Entonces la vio, moviéndose lentamente y más nítida a medida que se acercaba a la luz, el vestido arrugado y rasgado por el pecho, el pelo en desorden, y al reflejar la luz sus ojos brillaron salvajemente—. *Deliquisti per aurem…* —La voz fluía con insoportable lentitud, y era porque su flujo parecía atraerla y contenerla a la vez—. *Deliquisti per manus…*

Cuando echó a correr hacia la mampara Stanley no la retuvo más de lo que la habría retenido una sombra proyectada sobre ella. Y tampoco su cuerpo, cuando lo lanzó hacia adelante estremecido de sollozos, pareció perturbar más que una sombra que le hubiera caído de pronto encima a la figura allí tendida, expuesta al último toque de perdón sobre la carne en la que todos los impulsos se fundían en uno. Y como una sombra en jirones su pelo tapó casi la cara arrugada, y su brazo izquierdo rodeó la cabeza y su otra mano agarró el hombro con tanta fuerza que pareció alzarse ligeramente de la cama, mientras sólo los labios de ella se movían junto a su oído: «Oh sí…», se le quebró la voz, pero no cejó. «Oh sí, oh sí… Oh sí…».

La mano izquierda del hombre de la cama se levantó lentamente. Se movió como con vida propia hasta la sombra del muslo de ella, y allí, bajo un último jeroglífico de venas, quedó en reposo.

Luego no hubo más ruido de voces ni de voz alguna: y sin ruido, su forma allí tendida no parecía ya dirigible. Lo único que trababa el tiempo era el movimiento recíproco del barco: pero mientras la proa se hundía al frente en un seno lejano y agitaba los fragmentos de su avance con sacudidas que los rodeaban por entero, Stanley llevaba un rato repitiendo cada movimiento de combate, cada torsión de las convulsas noches pasadas, cada arremetida y efugio de aquella lucha de sombras ahora detenida con firmeza por la mano del padre Martin en su hombro hasta que se enderezó cobrando fuerzas, apartándola al fin de un tirón, arrancando su botín y dejando un hombre muerto tendido a la luz.

Se tambalearon juntos por cubiertas, peldaños, escaleras de cámara, pasillos; estuvieron a punto de caerse en el charco que se agitaba delante mismo de su puerta, y una vez dentro fue como si nunca hubieran salido: mamparos de metal de color beis tachonados con hileras dobles de remaches, metal encima atravesado por una viga de acero en forma de «I», acero bajo los pies en planchas traslapadas con remaches, la puerta cerrada a ras de suelo y ninguna vía de escape más que el ventilador, y todo aquel severo recinto de ángulos trepidantes de vibraciones, en movimiento sin rumbo alguno: más que si nunca hubieran salido de él daba la impresión de que nunca fueran a salir y nunca hubieran estado en ningún otro sitio. Stanley consultó su reloj, como si saber qué hora era pudiera confirmar algo.

—¿Por qué me has apartado de él? —preguntó ella serenamente.

Stanley levantó la vista de la esfera del reloj hacia su cara y la miró boquiabierto. «Pero si no estaba… si no está… tú…». Eso fue lo único que pudo decir; pero ella seguía esperando, erguida inmóvil contra el balanceo del barco y mirándolo, su sencillo vestido arrugado y rasgado por el pecho donde él lo había rasgado, y en su cara una expresión como la que tenía aquel día que la encontró en el hospital, que ahora le parecía un día de su infancia. Dio un paso hacia ella y levantó la mano. «Ahora…», y se interrumpió como si tuviera algo en la garganta: iba a decirle que se tumbara, como si aquélla pudiera volver a ser una propuesta inocente, y un dolor de índole nueva e íntima lo atravesó desde atrás para confirmar el puro sentimiento vacío que sus piernas flojas sostenían en testimonio.

—¿Por qué?

Stanley retrocedió el paso que había dado. Vio marcas reluciendo en su cara, pero no lágrimas. Eran marcas de la cara ungida sobre la que se había arrojado. Y extendiendo bruscamente los brazos ante sí,

Stanley exclamó:

—Pero por qué te has… ¿quién era él…? ¿Cómo sabías quién era?

—¿Era…? —repitió ella, y—: Oh, era. —Se llevó los dedos a la frente y bajó los ojos, y luego dejó caer la mano hasta una oreja y la detuvo en el lóbulo vacío—. Porque él sabe quién soy yo, aunque tenía tan poco que compartir… tan preciosamente poco. ¿Y nunca lo conociste? —preguntó, alzando la cara hacia Stanley—, sus ojos, no los ojos de un amante, no, sólo una vez. Trajo azucenas cuando venderlas iba contra la ley. ¿Contra la ley…? ¿Vender azucenas? —Tocándose aún el lóbulo de la oreja, ahora apartó los ojos de él y siguió hablando en voz baja—: No un amante, no buscaba para encontrar lo que había allí, sino lo que él podía poner allí, y con el mismo egoísmo llevárselo. ¡Pero no lo hizo! ¡No lo hizo! ¡No lo hizo! —gritó, y se arrojó sobre Stanley.

Él cayó contra la puerta, y sus brazos en ristre, preparados para luchar por impulso propio, pues él no lo estaba, se encontraron sosteniéndola, mientras sollozaba con débiles gemidos que se truncaban en jadeos desesperados por respirar. Pero hasta aquellos ruidos, tan cercanos que su propio pecho se agitaba con ellos, parecían lejanos mientras la arrastraba por las planchas de metal, tambaleándose, tropezando en una juntura remachada, y dispuesto a romperse la cabeza contra el suelo antes de que su peso pudiera arrastrarle a la cama con sus sollozos distantes, pues el ruido de su propio corazón les engolfaba a ambos, el camarote de acero trepidaba al ritmo de sus latidos, medio compás y luego uno entero, y ambos encerrados en su interior, recluidos en aquel recinto de acero remachado, un corazón en movimiento sin rumbo alguno.

—¡Déjame salir! —gritó ella, y él la empujó, dándose contra la afilada esquina de una cómoda de metal mientras ella caía de espaldas en la cama, y el lado de babor se elevó tras él, y ella se golpeó la cabeza contra la hilera de remaches y el crucifijo cayó y la apuñaló en el hombro.

Fue el crucifijo lo que Stanley recuperó primero, y se quedó allí parado con él en su mano temblorosa, mirando las encogidas piernas amarillentas, rígidas, con los músculos endurecidos hasta la punta de los pies, y luego el pecho henchido, tensamente inmóvil, la barbilla alzada y los ojos desmesuradamente abiertos, mirando sin ver. Había dejado de respirar. El crucifijo tembloroso salió de su fijo campo visual y se encontró mirándola, sólo un bulto borroso ante sí.

Tenía la cabeza vencida sobre un hombro, oscilando lentamente contra el acero a su espalda, los ojos cerrados, y gemía. Habían empezado a aparecer rayas y manchas tenues en su cara pálida, y Stanley se inclinó sobre ella. Empezó a hablar en voz alta mientras su corazón volvía a latir con las máquinas y todo el conjunto de ángulos de metal cercados tirando unos de otros seguía su ritmo: «Escucha, escucha… Escúchame…». Dejó caer el crucifijo a su lado y la cogió por los hombros. La cabeza cayó hacia adelante. «Escúchame…». Volvió a tenderla sobre la cama, le levantó las piernas y luego le sacó el crucifijo de debajo y se lo puso junto a la cabeza. Se quedó mirando un momento su cara inmóvil, luego se levantó y fue por un vaso de agua. Buscó una toalla, no encontró ninguna, así que se mojó los dedos y se los pasó por la frente, diciendo ahora: «Escucha, no puedes haberte… yo no quería… no puedes haberte herido, no… escucha…».

Ella abrió los ojos mirándolo directamente, y al fin dijo:

—¿Vas a tenerme aquí siempre?

—No, no, yo… porque ni siquiera yo, no puedo soportar…

—¿Iremos a verle ahora?

—Sí, yo… no, tú… ahora, ahora tienes que descansar un momento, un ratito. Ahora nosotros, escucha, los dos tenemos que… dónde puse… Dónde pusiste ese… ese rosario que te regalé, ese… esas cuentas plateadas que te regalé, ¿dónde están…? Porque nosotros…

Ella se le quedó mirando sin más. Stanley se levantó y empezó a buscar frenéticamente a su alrededor. En un bolsillo, una mano tan frenética como sus ojos encontró la muela y dos píldoras pringosas pegadas a su envoltorio.

El rosario era italiano, con cuentas de filigrana de plata y una cruz de filigrana en la punta. Lo vio tirado sobre la cómoda de la que acababa de apartarse y se lo llevó a ella, hincando una rodilla a su lado.

—Escucha, ahora los dos… después de lo que hemos… escucha, la Salutación Angélica. La Salu-tación An-gé-lica, ¿la recuerdas? Ave… escucha, repítela conmigo. Toma esto… —Le metió las cuentas del rosario entre las manos, inmóviles sobre su vientre—. Ave María…

El vestido rasgado estaba subido hasta la punta de su pecho, que yacía inmóvil como si no respirase. Las cuentas descansaban sobre sus dedos quietos con uñas sin color. Le miraba.

Le miró durante cuatro repeticiones, el pecho igual de inmóvil, las cuentas inalteradas por los dedos y las uñas sin color, las marcas de la cara enrojeciendo. Luego rompió a reír.

El lado de babor descendió con una sacudida, y Stanley cayó de nuevo sobre sus talones: jamás había

oído un ruido así, cayéndole encima desde cada rincón de los mamparos de metal. Lo único que pudo decir fue: «¡No…! ¡No…!», hasta que consiguió agarrar el crucifijo.

—No, ahora… ahora escucha, tú… Aquel que… El que… cuyo amor era tan grande… cuyo amor por nosotros era tan grande que entregó Su vida… Él… Él…

—¡Él…! —exclamó ella—, ¡pues llévame a él!

—No, no me refiero a él, me refiero a… toma.

Stanley hundió el crucifijo entre las manos que ella tenía alzadas ante sí, las cuentas en un montón sobre su regazo. Por un momento su mano lo sostuvo, sus dedos temblaron sobre la rígida figura amarilla. El nuevo sentido que su propio cuerpo le había dado le hizo sentir vértigo, y tragó saliva con el esfuerzo que le costaba el mareo.

Ella también lo estaba mirando. Sus ojos brillaban intensamente, y lo apretaba con gran excitación. Stanley se levantó ante ella. La observó, esperando que le confirmase alguna transfiguración de fe, no sabía cuál. Ella alzó los ojos. Relucían en su cara angulosa.

—Esta cosa horrenda —dijo, y se lo tiró.

Stanley extendió maquinalmente la mano para cogerlo, pero en el instante en que sus dedos lo tocaron se pusieron tiesos y cayó.

—Tu terrible hombrecillo clavado con clavos —gritó—, y tú murmurando y murmurando, y esa… cosa terrible. —Se levantó—. ¿Por amor? ¿Por amor? Oh, nunca, nunca, nunca. Yo sé de quién es el amor que debe salvarme como debo ser salvada por amor. Y tú no puedes apartarme de él. Tú no puedes apartarme de él. Tú no puedes, ni tampoco Ese muerto con clavos, no por amor.

Llamaron a la puerta, y antes de que Stanley pudiera abrirla o mantenerla cerrada apareció la mujer gorda llenando el umbral.

—Mi querido muchacho, mi libro, lo he perdido y he debido de perderlo aquí. ¿Mi libro sobre nuestra santita española?

Miraba a Stanley y detrás de él. Stanley encontró en el suelo el folleto amarillo y lo recogió.

—Pero no me lo llevaré si lo estás leyendo —dijo la mujer gorda, curiosamente inmóvil en el oscilante umbral—. ¡La preciosa chiquilla…! Prefiriendo la muerte al pecado. Me ha gustado la parte…

—¡Tome, quédeselo!

—Me ha gustado la parte en donde ella se está preparando, ¿para la Primera Comunión? «Ten cuidado con tu lengua», le decía el sacerdote, «porque será la primera parte de ti que toque el cuerpo de Nuestro Señor…».

La mujer gorda estaba allí parada, llenando el umbral. Tenía una boca pequeña, los labios pintados con un tono de coral, y los fruncía con impaciencia. Estaba allí parada, curiosamente inmóvil.

El rosario voló por el aire.

—¡Vete a que te follen!

Stanley volvió lentamente la cabeza. No vio ningún rasgo, sólo lívidas marcas rojas. Las cuentas de filigrana de plata se esparcieron rodando por todo el suelo. Se agachó a recoger el crucifijo.

—Estás poseída —dijo la mujer gorda. Stanley levantó lentamente la cabeza ante ella, mientras cogía el crucifijo, asustado por la expresión de los labios de coral, temiendo que la mujer gorda lo derribase al abalanzarse sobre la figura que tenía a la espalda, a la que acababa de juzgar: pero la mujer gorda lo estaba mirando directamente a él. Observó lo que estaba haciendo, y cuando se levantó clavó sus ojillos en los suyos. Los labios de coral seguían frunciéndose en silencio. Luego se apartó del umbral y se alejó por el pasillo, con el folleto de lance amarillo en la mano de las dos perlas mezquinas.

Stanley echó el cerrojo a la puerta y apoyó la espalda en ella. La cruz que tenía en la mano estaba entera, pero la figura allí clavada estaba rota por las rodillas, y la barbilla había desaparecido. La puso boca abajo sobre la cómoda y se volvió con la mano en el bolsillo, donde sintió la muela y las dos píldoras pegadas a su envoltorio.

Luego se encontró otra vez forcejeando con ella. En cierto momento se separaron de golpe uno o dos palmos, y Stanley alzó la vista hacia el espejo de la puerta del armario para tranquilizarse, pero sólo se vio a sí mismo. El barco dio un bandazo, la puerta se abrió lentamente y el espejo los abarcó otra vez a ambos, pero él no lo vio, pues en aquel momento tuvo que reanudar la lucha, con la imagen única del espejo ante los ojos.

La fuerza de ella se agotó de repente, y Stanley consiguió por fin hacerle tragar las dos píldoras para dormir, pensando, mientras desaparecía la segunda, que debería haberla guardado para él. Luego se puso a recoger las cuentas de filigrana de plata. Encontró la tarjeta de la Porciúncula rota por la mitad y se detuvo a juntar los trozos, pero sus manos temblorosas no terminaban de acoplar los bordes. Desistió y los dejó

junto al crucifijo, se quedó mirando un minuto entero hacia la cama, hacia la silenciosa figura que veía allí, y luego miró frenéticamente a su alrededor como si también él estuviera buscando unas zarzas. Tiritó como si tuviera frío y se puso de nuevo a perseguir las cuentas.

Cada vez que iba a agarrar una se le escapaba rodando de la mano, mientras terminaba un *Gloria Patri* con la última. Musitando Aves entre medias, cada vez que atrapaba una renovaba la devoción con un Paternóster, recogiendo, dieciséis siglos después, los guijarros que tiraba el ermitaño Pablo para llevar la cuenta de sus trescientas plegarias diarias.

El tajamar abría un sendero en el agua mientras el barco hendía la noche, y el mar chapoteaba muy por debajo del monograma decimonónico del costado, un emblema más intrincado que la cruz pintada en la línea de flotación de aquellas Galeras Peregrinas que llevaban devotos en busca de reliquias, a Jerusalén por piedras de la iglesia de Santa Ana, para mujeres embarazadas, juncos para mujeres de parto de la fuente de Santa Catalina en el Sinaí, y para mujeres estériles, rosas de Jericó.

Dormido en su silla, Stanley tuvo un mal sueño, tanto peor por su espantosa familiaridad, aunque, al despertar en la oscuridad, no recordó qué era. Pero al lado oyó torsiones, vueltas, gemidos: «Sí, si da tiempo, sí, oh sí… Oh sí…».

Stanley se halló sudando a chorros. Tenía la ropa empapada y los calzoncillos casi mojados, pero no se atrevió a encender la luz, temiendo la confirmación de todo lo que imaginaba latente en la oscuridad mientras se echaba encima un abrigo y tiritaba, escuchando los ruidos que hacía ella y los latidos con que su corazón los impulsaba hacia Gibraltar y el mar interior, como los corazones han impulsado a otros a lo largo de los siglos, desde los que se asomaban a la cueva de Belén donde arrojaron los cuerpos de los Santos Inocentes (y más que dispuestos, al darse la vuelta, a pagar cien ducados por el cuerpo acuchillado de un mortinato sarraceno), hasta sus descendientes que se reunían para asistir a la quema de una célebre envenenadora de París, la marquesa de Brinvilliers, solemnizando así sus talentos en la hoguera y buscando luego sus cenizas como preservativo contra la brujería.

Despuntó el alba, con la gloria plena del alba en el mar. Habían aparecido algunos pájaros blancos. Se mantenían suspendidos tras el mastelero de popa, picando de vez en cuando sobre el agua para echar un vistazo a cualquier cosa que tirasen por la borda. El sol naciente encontró a Stanley corriendo sudoroso y despeinado por una cubierta de estribor. Se detuvo en una escalera, se colgó de la barandilla mojada para recuperar el aliento, y luego se abrochó diversas prendas de su ropa. Miró al sol con leve sorpresa, como si fuera un intruso, uno que pudiera ayudarle; pero pronto desechó la idea y siguió adelante. Su bigote parecía algo en lo que había caído, y su pelo se erguía por detrás en una espesa maraña. Un camarero del comedor de la clase turista se apartó de su camino contra la barandilla, dando al parecer por supuesto que alguien perseguía a Stanley. Pero Stanley se dirigió derecho a él, agarrándolo con una mano y agitando la otra.

—¿La ha visto? ¿La ha visto?

—*Ma signorino, che…*

Pero Stanley se había alejado ya, y el camarero se quedó pegado a la barandilla durante medio minuto largo mirando en la dirección de donde había venido Stanley, con la morbosa expectación de alguien que ha visto muchas películas americanas.

Stanley registró buena parte del barco. En cierto momento estuvo a punto de meterse en la sala de navegación. En otro se abalanzó con la misma pregunta sobre un hombre alto de pelo blanco con una manta de viaje y zapatillas de esparto.

—Corriendo un poquito, ¿eh? Buena cosa, te vendrá mejor que todos los médicos… cielo santo. ¡Cielo santo…!

Stanley saltó la barandilla, llegó a otra escalera y la subió. En la enfermería del barco encontró vacía la cama que había sido un centro de actividad la noche anterior. Aunque difícilmente podía saberlo Stanley, despertándose como lo había hecho, solo y sudado, para levantarse de un salto y desparramar otra vez por el suelo todas aquellas cuentas de filigrana de plata, ella no había salido mucho antes que él, y quizá, como advirtió cuando la encontró corriendo aún, con tan poca idea como él de adonde iba.

Y «¡Muerto!», dijo ella cuando al fin la encontró, y la agarró de la muñeca para detenerla.

Al fondo de la cubierta, que era en esta ocasión una techada y cercana a la línea de flotación, un grupo de hombres silenciosos rodeaban un largo saco de lona, presididos por el padre Martin, que tenía un libro en una mano y elevaba la otra a los regulares intervalos sonambulísticos que señalaba el ritual.

—¡Muerto…! Y ese maldito andró-gino negro. Él lo hizo.

—Pero vamos… vamos… vamos…

—Tú lo sabes, tú también le viste administrar el veneno y las palabras envenenadas…

—Vamos vamos vamos…

—¡No…! No me agarres aquí…

—Sólo era un español, lo oí hablar. Oí el viático anoche y lo oí hablar en español.

—¡Suéltame!

A barlovento como estaba la cubierta, ninguno de ellos la oyó gritar, o en cualquier caso ninguno se volvió; y mientras la sujetaba, Stanley se dio cuenta al fin de que no estaba haciendo ningún esfuerzo por zafarse de él.

Con un signo, el padre Martin se quedó inmóvil, y las otras figuras se pusieron en movimiento, tan lenta como cuidadosamente, y empujaron el pesado bulto de lona por encima de la borda.

Al oír el chapoteo, los pájaros se lanzaron inmediatamente en picado. Los hombres y el cura se habían apartado de la barandilla y alejado hacia adelante, pues el alba era muy brillante sobre el agua y deslumbraba los ojos. Entonces ella se soltó de él y corrió hacia la barandilla. Stanley vaciló, sorprendido, y luego salió corriendo tras ella para sujetarla antes de que pudiera saltar.

Pero ella se detuvo y se quedó mirando el mar cegador.

Stanley se detuvo y se recuperó lo suficiente para santiguarse. Luego miró a lo lejos, al reverbero del mar que se extendía por todas partes por donde no lo hacía el cielo, y la idea de la tierra le pareció tan imposible como la luz del día al despertarse de una pesadilla, el mar de donde había salido aquel hombre, y adonde había vuelto. Entonces recordó su sueño: estaba cruzando una calle, llevando en brazos una diminuta figura envuelta en un chal, y se encontró con Anselm.

—¡No…! —gritó ella ante la barandilla; y Stanley cerró los ojos al sueño y los abrió de nuevo al mar, que había perdido el reverbero del amanecer. El mar, romántico en los libros, o en sueños o conversaciones, símbolo en poesía, la madre, último amante, y aquí estaba, ninguna de esas cosas ante él. ¿Romántico?, ¿aquella ondulante realidad insensible?, ¿vivo?, ¿maligno?, ¿simbólico?, agitando sus superficies a imitación de la vida sobre abismos que albergan la esencia misma de la oscuridad, de la vida y la muerte ciegas. Ilimitadamente ni sí ni no, ni mal ni bien, ni esperanza ni temor, fingiendo todas esas cosas a los ojos que lo contemplaron por primera vez, pero inalterado desde entonces, todavía con su propio color, palpitando con el ansia indiferente de toda realidad.

Stanley bajó la vista, para equilibrarse mientras daba un paso hacia ella, y las vetas de la barandilla de madera se agitaron contra sí mismas a imitación de la superficie del agua, extendiéndose como ella más allá de las brumas matinales que velaban el horizonte donde quedaba África, imperceptible para los sentidos, pero traída en insinuaciones por el viento del sur. El barco subía y bajaba, trepidaba, hundía la proa en el agua. Debajo, los pájaros blancos, al no encontrar nada, asustados por la vibración del casco, remontaron juntos el vuelo y se alejaron, como los fragmentos de una carta rota y lanzada al viento.

—Oh Cristo, el arado…

—¿Oh Cristo, el qué?

—… la risa de blancas aves sagradas…

—¿Qué está leyendo?, ¿un poema? Sabe, no tiene muy buena cara. —El hombre ante la barandilla tendió su vaso—. ¿Quiere un trago de esto? —preguntó, y se encogió de hombros ante la expresión de horror con que fue acogida su oferta, pero siguió mirando a la figura de la tumbona, un hombre que, en cualquier otra circunstancia, habría podido describirse como de cómoda mediana edad. Envuelto en el flujo de una manta escocesa de viaje y en pliegues de paño irlandés a prueba de espinos, miraba fijamente un libro abierto y movía los labios con esfuerzo preciso.

El hombre ante la barandilla se sacó una botella del bolsillo para rellenar su vaso y miró a lo lejos por encima del agua, a través de las brumas matinales, hacia la mole borrosa que asomaba en el horizonte.

—Esa joroba abollada no parece desde aquí un anuncio de un seguro de vida —murmuró, escupió por la borda y se enjugó la barbilla. Había aparecido a cuatro patas, aunque un tanto escorado debido al vaso que mantenía vertical en una mano, gruñendo a una perra atada a una mujer alta que pasaba en sentido contrario—, una caniche hawaiana —explicó—. ¿Ve lo que lleva puesto? Le pregunté qué demonios era. Un cinturón de castidad, es de plástico. Fabricado en Inglaterra.

Huki-lau

lo necesitará entre esos traviesos perritos españoles, me dice. Jesús. ¡Grrr-rouf! —arremetió para la perra—.

¿Usted también desembarca en Gib? —La figura de la tumbona respondió con un ruido débil, corregido con un gesto de cabeza—. Yo también. Un cretino español demandó a mi periódico, pagaron al cabrón a modo y ahora me mandan a mí al quinto infierno a ver qué demonios está pasando. Green que se está fundiendo el dinero en una santa patrona. Sabe, no tiene muy buena cara. —Se había incorporado y estaba apoyado de espaldas contra la barandilla, bebiendo—. ¿Qué lleva en esa bolsa de papel? ¿Para vomitar?

—Pan.

—¿Pan?

La figura de la tumbona hizo un gesto achacoso hacia arriba.

—Oh, ¿para los pájaros? —El periodista sujetó el vaso sobre la barandilla y sacó un puñado de pan de la bolsa—. Usted me resulta de algún modo familiar, ¿sabe? Es la primera vez en todo el viaje que le veo en cubierta. —El hombre de la tumbona hizo un gesto vago hacia abajo—. Oh, ¿ha estado mareado en su camarote? Entonces se ha perdido toda la diversión, ¿se enteró de ello?, ¿el naufragio? —El hombre de la tumbona se sobresaltó visiblemente—. Recogimos a esos pobres desgraciados en un bote salvavidas, uno de ellos murió ayer y lo echaron otra vez adonde lo habían cogido. Un viejo cascarón llamado el *Purdue Victory* se partió justo por la mitad. —Se detuvo a mojar un trozo de pan en el vaso y se lo tiró a una gaviota—. Un pie de lapas en el casco, agua salada Mirándose en los tanques de agua, capas de herrumbre como su puño pintadas encima, se meten en esa tormenta y la cadena del timón salta, el mar lo menea de acá para allá como un boxeador trastea a otro en el cuadrilátero cuando está grogui para acabar con él. ¡Paf! La maldita cosa se rajó por la mitad y se hundió en dos minutos, las dos partes. De todas formas iban a desguazarlo después de este viaje, ¿sabe? Pero esa compañía tiene una buena camarilla en el Congreso o lo habrían desguazado hace diez años. Así que ahora, con profundo remordimiento por los tipos que se han ahogado, se agencian un cuarto de millón de pavos del seguro. Te rompe el corazón. —Lanzó al cielo otra miga de pan empapada en whisky y observó cómo su nuevo compañero de cubierta tragaba saliva con esfuerzo y volvía a la página impresa—. ¿Poemas de quién? —Se agachó a mirar la cubierta—. ¿John Mansfield? ¿Lo ha sacado del salón de primera clase?

El hombre de la tumbona asintió con la cabeza. Ensayó una sonrisa, pero quedó borrada por una mueca al tragar.

—¡Navega!, navega y navega sin cesar, ¿recuerda ése? ¿Colón? A su espalda quedan las azules Azores, a su espalda las Columnas de Hércules, ¿recuerda ese poema? Habla, bravo Almirante, ¿qué diré yo? Pues diré navega, navega, navega sin cesar… —El periodista se debatió hasta alcanzar una postura casi vertical contra la barandilla, y se bebió medio vaso de un trago—. Sabía todo el tiempo adonde iba, Colón. ¿Sabía usted eso? —confió—. Navega, navega, sabía que no iba a la India. ¿Sabe cómo lo sabía? Porque los portugueses ya habían descubierto América. El rey de Portugal le echó un vistazo y dijo que se fuera al infierno. ¿Sabe quién era su cartógrafo? Era el hermano de Colón. Lo único que quiere el rey de Portugal es acabar de una puñetera vez con la competencia de los españoles en el comercio de especias, así que su cartógrafo va y le pasa esos mapas a Colón para que pueda ir a descubrir América para Fernando e Isabel, les da algo en que ocuparse para sacarles de una puñetera vez del comercio de especias. El robusto contramaestre dijo: «¡Mirad!, basta las estrellas se han apagado». Mis hombres se amotinan entecos y macilentos… Y durante todo el tiempo Colón tiene dos correderas en el barco, falsea una para simular que están sólo la mitad de lejos de lo que creen, mientras él sabe que van camino de América todo el tiempo. ¿Sabe lo que descubrió Colón en América? La sífilis. Todos cruzaron el océano para pillarla. Ahora habla bravo Almirante, ¿qué diré yo…? —Con toda una rebanada de pan empapada en whisky, arremetió gritando—: ¡Navega…! —Tropezó con la pata de la tumbona y se enganchó un pie bajo la barandilla. La botella salió despedida de su bolsillo, resbaló por los imbornales y se hizo añicos. Se quedó tumbado mirando el vaso que todavía mantenía vertical en la mano. Luego, sin cambiar de postura, levantó la barbilla de la cubierta y apuró el contenido, se puso en pie desmañadamente, y llamando—: Toma, camarada —a una gaviota que volaba como suspendida en el aire junto al barco, le tiró el vaso vacío.

El hombre de la tumbona abrió los ojos. La mole de Gibraltar estaba más cerca. Justo encima, una gaviota blanca tenía sus fríos ojos clavados en él. Volvió a mirar a su libro, y pasaron unos minutos en los que alzaba nerviosamente la vista y volvía a bajarla hacia la página, hasta que al final cogió la bolsa de papel y con un gesto indeciso intentó arrojar al aire un trozo de pan. El pájaro descendió en picado.

—¿Qué pasa, le ha asustado?

—Volando ahí arriba son bonitas, pero tan cerca…

—Le ha asustado, ¿eh? —El periodista ganó de nuevo la barandilla cojeando y se arremangó el pantalón —. Se va a hinchar como un globo —dijo mirando su tobillo—. Mire esa roca abollada, deberían hundirla. Pero ¡oh no! No los britanos. Sería demasiado sensato. En lugar de eso tienen esa extravagante superstición

sobre esos mandriles que corren de un lado a otro por todo el lugar, que perderán Gibraltar cuando ya no quede ninguno. Así que qué hacen; cuando empiezan a menguar las existencias traen de África por avión más de esos mandriles con el culo como una puesta de sol. Corren de un lado a otro por todo el lugar. ¿Qué le parecería levantar la vista y ver a un mandril con el culo como una puesta de sol asomado a la ventana de su dormitorio? —retó—. No hacen daño a nadie, sabe. Salvo a la Y.M.C.A. Es amarillo, el edificio. Les vuelve locos de remate. Bajan y le tiran piedras. ¿Qué le parecería ser un miembro de la Asociación de Jóvenes Cristianos de Gibraltar y tener a una manada de mandriles con el culo como una puesta de sol tirándole piedras? —Acariciándose el tobillo, que se hinchaba por momentos, se asomó por encima de la barandilla y se quedó mirando la estela del barco—. A su espalda quedan las Columnas de Hércules. El pálido contramaestre enseña los dientes y dice: ¡Bravo Almirante, habla!

El hombre de la tumbona consiguió dar un trago líquido y se balanceó levemente clavando los ojos en *La misericordia eterna,* leyendo entre dientes con precisos jadeos: «Crisss-to, la risa de blancas aves sa-sagradas volando…».

—¡Una luz! ¡Una luz! Navega, navega sin cesar. El muy hijoputa sabía bien adonde iba durante todo el tiempo.

Stanley despertó sintiendo unas manos frías que le bajaban los pantalones por detrás, y se quedó tumbado un momento con los ojos abiertos de par en par mientras los dedos se hacían más íntimos.

De alguna parte llegó música. Era el tango «Celos».

Entonces estuvo a punto de saltar de la cama.

—¿Qué está…?, ¿quién es usted? —gritó, volviéndose hacia la mujer de blanco. Tenía una generosa cara escandinava—. Pero espere, pero espere, pero espere…

—Pero túmbate —dijo ella—. Quédate tumbado. Quiero ponerte este supositorio, hijito.

—¿Este qué? —Se quedó mirando el cono que tenía entre los dedos. Era nembutal sódico con un excipiente de manteca de cacao. Luego la miró a ella. Ella sonrió y le agarró el hombro con fuerza trituradora. Entonces miró a su alrededor. El lugar oscilaba levemente—. ¿Estoy en la enfermería del barco? —preguntó. Luego se miró la muñeca y dijo—: ¿Quién me ha robado el reloj?

—Te pondrás bien, ahora date la vuelta y déjame ponerte este supositorio…

—Sáqueme de esta cama —exclamó él.

—Tienes que quedarte en la cama un ratito más…

—No pero no en esta cama, no en esta cama… mire, todas las demás camas están vacías, póngame en otra, póngame en esa cama, pero no en esta…

Con una agradable sonrisa y un giro de muñeca, le volvió en redondo y su cara se hundió en la almohada.

—Pero usted… no puede… espere…

—Ahora relaja las nalgas… eeeso es…

—Pero no puede… ¡ummp!

—Eso te ayudará a descansar, hijito.

—Pero yo no quiero descansar. Usted no puede retenerme aquí. ¿Dónde está mi reloj? ¿Qué día es? Y dónde… ¿dónde está ella?

La mujer pareció preocupada por primera vez, y dijo:

—No vamos a empezar otra vez, ¿verdad?

—Empezar… ¿otra vez qué?

Entró un camarero con una bandeja de comida y empezó a acercarse. Entonces vio que Stanley estaba incorporado en la cama, con los ojos abiertos de par en par. Dejó la bandeja a una distancia prudente y dijo: «Coraggio…».

—¿Y quién era ése? —preguntó Stanley cuando el camarero hubo salido por la puerta.

—Es el que impidió que saltaras por la borda.

Stanley se recostó lentamente. «¿La borda de qué?», murmuró, pero ella no le oyó. Estaba ocupada deshaciendo una cama.

Motas de sol danzaban caprichosamente por el techo y una de las paredes. La cabeza de Stanley se apoyó contra una barra de metal de la cama. «Pero no… por qué iba yo a…», empezó, llevándose una mano a la cara. Se tocó la mejilla, luego la barbilla, apartó la mano y se la quedó mirando; luego empezó otra vez a frotarse la mejilla. Estaba áspera, con barba de varios días.

—Pero cuánto tiempo llevo… ¿cuánto tiempo llevo aquí?

—Túmbate y no intentes recordar nada ahora, hijito —dijo la mujer de blanco—. Túmbate y duerme un poco —añadió mientras vaciaba briosamente una funda de almohada.

—Pero sí, lo recuerdo todo. Lo recuerdo todo perfectamente. Todo, salvo… salvo eso, si hice eso, pero yo… yo no haría eso. ¡No…! —Volvió a incorporarse con los codos—. No fui yo quien lo intentó, fue ella, ¿no se acuerda? Pero espere, escuche, primero póngame en otra cama, no puedo quedarme en esta cama. Cualquiera de las otras camas, están todas vacías y da igual si…

Entonces se interrumpió. Había alguien dos camas más allá. Una cara, bien afeitada pero con aire cansado, aparecía apoyada en el cuenco de una mano, el codo hundido en la almohada, observándole con paciente curiosidad. Las sábanas envolvían la cabeza, de modo que sólo asomaba la cara.

—¿Qué te crees que soy, una gaviota?

—Oh no, lo… lo siento, no le había visto, espero no haberle molestado, pero… no le había visto.

—Está bien, camarada. LLevo escuchándote desde hace mucho tiempo, ya me he acostumbrado. ¿Quieres un trago de esto?

Apareció una botella bajo la almohada.

—Oh no, no gracias, no pero escuche…

—¿Juegas a las cartas?

—No pero escuche, ¿qué quiere decir con que lleva escuchándome desde hace mucho tiempo?

—Justo hasta que te excomulgaron, desde entonces has estado muy tranquilo, ¿sabes?

—¿Hasta que me qué?

—Te excomulgaron, allí arriba, en el altar mayor, con un obispo y doce sacerdotes, ¿no te acuerdas? Sonaba muy bien, todos ellos con velas encendidas y hablando en latín, ¿sabes? Y luego gritaron todos: ¡Fiat! ¡Fiat! ¡Fiat!, y tiraron las velas al suelo. Entonces ella te puso una inyección.

—¿Quién? —preguntó Stanley desvalidamente.

—Esa cabeza cuadrada. Tiene un buen culo, ¿verdad?

La mujer de blanco se acercaba otra vez desde el fondo con unas sábanas. Se detuvo a poner la bandeja frente al hombre dos camas más allá, y sonrió amenazadoramente a Stanley, que volvió a tenderse.

—Parece que tuviste problemas con una dama —dijo su vecino, probando el puré de patatas con un dedo—. Dime sólo una cosa, ¿quieres? ¿Quién demonios es santa María Egipcíaca?

—Bueno, ella… eso fue cuando bajé y la encontré delante del espejo pintándose la cara con maquillaje y lápiz de labios y todo eso, y negro alrededor de los ojos, y tenía esas marcas en la cara, del veneno, quiero decir, que eso es lo que dijo ella, del veneno que el andrógino negro, quiero decir, que así es como llamó al padre Martin, el veneno que el padre Martin le puso a él y se le pegó a ella, pero sólo en la cara. Porque ella dijo: ¿Ves?, y se levantó el vestido para enseñarme el… para enseñarme que no tenía ninguna marca en el… en ninguna parte de su cuerpo.

—¿Quieres decir en el conejo?

—Quiero decir que entonces dijo: «Esto estaba tapado cuando ella yació con él, porque lo envenenaron ahí y por eso murió, pero ella no morirá». Eso es lo que dijo, y luego dijo que íbamos a Tierra Santa y que ella iba a ser santa María Egipcíaca yendo a Tierra Santa en el barco.

Su vecino se le quedó mirando un momento más, y luego empezó a comer, diciendo: «Gracias», con el primer bocado. «Eso lo aclara todo».

—Y hablando… —musitó Stanley, con la mirada baja y fija— de la bestia con dos espaldas —musitó para sí—, de… hacer la bestia con dos espaldas.

Durante un minuto quedó todo en silencio, salvo por los ruidos de su vecino comiendo y la radio lejana que emitía música italiana. Luego apareció ante él la mujer rubia, y Stanley dio un respingo como si fuera a pegarle.

—Ahora quédate tumbado e intenta descansar un poco, hijito. No intentes recordar nada.

—Pero sí —susurró Stanley desesperadamente—, me acuerdo, me… porque yo repetía todo el tiempo la Salutación Angélica y luego repetía el Credo de los Apóstoles, y esas cuentas no dejaban de rodar por el suelo y el… el crucifijo estaba… no podía agarrarlo, porque… y luego llegó el padre Martin, puede preguntarle a él, entró, debió mandarlo esa mujer gorda, porque entró y me puso una mano encima y dijo algo, y ella se reía. Y yo dije: «Gracias a Dios que ha venido, padre, ella le necesita», y él se me quedó mirando sin más y ella siguió riendo. Lo llamó viejo hermafrodí-tico de risa y le preguntó si podía exorcizar a un camello poseído como hizo una vez san Hilarión. Y luego él levantó su crucifijo y ella cambió por completo de repente y dijo: «Apártalo, le hace daño», y le escupió. Pero él siguió mirándome a mí, y tenía la mano encima de mí y yo dije: «Haga algo por ella, padre»; seguí diciendo eso, pero no le hacía ningún caso. Esparció un poco de agua corriente alrededor y no pasó nada y luego esparció un poco de agua bendita y

entonces ella empezó a gritar y dijo que le dolía el hombro.

Stanley se estremeció y dejó de hablar. La mujer de blanco se había vuelto y se dirigía con paso firme y silencioso hacia la otra punta de la sala, al fondo del pasillo entre las camas. El hombre de dos camas más allá dejó caer en su regazo el último bocado de su almuerzo, y soltó un taco.

—Y luego, cuando me confesé, estaba arrodillado todo el tiempo y ella no dejaba de…

—Será mejor que eches un trago de esto —dijo el otro hombre, sacando de nuevo la botella. Dio un largo trago y la ofreció.

—No, porque escuche… —empezó otra vez Stanley.

—¿Qué me dices de una mano de casino?

Stanley estaba sentado en la cama con las rodillas levantadas, y dejó caer la cabeza hacia adelante para apoyarla en ellas. Tragó saliva y empezó a hablar otra vez, más deprisa, en voz más baja y, con la cabeza así, de forma menos inteligible.

—Porque cuando él dijo: «Yo te exorcizo, Stanley, débil como eres pero vuelto a nacer con el Sagrado Bautismo, por el Dios viviente, por el Dios verdadero, por Dios que te redimió con Su Preciosa Sangre, que seas exorcizado, que todas las ilusiones y la iniquidad de los engaños del diablo salgan y te abandonen junto con todo espíritu impuro, como ordena Aquel que vendrá a juzgar tanto a los vivos como a los muertos y que purificará la tierra con fuego. Amén. Oremos…», cuando dijo eso ella se le quedó mirando sin más y yo la vi allí, y parecía… parecía…

La mujer rubia había vuelto con una bandejita llena de frascos y jeringuillas. Se detuvo en la otra cama para limpiar el puré de patatas de la colcha, y el hombre le pasó una mano por la cintura y la deslizó de arriba abajo por el muslo almidonado. Cuando se inclinó sobre él le sopló en la oreja.

—«… otorgar Tu gracia a Tu siervo que sufre de una debilidad en los miembros de su cuerpo —seguía musitando Stanley—, para que todo lo que es corrupto por fragilidad terrenal, todo lo que ha sido violado por el engaño del diablo, encuentre redención en la unidad del cuerpo de la Iglesia. Ten piedad, oh, Señor, de sus gemidos, ten piedad de sus lágrimas…».

—Dentro de un minuto —dijo la mujer en la cama de al lado, apartándose con una risita sofocada y un chasquido de elástico.

—¿Ve? Lo recuerdo todo, incluso todas las palabras —exclamó Stanley, mientras la mujer de blanco dejaba la bandejita en su mesita de noche y le estiraba un brazo—. Y luego… porque luego las marcas, esas marcas que tenía, pareció como si se le estuvieran borrando de la cara, como si desapareciesen sin más, y se quedó tan blanca como… como esto, y entonces él dijo: «Por consiguiente, maldito diablo, escucha tu condena, y rinde honor al Dios viviente y verdadero, rinde honor al Señor Jesucristo, saliendo con tus obras de este siervo a quien nuestro Señor Jesucristo ha redimido con Su Preciosa Sangre. Oremos…», y ella… ella había empezado a hablar también, y gritaba también, y decía: Ella será monja y sudará sangre también, y sudará sangre como santa Catalina Racconigi, y como santa Verónica Giuliani y como santa Lutgarda de Tongres, sí, y como santa Estefanía Quinzani cada viernes el sudor de sangre, y esconderá las Cuatro Llagas, y ocultará la Corona de Espinas bajo su velo como esa Pobre Clara de Rovereto… *¡Ouuuouu!* —aulló Stanley.

—Jesucristo, camarada…

—Ahora quédate quieto, hijito, esto no duele, no es más que una agujita.

—Pero usted… pero usted… ¡No, escuche! ¡No! ¡No, porque yo… no! —Se encogió en la cabecera de la cama, lejos de ella. El sol no bailaba ya por el techo y la pared, sino que brillaba con luz propia fija y decreciente, no ya reflejado en el agua, sino brillando por una portilla sobre un pesado cenicero de cristal en otra mesa, hacia donde miraba. La esquina del cenicero reflejaba la luz del sol y la deshacía en colores que cambiaban poco a poco ante sus ojos, rojo, a verde, a violeta, a verde, mientras el barco cabeceaba suavemente—. ¡Escuche…! —susurró Stanley con voz ronca, rígidamente contraído contra los barrotes de la cama—. *Escuche…*

Se oían voces lejanas, indistintas, interrumpidas por gritos más próximos y ruidos totalmente inesperados a estas alturas, todo ello sostenido por los latidos de una pulsación apagada, que seguía sonando, y había seguido sonando durante todo aquel rato como el latir de otro corazón, pero no el suyo.

—Escuche… —repitió débilmente. Entonces pareció caerse por el lado de la cama; pero se levantó, y con energía que no era suya, por lo que sabía, pues sabía que su corazón se había parado, se acercó a la puerta y la abrió de un tirón. Lo que vio le detuvo. Se tambaleó y dio dos o tres pasos vacilantes hacia la barandilla, donde se apoyó.

Se quedó mirando el estático paisaje. No se movía, y no podía aceptarlo de ese modo, sin moverse, y tan lleno de cosas. Aquí y allá se movían fragmentos bruscamente y por separado, barcos pequeños a la

derecha, y gente en el muelle, coches moviéndose lenta pero firmemente contra la dura tierra, y todo separado; hasta los ruidos se elevaban con la disonancia de las diferencias, sirenas y gritos agudos, campanas y automóviles quebrando sus bordes entre sí.

—¿Dónde estamos? —dijo, mientras la mujer de blanco le cogía en la barandilla.

—En Nápoles, pero tú…

—Pero Nápoles, tengo que bajarme, tengo que bajarme aquí, tengo que bajarme en Nápoles, dígales… espere…

—Vale, hijito, vuelve a la cama, pararemos en Livorno y en Génova, y puedes…

—Espere espere espere mire mire allí está ella, allí está ella, ¿no la ve? Mire, ¿no lave?

Se soltó de la mano que lo tenía agarrado del hombro y estuvo a punto de caer por encima de la barandilla, señalando a las figuras en el muelle.

—Mire, ¿no la ve…? Allí está, ¿no la ve…? Con ese hombre, ¿no la ve?, con ese hombre, no la ve con ese hombre del sombrero negro y el abrigo negro y el… con el cabestrillo, ¿no los ve? ¿No la ve? ¡Espera! ¡Espera! ¡Espera! —gritó por encima de la barandilla—. ¡Espera… espérame…!

La mujer lo agarró por los dos hombros y le arrastró hacia atrás sobre los talones, apartándole de aquel repentino paisaje tan atestado de detalles. La sirena del barco traspasó todo cuanto había a bordo. Stanley se agitaba desvalidamente cuando volvió a meterlo dentro. Tenía los ojos cerrados, pero seguía musitando: «Pero espere… pero espere… pero espere…», mientras ella volvía a llenar la jeringuilla y le clavaba la punta de la aguja en el brazo.

Se quedó temblando a la escasa luz, con la sábana estirada en una recta perfecta sobre los hombros, tratando de hablar, pero aunque sus labios se movían no podía articular ningún sonido. En sus ojos fijos, la imagen de la mujer de blanco se acercó por el pasillo entre las camas con una mampara. Sus labios formaron: «Pero espere, no en esta cama, en cualquier otra cama pero no en ésta, pero espere…». Pero no pudo articular ningún sonido. Se atragantó con un grito: «No esta cama…», pero no pudo articular ningún sonido. Palpó en busca de su bolsillo, pero no tenía ningún bolsillo. Encontró su muñeca izquierda con la mano derecha, y lo único que sintió fue la muñeca desnuda.

—No aquí… no en esta cama… todavía no… —susurró, y la mampara se detuvo dos camas más allá y se abrió.

Stanley escuchó: creyó oír las cuentas rodando por el suelo; alejándose, parándose, volviendo. «Pater noster», susurró mientras rodaban, «qui es in coelis…». Su lengua encontró el hueco de su encía. «Qui tollis peccata mundi… no, quiero decir qui… qui… que…».

Tosió e intentó decir ¡Espera…!, pero descubrió que estaba vomitando, y asomó la cabeza por el lado de la cama. Luego sacó un pie y tocó con él el frío suelo. Aumentó el ruido de las máquinas, y entonces volvió a latir con fuerza su corazón, y recuperó el aliento y pudo respirar. Con ambos pies en el frío suelo de acero, se apoyó con una mano en la mesita de noche e intentó susurrar «Espera…», pero oyó: «¿Qué…? ¿Qué estoy… haciendo aquí? Todo lo que he… todo lo que he perdido…». Estaba mareado, de pie ya.

El barco dio un topetazo, y retembló. Se agarró al pie de la cama, y se agarró con más fuerza cuando la sirena escindió los únicos ruidos que tenía, y se fue apagando, volviendo del puerto en fragmentos para reforzarlos: la fuerza regular y endemoniada de las máquinas, llenándole el corazón como un bulto que le subía por el pecho hasta reventar los bordes de su garganta, y el ruido chirriante, chirriante, chirriante tras la mampara. Aquel ruido había empezado de forma desigual, y luego se había detenido y había vuelto a empezar con el ritmo regular de avance y retirada de las máquinas y de su corazón, cada vez más rápidos todos ellos mientras se acercaba a la mampara sin sombras y oía tras ella un gemido, y jadeos, los pasos cautelosos y luego atacantes y acezosos de la bestia a la que se acercaba en silencio, susurrando sin que le oyeran: «Espera… no… no… me dejes solo».

Casi había oscurecido ya. Volvió a sonar la sirena, deteniéndolo todo. Hasta las máquinas marcha atrás se pararon; entonces hubo un silencio perfecto y las máquinas, y su corazón, se pusieron en marcha lentamente, mientras el lado de estribor se elevaba, y dio otro paso adelante. Había visto Nápoles.

V

«Te ruego que vayas ahora corriendo a recibirla, y le digas: ¿Te va bien a ti? ¿Le va bien a tu marido y a tu hijo? Y ella dijo: Bien».

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El día no amanecía. La noche se retiraba para mostrarlo uniformemente pálido de un extremo a otro como un cadáver tratado, cuyo pelo, que sigue creciendo sin advertir la futilidad de su adorno, se afeita pasado el momento del color terroso como aquellas horas tempranas que asomaban en barba incipiente y pasaban, y el día quedaba expuesto, con jirones de su primera desgana por aparecer flotando aún sobre su cara donde la oscuridad no era ya privación de luz sino al revés, igual que el bien, que se muestra pasivo y lerdo al disiparse el caos, es la ausencia de mal. El día existía sin sol, su luz sin fuente aparente, su paso sin continuidad, no sucediéndose como hace la vida sino coexistiendo consigo mismo, y pasarlo era tantear sus rasgos familiares, sus costillas y huecos, partes impotentes y extensiones inmóviles, como el ciego que identifica con una mano sensibilizada por la memoria el cuerpo de un conocido en lo que ambos habían llamado vida.

El sonido de las campanas se deshizo en el aire y se fue apagando, mientras las nubes en jirones de gris sucio, amenazantes como el mal apresuradamente convocado y reunido, bogaban bajas sobre el pueblo arrimado en busca de cobijo a los muros almenados del Real Monasterio de Nuestra Señora de la Otra Vez.

En la plaza embarrada que se abría bajo el ancho atrio de la iglesia del monasterio, cuya fachada gótica y rosetón sin vidrieras la dominaban, brotaba el chorro de la fuente del pueblo, y mujeres con jarros de piedra y cobre se acercaban a llenarlos. Sus voces se elevaban en duros sonidos cuyos bordes delicados se hacían rápidamente añicos y las palabras se perdían, recuperaban y componían en aquella suave mitigación: «Adiós…», [55] y se prolongaban en la blanda y monótona confirmación hasta que se repetía, y se repetía a cada momento, «dios…», [56] una expresión de sonido que era parte tan esencial de aquella tranquilidad áspera, fría y gris que sólo su ausencia se habría notado.

Una vez abiertas las puertas de la iglesia, el portero se quedó parado un minuto entero en el ancho atrio de piedra, haciendo tintinear las llaves que llevaba atadas en la punta de un bastón, la mayoría tan largas como su mano, y era un hombre grande, de largas manos. Era viejo, y su cara estaba surcada de cicatrices en recuerdo de una enfermedad de hacía medio siglo, una cara rugosa y quebrada por salientes como la tierra que tenía delante, donde por todas partes se levantaban muros para limpiar de piedras pequeños espacios. Llevaba una chaqueta de paño negro abrochada a la garganta con un solo botón, y después de pasar un minuto entero mirando la plaza embarrada volvió su cabeza descubierta hacia los muros del monasterio y se perdió de vista.

Entonces, la figura que observaba desde arriba se apartó de la ventana, desapareció durante el tiempo que tardaba en recorrer ida y vuelta la habitación y volvió a plantarse allí, contemplando la plaza embarrada. Ante él había un estrecho balcón, y la ventana misma se abría en la fachada de la iglesia, aunque era un cuarto de invitados. Levantó los ojos por encima de los tejados del pueblo y clavó su mirada absorta en las montañas cubiertas de nubes. Era un hombre cómodo de mediana edad, vestido con un costoso traje de paño irlandés a prueba de espinos, con los dos últimos botones del chaleco desabrochados, o más bien nunca abrochados, en señal de la confianza despreocupada que se permitía como novelista de bastante éxito para ser calificado de distinguido por sus editores. En aquel momento mostraba una expresión de intensa abstracción, la cara de un hombre que tenía, o estaba a punto de tener, o al menos intentaba sinceramente provocar una experiencia religiosa: así se lo pareció a él, en cualquier caso, cuando pasó ante el espejo y la confirmó.

Ahora estaba mirando a un crío encaramado en la balaustrada del atrio de la iglesia, un crío lo bastante grande para ser *boy scout,* que constreñía su persona para ver lo lejos que podía enviar un chorro en la plaza embarrada, por donde pasaban una cerda y tres marranos en solemne procesión de domesticidad. El distinguido novelista miraba, para ver, según debería admitir después en su fuero interno, lo lejos que llegaba el chorro, cuando un pájaro se estrelló contra el cristal delante mismo de su cara, y siguió revoloteando allí mientras él retrocedía tambaleándose y perdía casi el equilibrio sobre los ladrillos del suelo. Se recuperó, recorrió la habitación entera y se sentó en la cama. Las notas para el artículo de revista

que había empezado estaban a su lado en la mesa. Las vio allí y desvió la vista. El momento de la experiencia religiosa había pasado otra vez. El crío dirigiendo su chorro desde el mismo atrio de la iglesia lo había trastornado; el pájaro lo había despachado. El distinguido novelista se apretó las manos entre las rodillas y se preguntó si sería ya la hora del almuerzo.

La habitación era amplia y, aunque no especialmente caliente, era cómoda. En una pared blanca a su izquierda había una estampa en colores de una Virgen rafaelista; en la pared de la derecha, un retrato de su anfitriona en tiesa efigie oscura, Nuestra Señora de la Otra Vez, con los rasgos de la cara notablemente bronceada desfigurados e irregulares por los años pasados bajo tierra durante la dominación árabe. En aquel cuadro apenas podía distinguir si tenía nariz; desde luego no sabía si le estaba devolviendo la mirada, así que la apartó y la posó en otro sitio, arrugando la nariz con el sorbido de impaciencia que se había hecho cada vez más frecuente durante los últimos días. Empezaba a parecer incómodo.

La cama estaba instalada en un cubículo. Era una de las más blandas que encontraría en el país, estaba cubierta con una manta de suntuosa lana, y en aquella disposición clandestina sugería vivamente placeres más allá de los muros, recordaba ilustraciones de Boccaccio y estimulaba cualquier sentido, menos el ascético. Se levantó bruscamente, como si estuviera muy incómodo. Y lo estaba. Había venido del lejano Madrid, por carreteras que empeoraban a cada curva, cambiando de autobús casi en cada pueblo por otro más desvencijado basta que aquel en que llegó parecía que lo habían llevado rodando hasta su destino por las rocas de montaña como un barril. Fue un comienzo prometedor, y habría sido difícil saber cuáles eran sus pensamientos mientras se acercaba a los muros grises cuya grandeza daba paso a la delicadeza de la tracería gótica de las pechinas sobre la puerta arqueada a la que llamó. Habría sido difícil, es decir, si no hubiera anotado algunos de ellos antes de que la vieja que le acompañó a aquel cuarto de invitados rompiera el encanto. («Como es bien sabido que la gente del mundo exterior rara vez si es que alguna logra entrar en este retiro casi inaccesible, sentí latir en mi pecho el estremecimiento de una profunda emoción que era incapaz de describir, mientras me acercaba a los encumbrados muros tras una subida extenuante, y alzaba la mano para tirar del cordón de una campanilla con siglos de antigüedad. Su dulce tintineo, que sonó a lo lejos igual que debió sonar aquel soleado día —nevosa noche etc.— en que san x —llenar— apareció ante esta misma puerta, hizo acudir rápidamente a un hermano lego de la Orden Franciscana, que me abrió. Todavía era joven, una figura esbelta pero viril, en las profundidades de cuyos penetrantes ojos grises leí un mensaje de paciencia y bondad que rara vez se ve hoy en el ajetreado mundo de los negocios…»). La vieja, que había tardado en abrirle, lo explicó diciendo que debían tener cuidado con los mendigos. Como hablaba español, que él no entendía, contestó a su saludo con unas palabras en inglés, adoptando una expresión que, según creyó, era un término medio entre la humildad y la beatitud. Viendo asomar a su cara lo que parecían ser los síntomas de una enfermedad, la vieja salió corriendo, y volvió con un monje joven que lo había estado incordiando desde entonces.

Fray Eulalio andaba por los veintitantos, un hecho que nunca permitía que alterase esos ejercicios de gravedad tan necesarios para su profesión, que no era tanto ser monje como ser español. *«Somos españoles»*, [57] solía repetir con severa magnificencia, *«que es una de las pocas cosas serias que se puede ser en el mundo»*. Y con estas palabras de su héroe, y en realidad el de todos, José Antonio, en los labios, había hecho aquella histórica elección entre la Iglesia y el Estado porque, en las presentes circunstancias, había muy pocas otras elecciones posibles. Poco más se podía hacer al respecto, cada ocupación aliviaba un tanto las miserias que la otra magnificaba y, en ausencia de una de las dos, imponía su ley. No era, ciertamente, una cuestión de miedo o valor: una reciente guerra civil había demostrado que la cogulla era un atuendo tan peligroso como el uniforme. Y en el caso de fray Eulalio, ni lo uno ni lo otro habría contenido su afanosa curiosidad por todo lo que se le acercaba, sus sencillas ambiciones, y la ingenua audacia que le llevaba a considerar a la gente del mundo exterior, es decir exterior a España, como objetos de raro interés, y a presentarse ante ellos como la viva encarnación del espíritu de la tierra que estaban visitando. Era de algún lugar de Andalucía. Tenía una forma primitiva de hacer amigos, que consistía en examinar detenidamente las posesiones de todo nuevo conocido, sin dejar de hacer comentarios cuando reconocía algo y preguntas cuando no. Lo primero que le llamó la atención en el equipaje del distinguido novelista fue un puñado de libros, y su primera pregunta, al lanzarse sobre ellos, fue si tenía un ejemplar de *Cómo ganar amigos y vencer todos los otros*. [58] Chapurreaba el inglés con esfuerzo entusiasta. Luego vio la máquina de escribir, y se la quedó mirando con una expresión muy parecida a la que intentó adoptar su distinguido propietario cuando vio la figura original de Nuestra Señora de la Otra Vez, en la capilla. Ya había liado un cigarrillo y se lo había ofrecido a su invitado, que no fumaba, así que lo encendió él, había escupido una o dos veces en los ladrillos del suelo para indicar que ambos podían considerarse como en casa, había preguntado qué altura tenían los edificios en Nueva York, cuántos católicos había en Norteamérica y cuál era el salario semanal de

un trabajador medio, cuando apagó el cigarrillo con la suela de su sandalia y salió disparado. El distinguido novelista estaba a punto de tumbarse y buscar un punto en blanco en la pared para quedarse mirándolo, en un acto de contemplación de lo que después describiría como estar «anonadado por aquella abrumadora soledad», cuando, llamando precipitadamente a la puerta y susurrando *«¿Se puede…?»,* fray Eulalio entró en tromba con un grueso volumen bajo una de las mangas pardas de su hábito. El hombre mayor dobló una mano sobre la otra y adoptó un aire sombrío ante lo que supuso sería una exposición de la historia del monasterio, o de la Orden, o algo por el estilo, tan cuidadosamente lo trataba el joven monje, y se encontró mirando las grandes páginas de un álbum de recortes privado. Una tras otra, el jadeante propietario volvió las páginas, lo bastante despacio para que cada una pudiera contemplarse con detenimiento. Todas eran fotos de máquinas de escribir.

Ni el cielo gris, ni las formas más oscuras del paisaje que se extendía debajo y parecía haberse hundido allí por mera pesadez, habían cambiado desde que el distinguido novelista los había mirado unos minutos antes. No tenía ninguna noción del tiempo, pues había dejado que se le parase el reloj en un gesto de sumisión al «solitario abismo de eternidad» en cuyo borde había esperado apostarse allí. Volvió la espalda a la ventana, y golpeó el suelo con un tacón como para comprobar su dureza. En realidad, tras una fastidiosa mirada a la cama, eso es exactamente lo que estaba haciendo, y volvió a hacerlo, aunque la segunda vez empleó menos fuerza, y provocó un ruido menos alarmante. Pues en algún lugar de aquel inmenso edificio estaban las camas de tablas, o al menos los jergones de paja, que había esperado le ofreciesen, para tumbarse allí a vislumbrar el mundo donde vivían aquellos «buenos monjes» durante el tiempo suficiente, en cualquier caso, para contárselo a su prójimo. Golpeó con el tacón un ladrillo del suelo: obviamente, les debía algo.

De fuera le llegó el sonido de las campanas de la iglesia y, volviéndose, se puso a forcejear con el pestillo de la ventana, las puertas de su corazón abiertas ya de par en par, y su humilde mobiliario esperando que lo inundasen y arrastrasen las ondas sonoras de aquellas voces de centinelas que proclamaban su mensaje de fe, para… Se pilló el dedo con el pestillo, y murmuró algo.

Pues no estaba allí para convertirse. Ni tenía la menor intención de intentar convertir a su prójimo, o a aquellas prójimas ansiosas, en casa. No era católico romano, ni de ninguna otra clase, y no tenía ninguna intención de llegar a serlo. Se consideraba, de forma bastante libre y simple, cristiano. Si lo hubieran apremiado, habría podido llamarse protestante, simplemente porque no era católico. No se limitaba a ninguna confesión concreta, no suscribía ningún culto segregado, sino que tenía a todos en igual estima. Como mostraban sus escritos, cifraba su deber con su prójimo en ganar prosélitos para aquellas virtudes que mantenían unidas las mejores partes de su prójimo, sin favorecer sobre los demás a ninguno de los sistemas de adoración que veía a su alrededor, honrándolos a todos, avanzando en nombre de un Bien amorfo, y sumamente razonable, en la auténtica tradición ecléctica de su país, un confederado de la virtud dondequiera que la encontrase, y un mensajero de las formas que adoptaba, no explicándose el hombre a sí mismo, sino unos hombres a otros.

Todo lo cual quería decir que había llegado a un gran número de su prójimo, como su cara serena (en la sobrecubierta) y sus derechos de autor demostraban.

La ventana se abrió de golpe cuando la última campanada se apagaba en el aire, y se encontró escuchando los broncos tonos estridentes de un organillo. El distinguido novelista juntó bruscamente las hojas de la ventana, no pudo cerrarla del todo, y se retiró hacia el fondo de la habitación aclarándose la garganta. La cama surgió ante él, y girando sobre sus talones se sentó ante la mesa, para quedarse mirando los papeles, los escasos libros y el letrero que tenía delante. Los libros incluían, en lugar de un diccionario, un Tesauro de la lengua inglesa muy manoseado; un libro de citas, que hacía para él las veces de una educación clásica; el Baedeker de España y Portugal en su edición más reciente (1913); y la Sagrada Biblia, que solía dejar fuera, y abierta, en señal de la santidad de su intención en aquel lugar. A uno de los libros le faltaban algunas páginas, tras un repentino ataque de disentería provocado por el aceite que usaban para cocinar; y cuando sus ojos se posaron en él, volvió a darse cuenta de cuál de los libros era, levantó rápidamente la vista y se quedó mirando el letrero colgado en la pared, sosegando su turbación mediante la enésima lectura de aquellas palabras que no entendía: «*Se ruega, por lo tanto, a nuestros visitantes la más estricta moralidad y compostura en todos sus actos y conversaciones, y se recomienda a las Sras. que en el vestido se atengan a las prescripciones de la modestia cristiana*».

Comprendió aquella última palabra, y la inicial minúscula le incomodó. Luego se extendió una vez más por su cara aquella expresión de intensa abstracción. Es verdad que, más que otra cosa, se habría llevado un buen susto si la Virgen rafaelista de la pared que tenía delante hubiera revuelto los ojos (como aquella Virgen de Rimini, primero de arriba abajo, luego lateralmente, luego en direcciones opuestas); o si la oscura

figura de rasgos borrosos que tenía a la espalda hubiera hablado, o le hubiera hecho señas, o hubiera extendido la mano y le hubiera hecho postrarse de hinojos. Pero en cierto modo era algo parecido lo que esperaba, algo menos amenazador, es decir, menos sectario, pues difícilmente podía admitir que había venido, como un vulgar griego, en busca de una señal: no, era más bien alguna manifestación vaga y exótica de alguna Presencia igualmente exótica y vaga, un misterio de proporciones evemérica[59] y, presentado en su propia prosa, reducible a la razón.

El pájaro golpeó el cristal. Dio un respingo, y la abstracción abandonó su cara mientras detalles de irritación se acumulaban para llenarla. El pájaro estaba aleteando contra las hojas parcialmente abiertas de la ventana, y se acercó corriendo a intentar cerrarlas de nuevo. Esta vez lo consiguió, y volvió a quedarse allí mirando hacia abajo. Un joven monje con el hábito franciscano llevaba del brazo a la figura encorvada del prior del monasterio, fray Manomuerta, que estaba casi ciego, por el atrio hacia las puertas de la iglesia. El viejo portero apareció brevemente, dejó caer los hombros e hizo un gesto entre su barbilla y su pecho, y esperó a que pasaran. El prior llevaba blancas vestiduras ondulantes que casi rozaban las piedras mojadas. Todo lo cual hizo que el hombre de mediana edad apostado ante la ventana de encima se aclarase la garganta tras el cristal, y pasase su peso de un pie bien calzado al otro, como si lo hubieran pillado fisgando. Observó cómo se cerraban las puertas tras ellos con esa expresión cohibida que pretendía se interpretase como respeto, la expresión que ponía cuando abrían cajones y le enseñaban casullas bordadas con hilo de oro y tachonadas de aljófares, la pared de la que colgaban las cadenas de cristianos libertos, la crestería exquisitamente tallada del coro de la iglesia, el soberbio retablo tras el altar mayor (que le impresionó de verdad, pues tenía sesenta pies de altura), los cuadros de Zurbarán, un Greco y dos o tres italianos del siglo XVI en mal estado, en la *sacristía*, el san Jerónimo penitente de mármol, obra de un milanés, la tumba de un rey de Navarra, el claustro mudéjar, con naranjos, el claustro gótico, con bojes. Le habían enseñado todas estas cosas con entera libertad, y habían contestado de buena gana a sus inteligentes preguntas (es decir, por boca de un hombre reservado más o menos de su edad, y de físico similar, aunque el hábito pardo mostraba su prosperidad de forma más favorecedora que el paño irlandés a prueba de espinos, y que hablaba unas cuantas palabras perentorias de inglés). Hasta el prior, Manomuerta, que aparecía y volvía a desaparecer con la silenciosa facilidad de un fantasma, sonreía e inclinaba la cabeza ante él con un breve saludo. En suma, por todas partes (salvo las incursiones de fray Eulalio) lo trataban con una amabilidad y una consideración que lo mantenían a un buen brazo de distancia de cualquiera de las revelaciones que había venido a explorar desde tan lejos. Había, sin duda, la barrera del lenguaje, que persistía en casi todas partes, menos en aquella brecha abierta por los asaltos de fray Eulalio, irrumpiendo de pronto para preguntar el precio de un traje en los Estados Unidos, o en busca de aquel libro que tanto deseaba, *Cómo ganar amigos y vencer todos los otros.*

Así seguían las cosas, día tras día. Y, además, si ha de saberse la verdad, se había preparado de antemano para defenderse de cualquier ardid que pudieran idear de cara a su conversión; pero nadie en absoluto estaba intentando convertirle. Las comidas eran excelentes, y aquella habitación, aquella cama… pero nadie parecía preocuparse lo más mínimo por su «lado espiritual», como lo llamaba en su prójimo: en realidad, nadie parecía siquiera notar que tenía uno, por muy cohibidamente que se acercase. Lo trataban con la misma amable formalidad, desde la misma distancia cortés de afable condescendencia, con que él había venido dispuesto a tratarles.

Estaba parado ante la ventana, mirando a través de su propia imagen borrosa en el cristal. Es verdad que por la noche, en aquella cama, disfrutaba de nuevas punzadas ardientes en partes insólitas de su cuerpo, que podían ser una manifestación de algún tipo, aunque sospechaba del café (pues desde luego se abstenía de vino en la mesa). En aquella misma cama había tenido una especie de sueño, aunque parecía que sólo estaba medio dormido cuando le ocurrió: caminaba por algún lugar habitual cuando de pronto tropezó, o estuvo a punto de sacar el pie de algo, o de meterlo en algo, y lo retiró con un gesto violento, que le despertó. Eso fue todo. Y también eso podía ser por el café, pues no fumaba.

Si hubiera fumado, sin duda habría encendido ahora un cigarrillo, cuando la vista de una sucia limusina aparcada al fondo de la calle, que casi bloqueaba, ensombreció su cara con el recuerdo de las chicas de la Embajada de los Estados Unidos en Madrid, que se habían dejado caer por allí el día anterior. Aquel sitio les había chiflado, según dijeron, y le ofrecieron cigarrillos americanos que de todas formas iban a regalar al chófer de la Embajada, si nadie los quería. Se fueron nada más comer, pero su parloteo y sus vagas imágenes intercambiables persistieron hasta bastante después de la cena. «Bueno, ¿y por qué estáis en España…? ¿Si no os gusta especialmente?», preguntó el distinguido novelista, una vez reconocido y atrapado. «Un empleo es un empleo». «¿Y os gustaría volver a los Estados?». «Eso es de lo que siempre estamos hablando, de volver a casa, pero un empleo es un empleo».

Sus ojos siguieron la única cosa que había ahora en movimiento, la flaca figura tambaleante de un hombre que acababa de salir de un bar al otro lado de la plaza y se acercaba a los muros. Se movía con paso inseguro, vacilando ante charcos lodosos, como si no supiera qué camino tomar para rodearlos, aunque a menudo no se detenía hasta que ya tenía un pie en el agua. No era el acostumbrado titubeo bamboleante de la borrachera, sino una nerviosa combinación de insistencia e incertidumbre.

Luego la plaza quedó desierta, y alzó los ojos hacia los perfiles de las montañas, donde se habían levantado las nubes, mostrando en el horizonte el mismo cielo gris que se extendía por encima. El distinguido novelista volvió resueltamente a su mesa de trabajo, se sentó, sorbió por la nariz y escribió: «En lo alto, bajo el sol brillante de la Sierra de G—, fatigado y con los pies doloridos tras subir por el camino de herradura ~~serpenteante desde el tranquilo~~ que que serpentea siempre hacia arriba desde el tranquilo valle del pueblo de Logrosán (?) por el severo paisaje de Extremadura…».

Llamaron a la puerta, y se oyó un «¿Se puede?» [60] roncamente susurrado.

—¿Fra Elālio…? —dijo con voz entrecortada.

La puerta se abrió lo suficiente para permitir asomar a la vieja señalándose la garganta con el pulgar, como si tuviera algo metido allí. «Café», [61] susurró, de forma tal que parecía realmente tenerlo, y volvió a desaparecer en el pasillo sombrío y tortuoso que llevaba a aquel cuarto. El distinguido novelista se levantó, se puso una corbata negra, dejó caer las comisuras de la boca, bajó los ojos y salió. Pero en la puerta se detuvo a mirar atrás, como si temiera perderse algo. Al fin y al cabo, llevaba allí esperando tres días.

—¡Oh, Dios mío…!

—¿Qummp?

—Ha mojado ese… como se llame. ¡Perrita mala! ¡Perrita mala y sacrilega…!

—Éste sería un bonito lugar para dar una fiesta —dijo el marido de la mujer alta, deteniéndose a mirar a su alrededor, mientras la caniche tiraba de los arreos que la estorbaban por ambos lados, y arrastraba a la mujer hacia el seto de boj.

—¡Fiestas, Dios mío…! No empieces con eso. ¿A qué hemos venido desde tan lejos? Espero no volver a ir jamás a otra fiesta. —Separó de un tirón a la perra de una columna gótica, y añadió—: Lo único de lo que has estado hablando desde que desembarcamos es de beber.

—Bueno, lo único de lo que has hablado tú es de comer.

—No es verdad, estoy a dieta y lo sabes. ¿Qué otra cosa se puede hacer en este país sino estar a dieta?

—Bueno, cuando no hablas de comer, hablas de no comer. Es igual de molesto. —Paseó la mirada por los arcos góticos del claustro—. De todas formas —murmuró—, la comida suele ser mejor en estos sitios que en la mayoría de los hoteles.

—Sigo sin entender por qué querías llegar aquí al rayar el alba.

—Lo entenderías si fueras tú quien pagara el coche. Y no ha habido ningún alba, por lo que a eso respecta. Míralo. Lo mismo podría ser… la hora del cóctel.

—¿Ves…? Ya estás otra vez. —Siguieron paseando en silencio, hasta que ella señaló con un dedo con la uña escarlata—: Mira esas viejas cadenas ahí colgadas, aquí guardan todo de lo que pueden echar mano. ¡Y mira…!

—¿Qué?

—Ese hombre, no es… el del traje de *tweed,* ¿lo has visto? Estoy segura de que he visto su foto en solapas de libros.

—Sí, ése. Lo he visto. No me extraña nada encontrarlo en un sitio como éste.

—He oído cosas sobre él, que era… ¿Lo es?

—Qué.

—De ésos.

—No lo sé. No ha tocado a una mujer desde que su tercera esposa lo dejó.

—Se ha ido, supongo que no nos ha visto. ¿Qué crees que está haciendo aquí? He oído cosas sobre la vida en los monasterios.

—No tiene suficiente imaginación para eso. Probablemente estará escribiendo otro libro.

—Ya ha escrito cincuenta. Si tenía algo que decir, es para pensar que ya lo habría dicho. ¿Por qué siguen publicándoselos?

—Porque sigue escribiéndolos. Y a un editor le cuesta más parar el negocio que mantener en funcionamiento las prensas, así que las ceban con cualquier cosa.

Una hosca nota de reminiscencia había teñido su voz.

—Vamos, vamos —dijo la mujer alta, cogiéndole del brazo con cinco uñas escarlata—, olvidemos todo eso. —Miró a su alrededor en busca de algo que comentar, y sus ojos se posaron en la perra—. ¿No crees que debería llevar puesto su cinturón para entrar en un monasterio?

Él rio, o gimió, era difícil adivinarlo.

—En todo caso ahí fuera, en la calle, he visto a una cabra mala mirando a
Huki-lau
de un modo muy indecente.

Pero su marido no estaba a su lado. Se había detenido a echar una última mirada al claustro.

—¿En qué estás pensando ahora, en hacerte monje, por el amor de Dios?

Se volvió para seguirla obedientemente, y cuando llegó a su lado musitó:

—Oh claro. Monje. Preferiría caerme muerto.

Pero el hombre del traje irlandés a prueba de espinos los había visto con toda claridad, y quizá por primera vez en su vida adulta no quiso que lo reconociesen. Se apartó de la arquería, siguiendo la pared hasta que encontró una puerta, y se metió por ella. Recorrió una galería, salió a otro patio y estuvo a punto de ser atropellado por una figura ambulante con el ubicuo hábito pardo absorta en su breviario, se enredó una mano con la borla oscilante y estuvo a punto de caerse en un intento tambaleante por evitar aplastar los dedos que asomaban de la sandalia, chapurreó las primeras palabras de una disculpa y se vio acallado por una sonrisa dulce y gélida, se libró por poco de caerse de espaldas en la fuente mudéjar, se arregló la corbata negra y al fin, pasando de lado por la puerta, se encontró entrando en la *sacristía* por un lado, mientras un hombre, el mismo que había visto poco antes cruzando indecisamente la plaza, desaparecía por el otro con algo grande y pesado bajo un brazo. A estas alturas, el distinguido novelista no sólo estaba sin aliento sino excitado hasta un grado notablemente alerta, y no le hizo falta más que una ojeada a la pared para que una mancha cuadrada más clara que el resto le confirmase que faltaba un cuadro. No se detuvo a considerar si era la desesperada esperanza de procurar alguna medida de expiación por el choque de un momento antes, o una súbita oportunidad de corresponder a la complaciente hospitalidad que le ofrecían allí, o simplemente la ocasión de meter la nariz en algo, sino que se abalanzó hacia el fondo de la estancia tratando de recuperar el suficiente aliento para gritar. Ahora bien, aunque había visto al hombre claramente, incluso con bastante claridad para estar dispuesto a jurar que había contraído suya arrugada cara en una sonrisa maliciosa mientras escapaba, al llegar al otro lado de la *sacristía* el perseguidor no supo decir por cuál de las dos puertas había salido. Tampoco se detuvo a considerar aquello, sino que abrió de un tirón la puerta que tenía más a mano, cobrando suficiente aliento para gritar: «¡Qué está haciendo ahí…!», en las profundidades de la iglesia. No se detuvo a considerar si su grito se oyó por encima del *Te Deum,* sino que cerró aquella puerta lo más deprisa que pudo y abrió la otra. El pasadizo de piedra estaba casi a oscuras, pero al fondo brillaba débilmente una bombilla, y echó a correr hacia ella, exclamando con el poco aliento que le quedaba: «¡Adónde va con eso! ¡¿Quién es usted?!».

—Sí, ¿qué está haciendo con eso…? ¿Dónde está? —repitió al llegar a la bombilla colgante, cuya tenue luz apenas proyectaba su sombra sobre el suelo de piedra. Se detuvo, y le pareció que no oía nada—. ¿Adónde ha ido? ¿Dónde está? —preguntó perentoriamente a las paredes—. ¡Vamos, salga!

Bajó la vista hacia la mano que sostenía ante sí. Le temblaba. Entonces creyó oír un débil ruido raspante, y lo siguió de puntillas hasta llegar a un cuartito cuya única iluminación venía del espacio de cielo gris que enmarcaba la ventana a trasmano en lo alto de la pared. Y allí, sentado en el suelo con el cuadro apoyado ante sí, estaba el hombre.

—Oiga usted… ¿qué es lo que…?

El hombre miró a aquel intruso colgado en el umbral con una mano a cada lado del marco de la puerta, sujetándose. Se lo quedó mirando atentamente, pero sin la menor expresión en la cara, ni sorpresa, ni curiosidad, ni interés, ni la más mínima muestra de inteligencia. Luego volvió a la pintura, y el cuchillo que tenía en la mano hizo ruidos raspantes sobre el lienzo, apenas más fuertes de lo que habían sonado de lejos.

—¿Qué le está haciendo a ese cuadro? ¡Oiga usted…! —Pero el paño irlandés a prueba de espinos estaba ya empezando a hundirse precariamente por la duda, o quizá por mero cansancio. El delicado raspado seguía. El cuadro representaba a un hombre con hábito religioso arrodillado ante un crucifijo suspendido en mitad del aire—. ¿Saben ellos que se ha llevado ese cuadro? ¿Saben lo que está haciendo?

—¿Ellos? —repitió en voz baja el hombre en el suelo, sin alzar la vista.

—Ellos, los… los monjes, los hermanos de aquí, de ahí, ellos… pensé que… —La protesta empezó a ceder, mientras el intruso se apoyaba en la pared y calmaba su respiración. Finalmente logró decir—: No

tiene muy buena luz. —Se quedó mirando la hoja en movimiento—. ¿Verdad?

—Está bien. —La hoja siguió moviéndose, raspando la esquina de un alféizar, un ventanuco alto muy parecido al de aquel cuarto. No había sillas, pero sí una mesa apoyada contra la pared y cargada de tarros y botellas, charcos pegajosos y manchas y trozos de pan—. De todas formas no veo muy bien.

—Pero… pero usted… ¿no tiene frío…? ¿Ahí sentado en el suelo? —El raspado continuó—. Y usted… ¿quién es usted? —El raspado continuó—. Yo… me llamo… mis amigos me llaman Ludy. La gente que me conoce me llama Ludy.

—Está bien —dijo el hombre en el suelo, todavía sin alzar la vista, con voz apagada y monótona—. La gente que no he visto nunca me llama Stephen.

El paño irlandés a prueba de espinos se deslizó lentamente por la pared, y Ludy quedó apoyado sobre sus talones, acuclillado en el cuartito.

Cuando terminó de raspar el fragmento estropeado del alféizar, Stephen se volvió y lo miró otra vez, pero sin más interés que antes. Una vez vuelto así, sus ojos no se movieron en busca de detalles, sino que se quedaron mirando exánimes durante su bueno medio minuto antes de volver a su trabajo. Tras examinar la pintura con la misma mirada, inició un ataque meticuloso sobre la pata de una mesa que aparecía allí.

—¿Le andan buscando?

—¿Quién…? ¿A mí? ¿Quién?

El hombre se encogió de hombros sobre el cuadro. Tenía los labios fuertemente apretados, como si estuviera concentrado en su trabajo; sin embargo había algo regular y mecánico en su movimiento, mientras la hoja se movía y su ruido era el único en el cuartito.

—¿Quién…? ¿A mí?

Se detuvo y dejó el cuchillo en el suelo, hurgándose en los bolsillos hasta que encontró un cigarrillo doblado de papel amarillo. Lo encendió, y preguntó: «¿No le buscan?». El humo espeso se elevó por su cara. Se agarró a las cuencas cuadradas de sus pómulos y se rizó lentamente en las cuencas de sus ojos. Se encogió de hombros otra vez, y volvió a dirigir la atención al cuadro. El humo azul de la brasa del cigarrillo se deslizaba por el papel amarillo, se bifurcaba en las ventanas de la nariz y le subía por los ojos, pero no hizo el menor gesto para quitárselo de los labios mientras trabajaba.

Ludy se inclinó hacia adelante, con los codos en las rodilleras a prueba de espinos.

—¿Buscan? —repitió—. ¿A mí…? No entiendo. Me… me temo que no lo entiende. Cuando le seguí, le… le tomé por un ladrón.

—Está bien —dijo Stephen serenamente, y ninguna expresión apareció en su cara a través del humo. Siguió trabajando en la pata de la mesa del cuadro, pero murmuró entre dientes—: Un ladrón…

—Pero por supuesto ahora veo… que usted también es americano, ¿verdad? Le hablé en inglés desde el principio, es curioso, nunca pensé que…

—Está bien —elevó Stephen la voz lo suficiente para decir—. He vivido como un ladrón. ¿No lo sabe? Toda mi vida he vivido como un ladrón.

—Pero está… está trabajando. ¿Es usted artista?

—Sí, y he vivido como un ladrón. —Luego volvió a levantar la cara bruscamente, aunque el cigarrillo conservó su ceniza—. Está mirando mis diamantes, verdad.

—Bueno, me he fijado en ellos. —Ludy se aclaró la garganta—. Son muy bonitos, desde luego —consiguió decir.

—Fue un regalo, este anillo. Un regalo del Boyg, ¿no? Sí. Eso es. ¿A qué ha venido aquí? ¿Qué quiere de mí?

—Bueno, ya sabe, un poco de conversación en inglés, para variar. Y los turistas que vienen. No esperaba turistas. Mujeres.

—Chicas…

—Y esas chicas espantosas de la Embajada. Entrando así como así. Entrando en el monasterio. Comiendo aquí. Comieron aquí. ¿Las vio?

—Una de ellas me dio unos cigarrillos baratos.

—Pero usted, estando aquí de ese modo…

—¿De qué modo?

—Pues… pues trabajando aquí, quiero decir. Viviendo aquí —dijo Ludy, paseando de nuevo la mirada por las paredes de piedra—. ¿Vive aquí abajo?

—No.

—¿Le estoy molestando? ¿Su trabajo?

—No.

—Y… ¿cuánto tiempo lleva aquí? —Finalmente Ludy no recibió más respuesta que el raspado. La pata de la mesa había desaparecido casi—. ¿Entiende?, ya que usted… ya que usted está familiarizado con esto, pensé que podría contarme algunas cosas sobre el lugar, ya que habla inglés. Es un monasterio muy rico, ¿verdad? Bueno, he visto paños de oro, y aljófares…

—El hermano lego Eulalio habla inglés.

—¡Ése! Ya lo sé, pero es… no he venido aquí a hablar de máquinas de escribir.

—¿A qué ha venido aquí?

—Bueno, por supuesto, algo… una experiencia de naturaleza espiritual… posiblemente. —Stephen le miró sin comprender—. Una necesidad de algo espiritual… algo más espiritual que las máquinas de escribir —terminó Ludy, y agitó las nalgas sobre los talones. Se aclaró la garganta y bajó la vista para rehuirla mirada de incomprensión—. Y cuando se entusiasma por algo espiri… por algo de este lugar, ese hermano Elālio, es aun peor —siguió malhumoradamente—. No le puedes explicar que no se grita por las cosas hermosas, que no se intenta… ya sabe lo que quiero decir.

—Se sufren —dijo Stephen en el mismo tono, y la hoja siguió raspando, y el humo siguió subiéndole por la cara y llenándole las cuencas.

—Sí, bueno, una mañana estaba escuchando esas campanas de ahí fuera, las *campanillas,* [62] *y* entró él e intentó elevar la voz por encima de ellas para decirme lo bonitas que eran. Se levanta temprano, ¿verdad? Bueno, me estaba enseñando no sé qué cáliz y se excitó tanto con él que creía que se me iba a subir al hombro de un salto. Después de eso ya no pude apreciarlo como es debido, por supuesto. Me pregunto si saben lo molesto que llega a ser, sólo porque habla inglés, si se puede llamar así, fisgoneando por todas partes. Fumando. No me pareció nada bien, un monje fumando cigarrillos en mi cuarto. Estuve a punto de denunciarle. Fisgoneando por ahí… Supongo que también habrá registrado todas sus pertenencias, ¿no? Agitándolas en el aire y escupiendo en el suelo…

—Así es como encontró la pistola.

—¿La qué? ¿Encontró qué, ha dicho?

—En el cajón. Tenía una pistola en el cajón, y la encontró de ese modo.

—¿Una pistola…? Bueno, eso… eso debió dejarlo desconcertado, una… ¿un arma?

—Pareció bastante decepcionado.

—Asustado, sí, un… un arma como ésa… en un monasterio.

—Oh no, no. Simplemente pareció cohibido, y luego me miró y cerró el cajón. No dijo nada. Simplemente pareció decepcionado.

—Sí… sí, ya… ya veo.

Ludy se aclaró la garganta, y alzó la vista tan bruscamente hacia el perfil que tenía delante que el impacto de su mirada pareció derribar la larga curva de ceniza del cigarrillo, pues nada más se movió allí. Luego bajó la vista hacia el cuadro, y preguntó de quién era.

—Navarrete… Juan Fernández.

—Oh… sí.

Stephen se había apartado de él, para escupir el cigarrillo al suelo y coger un trozo de pan de la mesa. Se quedó allí sentado masticando el pan sin más sentido aparente de lo que estaba haciendo que el que mostraban sus ojos por lo que estaba mirando, aunque la media rebanada desapareció enseguida, y volvió a acercarse al cuadro cuchillo en ristre.

—Navaretty, también era monje, ¿no? —Ludy mostró su interés por este religioso levantando su peso de las nalgas para apoyarlo en la punta de los pies.

—Estudió con Tiziano —murmuró el hombre inclinado sobre el cuadro, moviendo ahora la hoja con más brío—. Los cuadros de Tiziano en El Escorial, los vio cuando fue allí a pintar para el rey, y cambió por completo de estilo. Aprendió de Tiziano. Así es como aprendemos, ¿entiende?

—Y usted, usted está… ¿restaurando esta obra? —Ludy se inclinó un poco más, no recibió respuesta, y volvió a apoyarse sobre sus talones contra la pared de piedra—. Debería tener mejor luz para un trabajo artístico tan delicado —dijo—. Sobre todo si no ve muy bien.

—Sí, mu-cho cuidado, es muy delicado… —Stephen se inclinó con su cuchillo para acercarse más al lienzo—. Pero está bien. Eso es lo que dicen ahora de Leonardo. Lo dicen los médicos, los oftalmólogos. Le sorprendería. Ese es el secreto de su enigmática sonrisa.

—¿Qué? ¿De quién?

—La Mona Lisa, la Mona Lisa… ¡de quién! —murmuró impacientemente, sin alzar la vista—. La ciencia nos lo explica ahora. El hombre que pintó su retrato no veía lo que estaba haciendo. En realidad no tenía una sonrisa enigmática, esa mujer. Pero él no veía lo que estaba haciendo. Leonardo tenía mala vista.

Ludy observó cómo se acercaba la hoja a un pie calzado con una sandalia.

—El arte no podía explicarlo —siguió claramente la voz, pero tan queda como si estuviera hablando para sí, mientras manejaba la hoja—. Pero ahora estamos seguros, ya que la ciencia puede explicarlo. Quizá Milton escribió el *Paraíso perdido* porque estaba ciego, ¿no? Y Beethoven escribió la Novena Sinfonía porque estaba sordo. Ni siquiera supo que le estaban aplaudiendo en la primera interpretación. No tenían un aplausómetro, entiende. Alguien tuvo que volverle hacia el público para que viera que le estaban aplaudiendo. —Entonces Stephen levantó la cara bruscamente—. Yo he superado todas las pruebas científicas, ¿entiende? —dijo ansiosamente, elevando la voz por primera vez. Pero cuando repitió—: ¿Entiende…? —dejando el trabajo para coger otra de las rebanadas de pan, habló con la misma voz apagada. Aunque la rebanada tenía la corteza dura, se deshacía fácilmente entre sus dedos. El pan se desmigajaba debido a su fina textura gris. Se metió la mitad en la boca, ofreció la otra mitad a Ludy, que meneó rápidamente la cabeza, y entonces la tiró otra vez sobre la mesa. Mientras masticaba, asomó por primera vez a su cara una expresión pensativa. Aunque puede que sólo pareciese pensativo porque sus ojos, dirigidos hacia el cuadro, estaban enfocados mucho más allá de él. Siguió masticando.

—Había una calle de Beethoven en mi pueblo natal —dijo Ludy—. Lo pronunciábamos igual que se escribe, Beeth-oven.

—Si vas a hacer dados cargados, tienes que hacerlos perfectos primero. No puedes cargar simplemente unos dados normales, tienen que ser perfectos para empezar.

—Ejem… sí, lo que quería preguntarle…

—He superado todas las pruebas científicas —murmuró Stephen, agarrando otra vez el cuchillo e inclinándose sobre el lienzo—. Con la ciencia se toman las cosas por separado, y entonces todos las entendemos, entonces todos podemos hacerlas. Coges las cosas limpiamente por separado. Entonces puedes ser razonable. Leonardo necesitaba simplemente unas gafas. Ése es el enigma.

Volvió a concentrarse en el raspado.

—Quería preguntarle, ¿quién es el de ese cuadro?

—Este es santo Domingo. Se azotaba tres veces al día.

—¿Qué?

—Inventó los rosarios. Nuestra Señora le reveló el Rosario.

—Entonces, ¿usted es católico?

—Una vez una persona poseída confesó que cualquiera que sea constante en la Devoción del Rosario será recompensado a buen seguro con la vida eterna. Pero probablemente habrá leído la obra de Ganssenio *Vita Dominici Ordinis Praedicatorum Fundatoris.*

—Bueno no, yo… me temo que no ha… caído en mis manos.

—Puede que lo haya olvidado —le aseguró Stephen, sin dejar de trabajar—. Está todo en el capítulo quinto, «De auctore Sanctissimi Rosarii, ejusque eficacia». ¿Se acuerda ahora?

—Ejem… vagamente, pero…

—También encerró a las monjas —siguió, sin alzar la vista—. Estrictamente enclaustradas. La mayoría de los inquisidores eran dominicos.

—Ejem… esta —empezó Ludy, volviendo a adelantar su peso para inspeccionar la pintura—, esta figurita de… la figura que hay aquí en la cruz es interesante, ¿verdad?

—Ese es Jesucristo.

—Bueno… sí, sí, por supuesto. Lo que quería decir es que… —Ludy se aclaró la garganta. Stephen se enderezó, y sostuvo el cuchillo ante sí como si fuera un pincel y estuviera calibrando alguna línea con su punta antes de añadir otro toque al lienzo. Ludy sorbió atentamente por la nariz—. Este crucifijo, lo que quería decir es que la figura no está… parece viva… —Parecía turbado por haberse metido en esto, pero siguió adelante—. Un pequeño… casi un pequeño maniquí vivo… ejem, respondiendo a… ejem… se ve una gran variedad de, ejem, en cuadros de la Crucifixión, las expresiones de la cara, ¿no?, algunas de ellas muestran una agonía que es totalmente, ejem… casi no es humana, pero… y luego algunas de ellas… quiero decir otras…

El hombre sentado en el suelo sacó otro cigarrillo de papel amarillo y lo encendió.

—En algunas estampas baratas Él parece simplemente aburrido —dijo Stephen, y siguió trabajando con el cuchillo—. ¿Ha visto la de El Greco?

—Yo… no creo haberla visto aún. Ejem. Hay un cuadro de El Greco aquí, ¿no? Aquí en el monasterio, arriba en la… una de esas salas, una pintura de, ejem…, hay un pájaro blanco bajando…

La hoja se detuvo. Stephen le echó una ojeada, un instante en el que reapareció la misma sonrisa maliciosa que Ludy había creído ver en su cara, pero inmediatamente volvió al trabajo con brío renovado,

el humo del cigarrillo agarrándose a su cara.

—La *Venida del Espíritu Santo* —dijo, con un tono súbitamente ansioso en la voz—. Él también estudió con Tiziano. Todos estudiamos con Tiziano.

Durante casi un minuto no se oyó más que el rápido raspar de la hoja, y Ludy se inclinó más y más hacia adelante hasta que estuvo a punto de perder el equilibrio.

—Pero… —logró decir al fin—, ese pie de ahí, casi ha desaparecido. ¿Por… por qué lo está raspando? Está… toda esa parte del cuadro no está dañada.

—Sí… —susurró Stephen—, es un trabajo muy delicado. Bueno, puedes cambiar una línea sin tocarla. Sí… «Todo arte exige un espacio cerrado», ¡ja!, ¿recuerda el homúnculo?

—¡Pero espere, pare! ¿Qué está haciendo? —Ludy levantó una mano como si fuera a interponerse—. No puede…

—Tenga cuidado ahora —dijo, mientras Ludy dejaba caer la mano y volvía a encogerse contra la pared de piedra—. He superado todas las pruebas científicas, entiende. Y tengo un montón de trabajo aquí, muy delicado, fuerza y delicadeza…

—Pero usted no puede… —protestó débilmente Ludy.

—Ese Greco que hay arriba en la Capilla de los Tres…

—¿Sí…?

—Es el siguiente que voy a restaurar.

—Pero usted… no tiene nada malo, está… ese cuadro está en buen estado.

—Sí, estudió con Tiziano. Ahí es donde El Greco aprendió, ahí es donde aprendió a simplificar —siguió Stephen, hablando más deprisa—, ahí es donde aprendió a no tener miedo a los espacios, a no perderse en detalles y desorden, a separarlo todo…

—Pero no puede, no le dejarán… agarrar ese cuadro y… y hacer lo que está haciendo… —Ludy se estaba levantando lentamente, con el paño irlandés a prueba de espinos pegado a las piedras, deslizándose hacia arriba con su peso mientras se apartaba de la figura en el suelo, que seguía trabajando rápidamente con el cuchillo. Pero tenía la mirada clavada en las manos cuadradas, una de las cuales agarraba el cuadro por arriba con el largo pulgar, y la otra lanzaba destellos desde los dos diamantes del cordial mientras seguía oyéndose el ruido de la hoja. Ludy cerró los ojos, y volvió a abrirlos mientras seguía irguiéndose, y sorbió por la nariz—. Usted… —Lo miró a la cara, donde sólo se movían las volutas de humo espeso contra sus superficies hundidas. Y entonces se dio con la cabeza contra la pared de piedra a su espalda, y se sobresaltó tanto que levantó de golpe ambas manos ante sí.

Stephen se había puesto en pie de un salto.

—¿Quiere ver… ver uno que ya he restaurado?

—Pero usted… usted…

Con el paño irlandés a prueba de espinos, la nuca y las manos pegadas, Ludy se aplastó contra la pared de piedra. Se quedó así, como si lo tuvieran allí sujeto, mirando fijamente la figura que se movía ante él bajo la débil luz, separando la mesa de la pared del fondo, mientras hablaba sin parar con una voz que era extrañamente jadeante y al mismo tiempo nada excitada:

—Un cuadro… un… un Valdés Leal, trabajé mucho tiempo en él, es… sí, hay calor en él, trabajé mucho tiempo en él, ya lo verá. Venecia, Venecia, todos estudiamos… sí, Tiziano, lo entenderá, todos estudiamos… con Tiziano, desarrollando esta… armonía, sí, es… lo entenderá cuando lo vea, este… este cuadro…

Agarrando el borde de la mesa con ambas manos, se detuvo y miró a Ludy, que había empezado a plegarse contra la pared gris. Y cuando repitió «Sí…» con un ronco susurro, sus ojos echaron chispas otra vez, pero se volvió rápidamente hacia la mesa, se la quedó mirando con aire indeciso y musitó algo, cogió la media rebanada de pan que había tirado allí hacía unos minutos, y siguió moviéndose, mirando detrás de la mesa y hablando y masticando al mismo tiempo, por lo que sus palabras brotaban ahogadas e inconexas a la vez.

Quizá si hubiera estado quieto y hablado en el mismo tono, Ludy se habría vuelto y salido por la puerta; pero ahora siguió pegado contra la pared, moviendo levemente los labios como si intentara terminar una frase de despedida, separando las manos flojas y vacías para volverlas a apretar inmediatamente contra las piedras, volviendo luego a separarlas aunque sólo fuera a la distancia de su propio calor en la pared, para completar el gesto que le permitiría escapar.

Mientras tanto Stephen seguía murmurando y no dejaba de alzar la vista como si estuviera hablando a varias personas en distintas partes del cuartito, ora mirando por encima del hombro de Ludy y cercándole así, ora dirigiéndose a un rincón vacío, o a la propia mesa, con cosas como: «Separación, eso es lo que salió mal, lo entenderá…», o: «Todo ocultándose de todo lo demás…», y en el momento en que Ludy empezó a

volverse los ojos lo atraparon de nuevo y dejó caer otra vez su peso envuelto en paño irlandés a prueba de espinos contra la pared de piedra gris, mientras la voz exclamaba:

—Pensará que me hacen falta microscopios para este… delicado trabajo. Sí, clara de huevo, yema de huevo, gomas, resinas, aceites, cola, ácidos, barniz, le sorprendería cómo se mezclan sólo para unir los pigmentos. Podemos sacar fotos con rayos X, infrarrojos, ultravioleta… Capas y capas de colores y aceites y barniz, ¡y la mugre! ¡La mugre! Mire eso, ese cuadro de ahí, mire las craqueladuras en la superficie, eso es de la tabla de madera que se dilata y contrae y la pintura se craquela al secarse. Si tuviéramos un microscopio con un condensador especular Leitz podríamos aumentarlo en quinientos diámetros, poner un disco de cálculo y hacer un cálculo de partículas del pigmento. Luego medimos su espesor con un micrómetro, ponemos el accesorio Micro-Ibso a la cámara y te… Si tuviéramos un aparato microextractor podríamos también hacer agujeros en él y sacar unas bonitas secciones transversales, las pones en cera y luego las cortas simplemente por la mitad con un cuchillo microtomo. Y cuando pones eso bajo un microscopio con luz incidente polarizada entonces puedes ver realmente lo que está pasando con una lámpara de arco, lo verás cuando coloquemos la serie de lentes de inmersión en aceite. Lo verás, si podemos equipar un microscopio con luz polarizada y poner debajo una partícula del pigmento, veremos si es isotropica o anisotropica, para eso utilizamos prismas de Nicol. Entonces calculamos el índice de refracción de las partículas del pigmento, y entonces, bueno, entonces por supuesto, entonces sabemos exactamente… la mugre que se acumula, y una capa de barniz tras otra, y la mugre que se acumula en cada plieguecito y fisurita siglo tras siglo, entonces lo sabremos. Ese es el secreto, acumular capas de óleos transparentes sobre otros densos y pesados. Bosch… no Bosch. Las transiciones… Leonardo aplicaba pintura húmeda con la palma de la mano… una base uniforme de marrón oscuro, y… esa plasticidad, esa plasticidad. Y… y… si conseguimos un cálculo de partículas hable, el índice de refracción de cada partícula y si es isotropica o… cuando llegas al gesso te… ¿qué era? ¿Qué era…? Te… sí, ese Greco, yo…

—No, usted…

—El siguiente.

Ludy seguía aún con la espalda pegada a la pared de piedra, y no eran sólo los ojos, cada vez que le traspasaban, los que le tenían allí clavado, sino la sofocante sensación, que aumentaba a cada instante, de que la puerta no estaba abierta, de que quizá no hubiera ninguna puerta; y deslizándose con miedo de confirmar semejante posibilidad, su mano avanzaba lo más despacio que podía hacia el marco de la puerta.

—Sí, ese Greco… ese… usando carmín para las sombras, y… ocre rojo y amarillo para la carne… la carne, la… hematites… pintores que no tenían miedo a los espacios, que no… atiborraban cada espacio con detalles, todo fatuo y separado afirmándose a sí mismo por miedo a… miedo a dejar algún espacio para la transición, para que las formas… se compartiesen unas a otras y… en la Edad Media, cuando todo estaba en pedazos y doraban los pedazos, sí, para asegurar su separación por miedo a que no hubiera Dios… antes del Renacimiento. —Dejó de hablar por el esfuerzo de sacar una tabla de detrás de la mesa, y la apoyó allí, vuelta hacia la pared. Pero nada más dejarla, empezó a murmurar otra vez—: Todo fatuo, haciéndose valer… cada detalle fatuo, por miedo… por miedo… —Luego agarró bruscamente otra rebanada de pan con la mano del anillo con dos diamantes, sujetó la tabla con el codo y partió la rebanada por la mitad.

La mano de Ludy había llegado al marco de la puerta, y sus dedos empezaban a doblarse sobre él, arrastrando todo su peso hacia aquella vía de escape, cuando tocaron tela, y se detuvieron.

—Sí, se acuerda, Cicerón, ¿en la *Paradoxa…?* Y no reconoce ningún mérito a Praxiteles por no hacer más que quitar el exceso de mármol, hasta llegar a la forma verdadera que estaba allí todo el tiempo. Estaba allí todo el tiempo, y lo único que hizo Praxiteles fue quitar el exceso de mármol, y éste… éste es el… el que acabo de restaurar, el Valdés Leal…

—¡Auuuuu!

—Oiga…

—¿Quién…?

—¿Él? Está ahí desde hace rato —dijo Stephen con calma, con tanta calma como había sonado su voz al principio de aquella intrusión—. ¿No sabía que estaba ahí? —preguntó Stephen, con la misma naturalidad que había mostrado cuando le descubrieron trabajando—. Lo conoce, ¿no?

—Sí, es… es el conserje de aquí —logró decir Ludy, mirando al portero que ocupaba el umbral y que, sin advertir por lo visto que su presencia hubiera provocado algo más que una mera constatación, no daba muestra alguna de ir a moverse. Allí en la entrada, le sacaba una buena cabeza a la figura del traje irlandés a prueba de espinos, y parecía tan macizo e inmóvil como las paredes, por respeto a la conversación que había interrumpido.

—*Casa con dos puertas, mala es de guardar,* [63] ¿eh? —Stephen se dirigió al viejo con soltura y afabilidad.

El portero le respondió de la misma manera familiar, y encogió sus hombros corpulentos. Bajó la cabeza, y una sonrisa empezó a contraer las arrugas de su cara, apretando las cicatrices de la enfermedad hasta que desaparecieron casi en la carne. Pero la sonrisa se detuvo allí: las arrugas la contuvieron, y volvieron a asomar las cicatrices.

—Es como todos los viejos que he conocido —dijo Stephen en voz baja, mientras la tabla que sujetaba con el codo se deslizaba lentamente hasta quedar boca abajo sobre la mesa.

Ludy se quedó mirando el cuadrado de cielo gris en lo alto de la pared mientras hablaban en español, apretando los tacones contra la pared como si fuera a saltar hacia allí, aunque sus voces eran bajas y despreocupadas, y Stephen se encogía de hombros y casi sonreía mientras hablaba, una impresión que hizo agazaparse a Ludy en el suelo, lentamente, pero mirando con incredulidad a la figura que estaba junto a la mesa como si hubiera salido de la piedra. Sin embargo, la sonrisa de Stephen se detuvo donde se había detenido la otra, no contenida por profundas arrugas y cicatrices, pero se detuvo.

El viejo estaba hablando, y Stephen, mirándolo como si escuchara, dijo en voz baja: «A veces viene a verme trabajar…», y dejó escapar un ruido áspero y constreñido cercano a una carcajada mientras tomaba la última rebanada del revoltijo de la mesa.

—Dice que es como Segismundo en la celda. Ha leído eso, ¿no?

—No —contestó desvalidamente Ludy, bajando la vista hacia el hueco entre la pierna y el marco de la puerta como si fuera a intentar escabullirse por allí.

—¿No ha leído lo de Segismundo en la celda? «¡Vive Dios, que pudo ser…!» [64] cayendo de un balcón al mar, aunque ahí hay un problema porque Polonia no tiene puertos de mar. *¡Vive Dios, que pudo ser!* [65] ¿No ha leído *La vida es sueño?* Tome…

Ludy vio que le ponían delante un trozo de pan. Lo cogió y se quedó con él en la mano. Oía masticar al viejo a su lado. Las dos figuras parecían estar acorralándole contra la pared.

—Es un penitente —dijo Stephen, pegado a él—, desde que salió de la cárcel. ¡Pero dese cuenta…! Para él, ella sigue siendo una niña, y hermosa en cera, mientras que su cara está vieja y ajada como todas estas ruinas de aquí, el pasado abandonado donde ocurrió. Aquí hay una permanencia del desastre, abandonado donde podemos remitimos a él, las torres de los moros yacen donde cayeron, y encontrará gente viviendo en ellas, ciudades enteras celosas del pasado, parodias de amantes lastradas con ruinas testimoniales, y no vienen corriendo a enterrar al viejo, sino que le dan las llaves de la iglesia, y él toca las campanas. Dice que ella se le aparece con azucenas que se convierten en llamas cuando las coge. Ya ve cómo confío en él.

Ludy bajó la vista hacia el pan, que se le estaba desmigajando en la mano.

—Me… me tengo que… ir…

—Tengo que confiar en él. A eso se reduce la cosa, a envidiar a un viejo. Bueno, hace doscientos años treinta y tres era una edad avanzada, y hora de morir. «¡Maldita sea la juventud, que la edad ha de vencer; maldita sea la salud, que la enfermedad destruye; maldita sea la vida, que la muerte interrumpe!». ¿Conoce la inmaculada concepción de Buda, y su muerte por una indigestión de cerdo? «Edad, enfermedad, muerte, ¡ojalá estuvieran por siempre encadenadas!». Tengo que confiar en él, pues ahora estamos aquí juntos, y penitentes por violación y asesinato.

—¿Usted ha… matado a alguien? —dijo Ludy levantando al fin la vista del pan que se le desmigajaba en la mano, para ver cómo las arrugas que rodeaban aquellos ojos apagados se constreñían en el inicio de una mueca de dolor, tan cerca que veía la prieta retícula de vasos capilares bajo la piel de los párpados, mientras los labios trataban de convertir la mueca en una sonrisa pero sólo se apretaban más y más mientras Stephen hablaba, jadeante pero no excitado, un titubeo puramente físico de su voz, como si no tuviera suficiente aire en los pulmones para decir todo lo que tenía que decir.

—En África, Argelia, la bala entró limpiamente y le rompió el cuello, en Sidi-bel-Abbès, le contaré. «J'ai le cafard», tenía tatuado en la frente, con la letra desigual de un niño…

Se detuvo, mirando ansiosamente a la cara de Ludy, un momento de súplica, hasta que cogió el último trozo de pan y lo mordió ferozmente, encorvado para recoger las migajas en su palma vacía.

—«Mon Légionnaire!». Un *ghoum,* sonriendo bobamente hacia la mesa donde estábamos sentados el pobre policía y yo, discutiendo si la luz del día era negra en la luna. «Et toi, divine Mort, où tout rentre et s'efface, accueille tes enfants dans ton sein étoilé…». El pobre policía leía a Leconte de Lisie. ¡Y me llamaba romántico!, porque planeaba huir al desierto. «Aféitate y limpíate un poco», dice, «o tendré que detenerte». Sin dinero, sin papeles, es más vergonzoso qué ir desnudo por la calle a pleno día. Pero por la noche hablábamos, la chica rajada de tatuajes en Djelfa, o la de Biskra, que llevaba un *louis*

d'or
en la garganta y un imperdible en la oreja. «El desierto está bien patrullado, y sin agua te caerás muerto en cuatro horas. ¡Es romántico! No lo permitiré. Tengo que cumplir con mi deber. Habla de cosas reales. No, conozco esos trucos», sigue, éramos amigos, entiende, «alquilar un camello y partir en secreto, para viajar una noche y un día y soltar tu montura en el desierto, y tumbarte a esperar el alba. "Affranchis-nous du temps, du nombre et de
l'espace
, et rends-nous le repos que la vie a troublé"». Entonces mira su reloj. Fuimos amigos allí durante algún tiempo. La raja azul en la frente, y por la barbilla y los talones, trescientos francos en Sfax una noche de sábado, el dorado *louis*
d'or
y las plumas y barrotes en la puerta. O el té en Bou-Saâda, ella lo ofrece estirándose por la alfombrilla del suelo, los porches a punto de caerse de las fachadas de las casas, y su madre se queda en la habitación, garantía de que es Ouled Nail para la danza que escandaliza a los turistas franceses, los músicos tocan de cara a la pared y salta como si tuviera algo vivo y saltando dentro, en la ciudad, mientras las franjas de sus tiendas se extienden por la linde del desierto junto a los esqueletos de las casas coloniales. Pero aquí donde está acuartelada la Legión la barba negra crece, «Défense de raser», me dice ella, «les médicastres français
s'entendent
», animando a las ladillas. Y los guardias desfallecen con bayonetas caladas en la calle. Así que aquí está Han, en la Legión, un *ghoum,* acercándose a nuestra mesa en la terraza del café. «Le cafard» tatuado en su frente, pero espere. Eso no es nada, ya verá cuando le bajen los pantalones. Se para a escupir en la calle, y levanta la vista como un animal. «¡Tú! ¡Has venido a unirte a nosotros! Qué placer volver a verte al fin, aquí, para estar otra vez conmigo. ¿Eh…? Qué estupendo será ahora, juntos. ¿Dónde has estado todo este tiempo, desde Koppel, te acuerdas? ¿Te acuerdas? Qué viejo tonto era. Y Frau Fahrtmesser, y Minchen, el cerdo y su hija, ¿te acuerdas? ¡Qué felices éramos! ¿Die Jungfrau? ¡Y qué jóvenes! ¿Te acuerdas de todo aquello? ¡Y ahora!, mi querido amigo, qué estupendo será, juntos. Al principio es duro, pero yo puedo cuidar de ti, ¿eh? Al principio la Legión es dura, pero conmigo, tú y yo, tú… pero tú… para eso estás aquí, ¿no?, para unirte a nosotros, ¿no?, para acompañarme en… esto, ¿no…?». Y levanta su camisa caqui apretada en un puño, de pie ante mí. «Sí, qué otra razón para venir abel-Abbès sino… alistarte… conmigo, ¿no?». Así que el sol se había puesto, y cuando me eché hacia atrás y dije: «No», se me quedó mirando un minuto. Se me quedó mirando, y siseó: «¡Y ahora tú! Nos engañaron, y ahora tú… Os contaré a los dos cómo nos engañaron. Nos traicionaron, y ahora… os lo contaré». Hablaba en voz baja, estaba reuniendo las fuerzas que se le podían escapar por la voz, y los hombros se le agitaban cada vez de forma menos convulsiva, hasta que pudo decir: «Te odio. Te odio muchísimo. ¿Entiendes cómo te odio? Incluso entonces te odiaba… echaba algo de menos, y siempre te odié, incluso entonces, o… no lo habría echado tanto de menos». Entonces se abalanzó sobre mí. La bala le atravesó limpiamente, y le rompió el cuello. Señoría, con todo respeto, el cabrón estaba muerto. Y desde entonces he estado vagando de un lado a otro. El policía le volvió la cara con la punta de la bota, y luego dejó que las letras azules rodaran por el polvo, y el viento agitó la cabeza rubia llena de polvo de la calle, y desde entonces he estado viajando. «¡Lárgate! ¡Ni siquiera estuviste aquí! ¿Entiendes? ¡Lárgate!». ¿Y qué podía hacer yo? El policía… fuimos amigos allí durante algún tiempo. Se quedó un rato con la pistola en la mano encima de aquella cosa tirada en el polvo, y después de que le vieran dos o tres personas se la guardó sin disparar, y miró su reloj, y desde entonces me he estado moviendo. Lo sabía. Habíamos hablado tanto los dos, sabía que me estaba lanzando al mundo, y desde entonces he estado viajando, hasta que llegué aquí. Éste es un lugar para descansar, para descansar al fin, un lugar para descansar, y el trabajo, para volver a empezar todo de nuevo, solo…

—Pero esas cosas… no ocurren… Tengo que irme.

—¡Pero espere! ¡Espere! Todavía no le he contado, ¡cuando le bajaron los pantalones tenía una cara tatuada en el trasero! Era como para montar un aquelarre en toda regla, los ojos bien abiertos en las nalgas. ¡Espere…! Ése es un beso que recordará. ¿Ehh? Y yo lo sabía, yendo por ahí con un culo así, con ojos azules… ¡Espere!

Fray Eulalio, los ojos reverentemente clavados en la punta de sus pies que se aplanaban contra las sandalias a cada paso, salió el primero de la Capilla de los Tres con un andar mesurado que, sin embargo, rara vez era capaz de medir durante más de diez pasos. En ese punto le asaltaba por lo general algún entusiasmo, y tendía a hacer cabriolas disciplinadas pero irregulares, por muy reservados que se mostrasen sus

acompañantes, dado que procedían del Exterior. En esta ocasión llevaba incluso las manos entrelazadas, y durante un momento de parloteo se quedó inmóvil junto a la puerta.

—No sé de quién será esa tumba, pero ya que estamos aquí podríamos hacer las cosas bien y verlo todo —dijo una mujer mientras salía.

—Chico, ese cuadro grande era un lío, verdad, el Rubins —dijo un hombre gordo con un traje marrón y una corbata amarilla, que al parecer se les había unido. Llevaba al cuello dos cámaras y un fotómetro, todo ello en fundas de cuero nuevas—. Rubins… ¿era español?

—Mira su nombre, Peedro Pablo, ¿en qué otra parte le iban a poner un nombre como ése? —contestó la mujer que venía con él. Carecía por completo de rasgos distintivos, salvo por el anillo que llevaba. Era de oro, y grande, y muy moderno, y recordaba a esos artículos que se anuncian como «defensores silenciosos».

La mujer alta esperó a su marido. Fray Eulalio estaba encantado con la redada matinal. Pero al levantar la vista empezó a vibrar, como si llevara oculto bajo el hábito un maravilloso sistema de muelles; y si algo hacía falta para ponerlos en movimiento era la vista de la figura que ahora vio en fugaces vislumbres de paño irlandés a prueba de espinos, zigzagueando entre las pilastras mudéjares que los rodeaban. Pues después de presentarse a unos americanos, nada le daba mayor placer que presentar unos americanos a otros, y la oportunidad de presentar cuatro a uno, y a uno que era un célebre escritor, *un escritor muy distinguido, muy culto*… [66] Estuvo a punto de saltar por encima de la fuente mudéjar.

El distinguido novelista no vio más remedio que rendirse, y trató de sosegarse mientras lo llevaban hacia adelante, aunque sólo fuera para ese minuto de cortesía que exigía su posición. Salió limpiándose las manos en los fondillos de sus pantalones.

—¡No sabíamos que fuera usted católico! —dijo la mujer del anillo, encantada, extendiendo esa mano, y retirándola más despacio, separando los dedos y bajando con disimulo la mirada para ver qué podía ser la pegajosa materia gris que tenía entre ellos, mientras su marido, inclinándose entre las fundas de cuero, perdía su afable sonrisa con el apretón de manos, y se retiraba a limpiarse la suya en los fondillos de sus pantalones.

—Bueno, verá… —empezó el distinguido novelista; pero fue incapaz de seguir. Trató de componer sus debilitados rasgos en una sonrisa, y se volvió hacia la mujer alta con una floja inclinación que pretendía hacer pasar por reverencia.

—Vamos a ver una tumba —dijo ella—, la tumba de… no sé quién, ¿la ha visto usted?

—Sí —respondió al instante, y se la quedó mirando de un modo tan raro que ella se volvió hacia su marido y dijo:

—No podemos dejar ahí fuera a la pobre
Huki-lau
completamente sola, aunque lleve ese… esa protección, nunca se sabe.

Fray Eulalio, mientras tanto, se movía tan afanosamente entre ellos como para dar a todos la sensación de que estaban en una habitación llena de gente, y como si quisiera asegurarse de que no era así, el marido de la mujer alta alzó su mirada vacía hacia los jirones de nube gris que cruzaban sobre el claustro mudéjar. El distinguido novelista se excusó: tenía un poco de trabajo que hacer antes de la comida, y se marchó.

—Fue él, el que asomó la cabeza en la iglesia y me preguntó qué estaba haciendo allí —anunció la mujer del anillo—. No habría imaginado que se comportaría de ese modo en un sitio como éste.

—Quizá sólo está jugando a algo —dijo distraídamente la mujer alta, preocupada por un tacón alto que había quedado atrapado entre los dientes de un mosaico roto—. Dios mío…

—La verdad es que no vale la pena darse todas estas caminatas —dijo la mujer del anillo—. No hemos conseguido ni un solo carrete en color para la cámara, aquí no tienen de eso.

Fray Eulalio, mientras tanto, explicaba que el distinguido novelista había sufrido recientemente la pérdida de alguien muy querido, una conclusión aleccionadora que había deducido del manifiesto habitual de la corbata negra.

Por eso se quedaron todos algo desconcertados cuando el distinguido huésped apareció con un sedante traje a cuadros Glen Urquhart, y la corbata de la Honorable Compañía de Artillería, aunque ninguno de ellos conocía su significado mejor que él (pues acababa de comprarla, un día que pasaba ante el escaparate de Gieves en Old Bond Street, en Londres, adonde había ido en busca de una experiencia directa de naturaleza completamente diferente). Era un dibujo vigorizante de trazos dentados en rojo oscuro sobre un fondo azul, y parecía bastante recuperado.

Es verdad, se sentía mejor comiendo en aquella mesita junto a las ventanas de la gélida sala, rodilla con

rodilla con un tranquilo hermano lego designado para la tarea, el grueso paño rojo extendido sobre sus regazos y calientes hasta la cintura por el brasero de debajo, con una rejilla sobre los carbones para proteger las puntas de los pies que sobresalían de las sandalias, un sistema bastante parecido al de una cama comunal persa que había visto en alguna parte (no en Persia).

—Ya hemos tenido un montón de experiencias para escribir a casa —dijo la mujer del anillo en la larga mesa donde acababa de empezar la comida, presidida por un plácido franciscano que no hablaba inglés. La mujer alta cerró su pastillero con un chasquido, mientras su marido se servía su segundo vaso de vino, y la mujer del anillo se santiguó y colocó la servilleta en su sitio con un gesto utilitario.

—Hasta nos atracó un salteador de caminos —confirmó su marido.

—Fue en un tren.

—De todas formas tú lo sigues llamando salteador de caminos —dijo pacientemente su marido, sonriendo con su sonrisa jovial—. Y hasta hablaba inglés.

—Era inglés chapurreado. ¿Y qué creen que nos dijo? Que teníamos tanta culpa como él, porque estábamos allí, que la víctima incita a la violencia sólo por estar allí, dijo, y hasta hizo una cita para demostrarlo.

—De Dante, nos dijo. Nos quitó todo el dinero a punta de pistola.

—Hasta la última peseta que llevábamos encima.

—Pero no se llevó las cámaras —dijo el hombre gordo—, supongo que no sabía lo mucho que valen.

—Dijo que debería hacemos un favor y tirarlas por la ventanilla, ¿se imagina? Me… mira que tienen esto frío —se estremeció.

Su marido sacó su cartera y enseñó un trozo de papel.

—Esto es un recuerdo de aquello. Me hizo escribir esto para que me acordase de comprar este libro y lo leyese. *Especulación trascendente sobre la aparente intencionalidad en el destino del individuo,* menudo titulito, ¿verdad? Escribí esto a punta de pistola.

—¿Se imagina? —preguntó ella al distinguido novelista, que meneó la cabeza como si realmente no pudiese. Luego se volvió hacia la sopa que la vieja le había puesto delante, y empezó a comer con una expresión en la cara como si, quizá, pudiese.

—Bueno, uno no puede quejarse —dijo alegremente el hombre gordo—, cuando sale de viaje a la aventura en un país como éste, como aquí Mamie y yo sólo con la ropa que llevamos puesta. ¿Verdad, Mamie?

Luego bajó la vista, para limpiarse una mancha de su corbata amarilla con el borde del mantel.

—Esta vez ni siquiera hemos traído un coche —dijo la mujer del anillo—. En cuanto salgamos de aquí iremos directamente a la Semana Santa de Sevilla. Yo quería ver también la gran feria que tienen en Valencia pero no sé cuánto tiempo vamos a estar aquí, no es hasta después. La llaman las Fallas, es todo fuegos artificiales. —Entonces se volvió hacia la apacible figura sentada a la cabecera de la mesa, y se dirigió a él en lo que creía que era su lengua, pues había seguido un curso, con algunas de sus amigas en casa, preparándose precisamente para exigencias tan a propósito como ésta—. *¿Cuándo tiene las Fallas en Valencia?* [67] —preguntó, y repitió—: *¿Las Fallas…?*— Pero como lo pronunciaba «falos», el buen franciscano contestó con una sonrisa gélida y le ofreció el pan.

La mujer alta se aclaró la garganta, pasó la jarra de vino en respuesta a ninguna petición lo más lejos que pudo llegar en la mesa, y dijo que había leído en alguna parte que en aquel mismo monasterio habían metido a un monje bajo una marmita por negarse a salir a pedir limosna. ¿Lo había visto alguien? «La marmita, quiero decir».

No, pero cuando la mujer del anillo y su marido estuvieron en Granada, un guía los llevó a dar una vuelta por el Hospital de San Juan de Dios, y tuvieron que mirar a todos los huérfanos tullidos y deformes, «que no era precisamente el tipo de cosa que habíamos venido a ver desde tan lejos, ni siquiera sabíamos adonde nos llevaba».

—Esa catedral que tienen allí es la más grande que he visto en mi vida.

—Y el ruido cuando la cabeza de aquel niño gitano golpeó contra el suelo…

El distinguido novelista seguía inclinado sobre su plato; y pareciese o no tan contemplativo como creía, al menos había frustrado basta entonces todos los intentos por hacerle intervenir en la conversación, es decir, hasta que alguien le preguntó directamente si le gustaba el arte de allí…

—Ejem…

—Como ese Greco grande, el cuadro de…

—¿Qué? ¿Está a salvo? Está todavía… —exclamó, alzando la vista bruscamente.

—¿Qué?

—No… nada, yo… estaba pensando en otra cosa. El… ejem, sí, es un… un cuadro excelente, la, ejem, plasticidad del modelado, la transición de, ejem, los óleos pesados extendidos sobre otros transparentes, una gran claridad de, ejem, intención religiosa sin perderse en una maraña de detalles, de, ejem…, por miedo a que no hubiera ningún… Ejem…

—Yo he visto otro cuadro suyo, me ponen nervioso, todo el mundo parece menearse demasiado en ellos.

—Vimos un gran Pietà en Granada, ése me gusta más. ¿No tienen frío?

El distinguido novelista atacó el pescado en el plato que tenía delante. Le miraba fijamente con un insolente ojo redondo, y le cortó la cabeza de un tajo. Una vez despachado el mundo del arte, el de la religión salió intrépidamente a colación.

—Ese era probablemente el tonto del pueblo.

—Pero ¿no lo dejan entrar en la iglesia? —preguntó la mujer alta—. En nuestra iglesia de casa, por supuesto no he estado en ella recientemente, pero teníamos uno, quiero decir, un tonto. Todo pueblo pequeño tiene uno, igual que tiene un borracho del pueblo y un judío, pero por supuesto no teníamos ninguno de esos chiquillos de mangas rojas para sacarlo por la puerta. Y ese chico que balanceaba esa cosa de cobre que colgaba de la cadena me ponía terriblemente nerviosa. Parecía que iba a estallar en cualquier momento.

El hombre gordo pareció cohibirse, y dejó de frotar otra mancha de su corbata.

—¿Y estaban ustedes en la sacristía cuando estaban vistiendo a ese viejo sacerdote para salir? No sé, todos esos encajes, y la forma en que esos chiquillos mariposeaban a su alrededor… —Vio que el distinguido novelista la miraba con inquietud, y siguió apresuradamente—: No quiero decir que sean de ese modo ni de ningún otro, pero… una oye cosas —murmuró, bajando la vista hacia su plato—. Dígame —susurró a la mujer que tenía al lado—, qué son estas cositas terriblemente extrañas que se supone estamos comiendo.

—Lentejas. ¿Nunca las ha comido?

—He leído sobre ellas —dijo la mujer alta, y dejó su tenedor.

—Si he de ser sincera, no entiendo realmente cómo pueden comer así todo el tiempo. He tenido retortijones desde que llegamos aquí. Por todo el aceite. Han tenido…

—Yo tomo píldoras para adelgazar. Te tragas una antes de una comida y se hincha como un globo en el estómago. Pierdes el apetito. No es que una pueda conservarlo aquí de todas formas. ¿Se han fijado en el pan? No quiero decir que lo prueben, simplemente fíjense en él. Se está volviendo prácticamente rojo.

—Mi marido sabrá lo que es —dijo la mujer del anillo, examinando un trozo de pan. Lo partió, y la fina textura gris se desmigajó—. Mi marido trabaja en química de los alimentos. Estudió toxicología en Yale. —Su marido le cogió el pan de la mano y lo examinó con una lupa de bolsillo—. Trabaja con la gente de Necrostyle —dijo ella—, conocerán sus productos, ¿no? —Entonces dio un codazo a su marido, y le susurró que tal vez estaba siendo poco educado—, porque esta gente es muy sensible. Aunque sean monjes.

—*Micrococcus prodigiosus* —declaró él, cerrando la lupa con un chasquido y alzando la vista con su sonrisa jovial—. Se forma a veces en alimentos rancios guardados en un lugar seco. Parece sangre, verdad.

—Te está mirando de un modo extraño —dijo la mujer del anillo a su marido. Y cuando a una seña de la figura a la cabecera de la mesa se llevaron discretamente el pan, susurró—: Oh, cariño, me pregunto si habremos herido sus sentimientos… —Y acababa de ponerse a hablar con la mujer alta, en un tono muy bajo de confidencia sincera—: Aquí están bastante atrasados, cuando desembarcamos los policías de la aduana estuvieron a punto de detenerme, creyeron que mis Tampax eran bombas incendiarias…

Cuando se dio cuenta de que la figura a la cabecera de la mesa se estaba dirigiendo a ella con sílabas lentas y cuidadosas:

—Está explicando algo sobre el pan —susurró aparte, escuchando—, vaya, es curioso. —Concentrándose, sus labios se movían como para arrancarle las palabras sílaba a sílaba mientras hablaba, y se volvía a explicar cuando paraba—, porque aquí es muy difícil conseguir harina, sobre todo si eres pobre como los monjes; tienen que comprarla en el mercado negro. No es exactamente así como lo dice —se corrigió cuando el silencio provocó su completa confusión—. Dice que hasta reciben paquetes de comida de América, como los de ese pastor protestante que estuvo aquí de visita hace unos treinta años y siempre les manda esos paquetes de comida, hace poco recibieron uno. Y aquí es donde me hago un lío —confesó, mientras la figura a la cabecera de la mesa la miraba con aire quejumbroso—. Creo que es algo que quiere que yo le explique, porque en ese último paquete de comida que acaban de recibir había una especie de polvos en una lata que mezclaron con la harina cuando hicieron este pan, y salió así de curioso. Quizá fuera cereal, sólo que no estoy segura de cómo se dice cereal en español. Quizá fuera germen de trigo, mi marido podría explicárselo probablemente, como el pan enriquecido que tenemos en casa, sólo que no sé cómo se

dice germen de trigo en español. —Suspiró, mirando casi pensativamente al trocito de pan que quedaba en la mesa junto a la mano de su marido, una corteza dura, la fina textura gris desmigajada y salpicada de puntitos «como sangre»—. En casa —repitió—. Ahora que estamos casi en Pascua… —Volvió a suspirar, y sonrió tristemente, mirando en lontananza y frotándose el ligero bozo de su labio superior—. ¿No es bonito que todos seamos americanos?

En la cabecera de la mesa, la figura se inclinó para expresarle su agradecimiento por sus explicaciones a los demás huéspedes exóticos, y ella, con la intención de agradarle más aún, se puso a hurgarse en el pecho en busca de algo. Se le enganchó el anillo, y finalmente lo sacó junto con una sarta de cuentas que resultó ser un rosario.

—¿Y ven esto? —dijo a los otros—. Esta cosita en forma de corazón que tiene en el medio está llena de agua bendita de Lourdes, ven, está impreso aquí mismo, certificado. —Lo hizo circular por la mesa. El franciscano lo miró con el mismo educado interés que podría haber mostrado por una vara de plegarias zuñi, y lo devolvió mientras ella seguía—: Mi familia comercia con novedades religiosas. La mayoría de plástico. El año pasado sacamos un *shofar* de plástico para Yom Kippur. Estaba lleno de caramelo. Se vendió muy bien. Enséñales tu llavero —dijo a su marido, dándole un codazo—. ¿Ven? —dijo, enseñándolo. Había un buen número de llaves, pero sacó la imagen plastificada—. ¿Ven?, sólo con moverlo un poquito se le abren y cierran los ojos, ¿ven cómo se le mueven los labios como si rezase? Y hasta la mano que tiene levantada en bendición se menea un poco, ¿ven? ¿Ven cómo se mueve la aureola cuando le das un toquecito…? Éstos se venden muy bien. Es toda una serie de llaveros con fotos artísticas.

Empezó a pasar por la mesa aquel objeto devocional, pero el buen franciscano parecía estar absorto en la contemplación de las uñas de sus pulgares.

—Por supuesto, como nosotros no somos católicos —le dijo la mujer alta—, mi marido y yo no siempre sabemos apreciar estas cosas, sabe. Estoy segura de que creía que iba a conseguir un trago gratis en la iglesia.

—Bueno, nosotros mismos somos conversos. Al cabo de un tiempo llegas a entender las cosas. —Bajó la voz y se quedó mirando con expresión ausente más allá de las cerámicas de la pared—. El significado espiritual de la Misa, la elevación de la Hostia, y cuando parten el pan…

—Bueno, por supuesto en nuestra iglesia teníamos la Cena del Señor…

—Pues todo el mundo consiguió un trago —terció el marido de la mujer alta. Había recuperado la jarra —. Esta mañana el viejo ese que estaba ahí arriba en el medio consiguió tres tragos —musitó—, y nadie más… ¿ustedes lo entendían?

—Bueno, la dicen en latín —dijo sobriamente la mujer del anillo.

—A mí me sonaba como si estuviera cantando: «Sé jugar al dominó mejor que tú…».

La mujer alta rescató la jarra e hizo ademán de pasarla hacia el otro lado de la mesa, pero la dejó porque estaba vacía.

—Si he de ser sincera —dijo a la mujer del anillo—, mi padre lo era de nacimiento, pero por supuesto nunca se lo dijo a nadie en casa: tienes que tener tanto cuidado en un pueblo pequeño. Lo pasó fatal, hasta le dieron la extremaunción.

—¿Cuando murió?

—Oh Dios, no, todavía vive. Eso fue antes de que naciera mi hermano.

—Pero una vez te han administrado la extremaunción, si luego te recuperas tienes que comer pescado y… renunciar a las relaciones matrimoniales.

—Entonces debieron darle otra cosa.

—Sé jugar al dominó mejor que túúúú… —brotó a su lado una voz arrulladora.

—Francamente —dijo ella en voz baja a la mujer del anillo—, no quiero verlo mezclado a él en nada de esto. Ya tiene a dos psicoanalistas esperándolo cuando llegue a casa.

—… mejor que túúúú…

—Ya ve lo que quiero decir.

La figura a la cabecera de la mesa se levantó, y la mujer del anillo, blandiéndolo como un arma mientras se desataba la servilleta y se santiguaba, se volvió hacia él y dijo con opresiva claridad: «La comedia está muy bien». [68] Y el franciscano, que no había ido al teatro desde que tomó las órdenes, inclinó la cabeza en reconocimiento de su amabilidad, aunque ella no pudo ver si mantenía su afable sonrisa porque se tapaba la boca con una servilleta en una mano, mientras se hurgaba en los dientes detrás con la otra.

Cuando salieron, fray Eulalio, que había estado confinado en algún lugar de las profundidades de la gran fortaleza durante las últimas una o dos horas por razones sólo conocidas por su superior, volvió a reunirse con ellos, y manifestó su confianza en que pudieran hacerle sitio para llevarle a Madrid. Era algo urgente. Si

salía ahora, creía que podría volver de algún modo aquella noche, o a primera hora del día siguiente (iba a buscar harina en el mercado negro). El distinguido novelista se excusó, con aire macilento e inseguro pese a las rayas vigorizantes de la H.C.A. Tropezó en las escaleras.

—Vaya, mira que es raro, verdad. Una casi se pregunta… —La voz de la mujer alta se apagó, mientras se quedaba mirando absortamente hacia lo alto de los muros, y luego murmuró—: Dios mío, da la impresión de que estuvieran esperando a los rusos. —Luego se recuperó, arreglándose el pelo con sus uñas escarlata—. Saben, francamente no he visto un alma en este lugar que pareciera terriblemente santa. Todos parecen bastante relajados.

—Se dan la vida padre —dijo su marido, relamiéndose los labios.

—Oye, deberíamos dejarles algo, una limosna o como quieras llamarlo, para pagar la comida. ¿Tienes alguno de esos billetes marrones grandes? Y ahí está el viejo portero en el atrio, ¿deberíamos darle algo? Siempre aparecen de ese modo en el último momento…

Volvió con una cara de desconcierto total.

—¡No ha querido coger ni un centavo!

—Son muy orgullosos —dijo la mujer del anillo—, hasta los pobres.

—Bueno, tiene tan pocos dientes que desde luego no podrá comer mucho, pero creo que podría tomarse una copa, probablemente bebe, y si te fijas en esas marcas de su cara verás que probablemente *tiene* algo… —siguió, cerrando su bolso, volviéndose hacia la limusina sucia a la que ya estaba subiendo fray Eulalio—. ¡Y ése me ha preguntado qué era el cinturón de
Huki-lau
, Dios mío! ¿Qué *podía* decirle? De todas formas —añadió mientras veía desaparecer el hábito pardo dentro del coche—, me *alegro* de que lo lleve puesto.

—Adiós…

—Puede que nos dejemos caer también por Sevilla en Semana Santa, suena como un desmadre.

—O si todavía están aquí, o quizá el año que viene, en Valencia…

—El año que viene vamos a ir a Hawái para el Festival del Narciso.

—Para las Fallas.

—Adiós… Qué día más asqueroso hace…

La limusina sucia se puso en marcha, se ahogó en la cuesta, esquivó por poco a una mula que se acercaba a la fuente con solitaria dignidad, y a un crío agazapado en la cuneta, y se perdió de vista en una curva.

—¡Mira! ¡Bernie, mira! —dijo la mujer del anillo, agitándolo hacia el atrio de la fachada gótica—. Ese hombre, ese hombre tan raro que está hablando con el portero, ¿no lo ves? ¿No lo hemos visto antes?, ¿en el tren?, ¡a punta de pistola en el tren! ¿No era él? Mira, o… ¿no era él?

Su marido estaba vuelto en aquella dirección, pero estaba ocupado. La corbata amarilla, que parecía tener dibujos de veleros marrones, no dejaba de metérsele en la cara, mientras intentaba ajustar el fotómetro al crudo color uniforme del día.

«El mundo está denasiafo con nosotros, tarde i pronto, obtenienfo y gastando derrochanos…». El distinguido novelista alzó la vista para ver lo que había escrito. La cinta se atascaba. Tiró de ella. Algo se rompió. Sorbió por la nariz. Le llegó un suave aroma de perfume. Levantó la mano y olió. Era el perfume de la mujer alta.

En vez de ponerse en pie de un salto, se quedó sentado ante la mesa un minuto más, mirando la máquina, los papeles, los lomos de los libros y el letrero. Se encorvó, y los trazos enérgicos de la Honorable Compañía de Artillería parecieron sostenerlo. Allí, junto a su codo, estaban las notas que había tomado para una novela inspiradora y conmovedora sobre la Cruzada de los Niños, ese episodio profundamente enternecedor de la historia religiosa que sirvió de paso para limpiar el sur de Francia de los restos de las purgas albigenses. Allí estaba también la lista de los conceptos que intentaba tener presentes mientras trabajaba, para transmitírselos a su prójimo. Las palabras sueltas estaban en mayúsculas, y eran: FE ESPERANZA CARIDAD CONCIENCIA JUEGO LIMPIO VALOR y HUMILDE.

Apoyándose con ambas manos en la mesa, se levantó, vertió agua fría en la jofaina, se lavó las manos y quitó el tapón. El agua cayó ruidosamente en el balde que había debajo. Luego se tumbó en la cama y se tapó con la suave colcha, notando que fuera había empezado a caer una lluvia menuda. El pie se le crispó una o dos veces, y luego no se movió nada en la habitación durante algún tiempo.

Las manchas desvaídas de los olivos atenuaban el verde oscuro de las faldas de las montañas. Las columnas de humo se elevaban en línea recta. Y por todas partes se veían esos tonos azules que Leonardo observó en la naturaleza, y contra los que previno al pintor como una ilusión óptica.

La plaza embarrada estaba tan concurrida como cualquier bar al final de una jornada laboral. Llegaban mulas y *burros,* [69] de uno en uno y por parejas; aparecían caballos al trote, respingaban, levantaban la cabeza; vacas ilustremente enastadas se acercaban con calma, algunas daban un trago rápido en la fuente y se iban a casa, otras se quedaban remoloneando para dar otro. Una cerda y tres marranos subieron por la calle y entraron en un portal. Las cabras trepaban hasta el atrio de la iglesia, se daban topetazos por la balaustrada y dejaban cagaditas en los escalones. El humo de las chimeneas ennegrecidas del pueblo arrastraba la discordia familiar de sus campanas por encima de los tejados de tejas. Durante cosa de un minuto no hubo un solo ser humano a la vista.

El distinguido novelista despertó con un sobresalto, como si alguien le hubiera tirado del pie. La habitación estaba a oscuras. Se quedó acurrucado un minuto con los ojos bien abiertos, y se cubrió los hombros protectoramente con la suave manta de lana. Luego volvió la cabeza lentamente, para ver quién lo había despertado. No había nadie allí. Se incorporó, sorbió por la nariz, se lamió los labios, y luego echó a un lado la manta y corrió por el suelo desigual hasta las ventanas, que abrió de un tirón. Al principio no vio más que la luna, una forma afilada que esperaba pudorosamente emboscada en el cielo despejado. Luego distinguió el negro perfil dentado de las montañas, y olió el humo que se demoraba en el valle. Creyó oír música en algún sitio. Y entonces, de las mismas puertas que tenía debajo, empezaron a aparecer figuras para formar una procesión. Encabezadas por un niño de blanco, salieron dos filas de mujeres de negro arreglándose los velos. Entre ellas, dos niños con velas flanqueaban la alta figura blanca del sacerdote. Los vio bajar la escalinata, pasar junto a la fuente oscura, entrar cantando dulcemente en una calle estrecha donde a su paso aparecían luces en las ventanas. Los vio perderse de vista, y entonces cerró deprisa las ventanas, encendió la luz, se sentó ante la mesa y se aclaró la garganta, intentando aclararse la cabeza de todo lo que había visto y oído durante el día, desde las distracciones mundanas a aquellas otras que, a esta distancia, podía convencerse de que nunca habían ocurrido.

«Cuando el radiante día primaveral se acercaba a su pacífico fin, salí de la celda que me había sido asignada por el enjuto pero viril anciano prior, y donde había llegado a conocer inusitados tormentos de soledad, noches en vela y una dieta espartana…». Tenía que teclear con una mano, pues tiraba de la cinta con la otra, de modo que trabajaba con reverente lentitud. Por alguna abertura de aquella inmensa mole de piedra le llegaban las exhalaciones del órgano, y la luz colgante, débil cuando más brillaba, se hacía más débil cada vez que se elevaba el órgano. A su lado, en el suelo donde lo había tirado, yacía arrugado lo escrito el día anterior, una descripción delicadamente reveladora de los preparativos en la sacristía para una misa mayor, que, al releerla tras oír el comentario de la mujer alta, le pareció demasiado delicada y demasiado reveladora, y se dio cuenta de que podía ser malentendida. (Fue aquel rastro de su perfume el causante).

«Bajo el claro dosel tachonado de estrellas de la noche primaveral, la oscuridad se veía transfigurada por las voces de aquellos hombres que se elevaban reciamente con un luminoso mensaje de fe para ~~todos los hombres~~ toda la humanidad. En aquel momento recordé el sencillo candor de la cara de ~~santo Domingo Francisco Dom~~ un santo pintado por el ~~gran artista español El~~ un artista español desconocido de hace mucho tiempo, y era la misma fe ardiente la que mostraban las ~~figuras~~ encapuchadas figuras que pasaban ante mí, moviéndose entre las sombras sin un solo paso vacilante. En aquel glorioso momento, uno sentía que su fe iluminaba el camino ante ellos, mientras escoltaban la Eucarastía [70] hacia su amado Superior, que ahora yacía suspendido entre la vida y la muerte. El mismo canto gregoriano, quizá, que se elevaba hacia estos mismos muros hace ~~millares~~ centenares de años, ~~se elevaba~~ brotaba ahora dulcemente ~~otra vez~~ una vez más, demasiado suave para resonar en las piedras. Más bien daba la inspiradora impresión de que la sencilla y hermosa melodía moraba en las piedras que habían presenciado y oído estas devociones desde tiempos inmemoriales, y que la ~~dibina~~ divina misión que pasaba ahora ante ellas la hacía brotar. No apresuraban el paso, pese al carácter crucial de su ~~divina mi~~ cometido, sino que caminaban a la vez inexorables y resignados a la voluntad de Aquel que los hacía avanzar ~~en aquella divina~~, llevando la Eucarestía a aquella ~~amada~~ humilde ~~persona~~ figura que en aquel preciso instante estaba siendo liberada de la vida que los unía a todos ellos, como se unían sus cantos en la oscuridad de la tierra que hollaban. Así fue que a altas horas de aquella noche, cuando el ~~amado anciano~~ venerable hombre hubo atravesado el velo hacia su Premio Celestial, yacía yo en mi duro jergón meditando en el mundo cuyos ruidos todavía

resonaban en mis oídos, y al que, forzosamente, debería volver muy pronto, el mundo del que él se había retirado voluntariamente hacía tanto tiempo, el mundo de la vanidad y el egoísmo, de las mentiras y el engaño, de las guerras y los rumores de guerras, de los hombres que se consagran al servicio tanto de Dios como de Mammón…».

Se detuvo, para quedarse mirando el trozo de pared que aparecía en blanco entre la máquina y el letrero reprobador colgado encima de la mesa. La luz redujo su intensidad hasta casi un mero color, y volvió a brillar, momento en el que el pájaro golpeó por fuera la ventana, y se quedó aleteando contra el cristal; pero él no vio nada ni oyó nada, preparándose para el salto:

«Y de repente el corazón me ~~empezó~~ dio un salto en el pecho, cuando ~~comprendí~~ descubrí el verdadero significado ~~del~~ que aquel símbolo de vida eterna ~~dirigía~~ proclamaba ~~para~~ a toda la humanidad, de todas las fes, y credos, y colores. Mis huesos no parecían ya atravesar la carne para clavarse en el duro jergón donde yacía, el aire nocturno me embargó pero era una noche de primavera, y me elevó. Pues aunque las luces de sus cirios se vieran tan pequeñas contra la gigantesca oscuridad de la noche, sin embargo se veían de lejos, igual que las vidas que ~~llevaban~~ brillan ~~en expiación~~ ante Aquel que lo creó todo, en expia,ión por los hechos oscuros del mundo ~~que ellos~~ actual. No, pensé, unas vidas como éstas no pueden ser en vano. Y mientras la vida fresca ~~en~~ del aire se elevaba por todas partes a mi alrededor, el símbolo que aquellos buenos hombres llevaban a uno de su grey que pronto sería arrancado de ~~ellos en medio de ellos~~ entre ellos se convirtió en parte de él ella. La profunda emoción de la primavera, y de toda la vida reviviendo, me paralizó durante aquel instante mientras, t aun entonces, se acercaba la semana de Pascua, y con ella, el mensaje de vida más allá de la tumba, y para ~~toda la humanidad~~ todo el género humano, esa esperanza que brota eternamente en ~~el pecho humano~~ cada pecho humano que abre sus puertas ~~a su prójimo~~ al servicio de su prójimo, y en esta expresión de Su la divina voluntad, ~~ya no teme~~ no teme ya a la muerte, sino que ~~alcanza consigue afirma asevera logra se acerca~~ se aproxima a la Resurrección».

Se recostó en la silla, y se pasó la punta de los dedos por la frente. Luego se levantó bruscamente, y volvió la espalda a su obra. Su pecho, que había estado hundido durante aquel ejercicio, se llenó con una profunda inspiración, y los trazos enérgicos de la Honorable Compañía de Artillería se destacaron mientras cruzaba a trancos la habitación hacia las ventanas. Había tenido fe, pero ahora se dio cuenta, contemplando el hacinamiento de tejados allí abajo, hincados de hinojos desde la fachada cacarañada por cinco siglos, de que había sido sólo una cuestión de tiempo. En aquel momento el pájaro se puso a aletear de nuevo contra el cristal. Sus alas batían las hojas, y se aferraba con sus delicadas garras al listón que las separaba. Golpeaba el cristal, moviendo al mismo tiempo la cabeza de un lado a otro para no golpearse el pico, con la cola extendida para mantener el equilibrio. Si era la luz la que lo atraía, pronto se apagó; pues el pájaro se había ido cuando llevó la manta junto a las ventanas, y se tumbó a dormir en el suelo. Sentía que se lo debía a ellos.

Tampoco le resultó difícil, al despertar la mañana siguiente en el cobijo sensual de la cama, creer que había dormido sobre los duros ladrillos. Había pasado allí un cuarto de hora entumecido, y ahora, al precipitarse hacia las ventanas, la inspiradora dureza del suelo desigual bajo sus pies borró la noche en la cama (pues si había soñado allí, no se acordaba), y se quedó mirando el amanecer con ojos tan claros como el mismo cielo temprano, y rasgos tan razonablemente detallados y separados como la calma luminosa del paisaje que tenía delante, donde el mundo había surgido de aquella masa indefinida y peligrosamente palpitante del inconsciente, para aparecer donde todo estaba satisfactoriamente separado, fuera, donde podía tratarse de forma razonable.

Pareció aliviado, y abrió las ventanas. Las voces que oyó venían directamente de abajo, donde vio a Stephen y al viejo discutiendo en el atrio de la iglesia. No pudo adivinar sobre qué, pues hablaban todo el tiempo en español. Se acercaban a las puertas de la iglesia y luego el viejo le hacía retroceder, agitando las llaves que llevaba en la punta del bastón. Una o dos veces pareció que Stephen iba a agarrarlas, pero el viejo las levantó fuera de su alcance, y luego, la tercera o cuarta vez que ocurrió, el viejo se abalanzó sobre él. Desde arriba pareció que iban a tener una agarrada, pero el portero pasó un brazo por los hombros del hombre más joven, y mientras hablaba lo llevó hacia la escalinata, donde siguió hablando a Stephen en voz más baja, señalando de vez en cuando con el bastón hacia las montañas.

En la ventana, el distinguido novelista se volvió también una o dos veces, como si lo hubieran sorprendido, o temiera que lo sorprendieran, escuchando a escondidas, pero luego siguió mirándolos. Finalmente se acercó a la mesa, y pasó un minuto revolviendo papeles con gesto distraído. Y cuando volvió a las ventanas abiertas, vio al viejo allí parado a solas. Miró hacia donde parecía estar mirando, y no vio

más que una calle vacía que se perdía de vista cuesta arriba tras las paredes de las casas, por donde, pocos minutos después, subía él.

Había examinado los fondillos de los pantalones de paño irlandés a prueba de espinos, descubierto que no necesitaban más que un cepillado para quitar aquella materia gris seca, se había puesto el traje y había salido a dar lo que habría llamado un paseo meditativo, por lo que parecía entender un merodeo sin objeto por un escenario poco familiar, caracterizado ahora por la constatación conscientemente asumida de que ahora estaba, tras su período de reclusión, al otro lado de los muros.

Como todo lo demás, el camino tenía piedras planas puestas de canto como piso, y pronto estuvo arriba detrás del pueblo. El único ruido que le llegaba en el lugar donde se había parado era el tintineo regular de un cencerro, prendido al cuello de un *burro* que ronzaba por allí cerca. Se quedó quieto como si aquella manifestación de tranquilidad rural hubiera absorbido su entera atención, como si algún verso inocente de las *Églogas* le hubiera acudido a la memoria por primera vez desde que dejó a Virgilio en un aula polvorienta para no volver a leer nunca latín más que en edificios públicos. Era una expresión de inocencia extática, casi beatífica, que rara vez se ve si no es en las caras de hombres que perpetran solapadamente algún acto vil, o algo que ellos, por la vergüenza de la infancia, consideran vil. Entonces se dio cuenta de que lo estaban observando.

George Borrow describe en alguna parte un encuentro con un lunático en los páramos de Portugal, la figura solitaria descubierta sentada en una piedra, y con la mirada fija, como la entrevista más vivida con la desolación que padeció en su vida aquel intrépido propagador del Evangelio: algo así paralizó ahora al distinguido novelista, al alzar la vista de la nubecilla de vapor que acababa de provocar ante sí hacia la figura inmóvil sentada en lo alto de la colina, junto al arco de una ruina gótica cuadrada con cuatro puertas. En tiempos podía haber sido una torre, o una capilla, a aquella corta distancia del monasterio de abajo, o algo que no tuviera nada que ver con eso. Y allí sentado mirando con fijeza hacia abajo estaba Stephen. Se abrochó a toda prisa los pantalones de paño irlandés a prueba de espinos y se acercó con un saludo para disimular su turbación.

—¡Mire!

Sobresaltado, Ludy se volvió a mirar. Al no ver nada, preguntó:

—¿Qué?

—El cielo. ¿Es que nadie lo pintó hasta que lo hizo El Greco? Mírelo, el cielo español.

Y contento de una oportunidad de rehuir la cara constreñida y los ojos, Ludy se quedó mirando el cielo. Miró; y se encontró tratando de encontrar algo en lo que clavar los ojos, pero cada línea lo llevaba a otra, cada forma daba paso a una posibilidad aún más transitoria. Y estaba allí atrapado, entre los vastos espacios que tenía delante y la intrincada respuesta que tenía detrás, hacia la que estaba a punto de volverse en busca de algún detalle en el que refugiarse, cuando la voz le detuvo con calma constreñida por encima del hombro, o en cualquier caso le dio fragmentos separados en los que prender un sentido mientras suspendía el tormento de pérdida a través del otro.

—Las Pléyades están saliendo ahora, ahora es la época. Los griegos se hacían a la mar ahora, en su sistema de navegación ésta era la época en que se hacían a la mar, con las Pléyades saliendo, y yo tengo que seguir adelante. No era tan simple.

—Ya veo, se va… ¿a algún sitio?

—Mi padre era un rey. ¿Lo sabía?

—¿Oh?, ejem, sí y… —titubeó Ludy—. Ejem, ¿y dónde está?

—Sí, ¿dónde está? «Los reyes no deberían dignarse a morir, sino sólo desaparecer», dijo alguien. Una vez me subió aun sitio como éste, y me enseñó el mundo de este modo. Sí, una vez, recuerde: «¡Yo era ese rey, y todas estas cosas eran mías! Ve, Ananda, cómo todas estas cosas han pasado, han terminado, se han desvanecido…».

Y con esto, Ludy se quedó suspendido, doblemente despojado: el silencio, que un minuto antes no resultaba inquietante, se volvió tan vacío como el cielo; y mientras paseaba los ojos por el cielo en busca de algo en que fijarlos, ahora hacía eso y además escuchaba, a la espera de algo que se abriera paso a través de la temerosa vacuidad que iba apagando sus sentidos uno a uno hasta que, con la absurda ansiedad que le había embargado desde la conciencia a su espalda, bruscamente se vio dirigiendo la atención de sus ojos hacia todas partes, sorbiendo por la nariz, agarrándose a cualquier cosa, hasta a la hierba, para sentir, hablando para oír. «¿Y dónde era eso?», logró decir, escuchando. «Sí, ¿dónde vivía?», se quedó esperando cualquier respuesta, y al no recibir ninguna se agitó nerviosamente, dispuesto a repetir la pregunta sin más razón que rescatar a ambos del silencio, hasta que un sonido se quebró en su garganta, y fue tragado, y escuchó.

—¿Yo?, en un mundo de formas y olores. Las cosas que eran reales para los demás no eran reales para mí, pero las cosas que eran reales para mí, ellas… sí, todavía lo son.

Y al escuchar, la constricción de la voz estaba allí pero era diferente, una inquietud extrema pero sin ansiedad, absorta, pero sin aquellos arranques frenéticos que el día anterior le habían acorralado contra las piedras, en aquella fría celda donde los ojos apartados del lienzo le habían arrojado en brazos del viejo en la puerta.

—Esta mañana le he visto, mirando por mi ventana, ¿qué pasaba ahí abajo?

—Me desperté y creí que estaba anocheciendo —contestó inmediatamente Stephen, pero luego se detuvo, como inseguro aún y tratando de recordar—. Y había un ruido metálico y chirriante, sonaba como la portilla de un barco abriéndose y cerrándose con el vaivén. Era extraño, una sensación extraña, casi sentía oscilar la habitación de un lado a otro. Entonces alargué el brazo derecho para enderezar la pantalla de la lámpara de pie, que estaba torcida, pero la mitad del brazo estaba dormida. Justo la mitad, y el hormigueo me hizo dejarlo caer, pero volví a levantarlo y enderecé la pantalla. Pero la pantalla siguió temblando. Siguió temblando cuando la solté y me puso nervioso, así que volví a alargar la mano para pararla. Pero siguió temblando. Me quedé mirándola, y empecé a darme cuenta de que temblaba con un ritmo regular, un compás regular que latía y latía por toda ella, y sentí mi corazón latiéndome en la nuca al mismo compás. Y entonces empezó a palpitar la mesa entera. Cuando la miraba se detenía, y cuando apartaba la vista volvía a empezar. Cerré los ojos. Lo único que sabía era que el corazón me latía como si fuera a salírseme por las clavículas. Y entonces salí. Salí y el cielo no se estaba oscureciendo, se estaba llenando de luz. Había pasado la noche entera durmiendo.

—Sí, parece… descansado.

Ludy dijo aquello alzando deliberadamente la vista hacia él, confirmando la palabra con la mirada, para eludir ambas; pero la palabra «¡Descansado!», repetida, cayó sobre él y se quedó mirando aquí y allá, perdido entre los trazos de la cara que tenía delante, hasta que la cara se volvió, y le liberó con un ronco susurro: «¿Descansado?».

—Sí, esta mañana iba a entrar en la iglesia, ¿no?, y entonces el viejo…

—No me ha dejado entrar.

—Sí, pero no creo que pueda decirle…

—Parado allí fuera en el atrio con sus llaves, también estaba mirando el amanecer, y no me ha dejado entrar. ¿Descansado?, cuando creí que había encontrado un sitio para detenerme. Pero no me ha dejado entrar. Qué creyó que estábamos haciendo, discutiendo, si no me dejaba entrar.

—Bueno, a decir verdad…

—De acuerdo, ésa es una forma de expresarlo. «A decir verdad». De acuerdo, pero al final, si las cosas que eran reales para los demás, ¿no eran reales para mí?, y si… da igual. Pero casi ha acabado de ese modo. Si me hubiera dejado entrar podría haber acabado de ese modo.

—¿Por qué no le ha dejado entrar?

—No, ¿no lo entiende?, ¿ser real sólo de ese modo? No era tan simple. «A decir verdad», aun así eso me gusta. «A decir verdad…». Escuche, esto es parte del asunto: me dijo que me fuera. «Vete adonde te buscan», dijo.

—Sí, si ha… matado a un hombre… —Ludy se apartó un poco—, a entregarse…

—¡Matado a un hombre!, ¿eso? Eso, eso, eso no da ningún fruto. Matar a un hombre, no, eso no tiene nada que ver, se acaba ahí mismo.

Stephen se estaba mirando las palmas de las manos, que temblaban abiertas ante sí, con los pulgares doblados hacia dentro y la piel tirante prestando color a las rayas: miraba como si buscase una prueba de exculpación en las manos que, como el corazón, tenían sus propias razones.

—No quería decir…

—¿Qué?

—Pero había otra cosa por la que quería preguntarle, me…

—En un homicidio como ése no te dan permiso, no seduces, no estás de acuerdo. Ni siquiera tocas. Así que ahí no hay ninguna fe rota. En un homicidio como ése, ellos no consienten —terminó con un áspero susurro decisivo, dejando caer las manos lentamente, y cuando empezó a hablar de nuevo su voz se hizo más clara, las palabras más rápidas desarrollando su propia lógica—. Ve adonde hayas pecado, y entrégate, ¿cree que me refiero a la policía? Vaya, cree que él me mandó entonces lejos, igual que el viejo me ha mandado partir. ¿Cree que es tan simple? Lo hice. Y no lo era. No querían dejarlo ser, no eran… niños. Y ahora, a empezar de nuevo. He sido un viaje, le contaré… «¿A decir verdad…?», sí, pero todavía no. He sido un viaje partiendo del fondo del mar. De buena gana me até la cola a la espalda, «Te arañaré un poco

hasta que veas mal, pero todo lo que veas parecerá bello y bravo…». ¡Dios santo, qué lujo era! Un viaje como él zarpando del Cabo para siempre, los alemanes trucaron eso, sin embargo, con una mujer, pero no es tan simple. Entre en Toledo de noche, es monstruoso, con sólo las estrellas, las moles de edificios destartalados, todo peso y sombra, y nunca volverá a verlo de ese modo, después de despertar a la mañana siguiente y caminar por la ciudad toda extendida bajo los pies a la luz del día, ¿y por dónde había estado vagando la noche anterior? Todo es diferente a la luz del día. Encuentre Valencia, con el cielo entreverado de fuego, en el calor del verano, allí hay una central telefónica *Sangre,* [71] eso me gustó. Las mujeres abanicándose en los trenes, abanicándose los pechos henchidos, la cara de aquella vieja como La Mancha tras la cosecha de julio. Hay fragmentos desperdigados por todas partes. «Un recuerdo de Nueva York», me había pedido él, o «Deme algo de dinero para medicinas», siempre medicinas, y me había enseñado una pierna hinchada antes de empezar a tocar la guitarra, y dijo que tenía mal el corazón, ese viejo gitano mirando mi puño deshilachado, y dijo que podía hacer que me lo arreglasen muy bien, tenía un amigo sastre. También se la jugué a él. Escondiendo el dinero en otro bolsillo en el último minuto consciente, y luego buscándolo por todas partes a la mañana siguiente, ¡qué vergüenza…! Y luego encontrándolo, tan cuidadosamente oculto, y salir a celebrar la prudencia de la noche anterior. Yendo y viniendo entre desastres, y siempre la tierra y el cielo, y ahora ¿a empezar de nuevo? Le contaré el frío que hace de noche en el desierto, ¡y creen que África es sólo el calor del sol! Sólo estaba allí porque no estaba en ninguna otra parte. Vería una ciudad con dos murallas sobrepuestas, y a un hombre desaparecer en la muralla, todo regulado al paso de un camello, un asno trabado en una parda ladera rocosa y palmeras al pie. ¿Se pregunta por qué le estoy contando todo esto? ¿Me cree? Mire…

Se levantó y empezó a hurgarse en la ropa, y sacó un trozo de cerámica; cayeron otras cosas, pero no se volvió a mirarlas.

—Esto es de Leptis Magna, no es bonito verdad, todavía pueden verse las huellas de los pulgares, de moldear el borde por aquí. Por qué guardará uno una cosa como ésta, de Leptis, y los árabes en cuclillas haciendo el té en fogatas de estiércol de oveja sobre el suelo de mármol, el templo de Hera, y los lirios que brotaron de su leche, y las ruinas romanas que se extienden hasta sumergirse en el mar.

Ludy se agachó a recoger lo que había caído, unos billetes arrugados de una peseta, y un tosco recorte de un lienzo con la pintura craquelada, la figura minuciosamente detallada de un viejo tendido, al que desollaban unas manos cortadas.

—Este —dijo, señalando el parecido— es el viejo, el portero de aquí, ¿no? La cara…

—Viejos, es igual que todos los… viejos —dijo Stephen, alargando la mano para agarrarlo, luego lo cedió con un gesto—. Me dijo… fíjese en la diferencia de edad, él tiene sesenta y tantos, y ella es todavía una niña, y siguen enamorados. Es… eso, ¿lo entiende ahora? Aquí puede estar más cerca de ella, mientras espera. Pero ¿para mí? Fue entonces cuando dijo no, y me mandó partir de nuevo. Él está aquí, ¿un penitente…?

Pero es diferente, porque ella se le aparece aquí, y… durante todo este tiempo ha estado viviendo esa historia de amor, ha estado enamorado. Pero para mi, por eso me ha mandado partir, para encontrar lo que… lo que él tiene aquí.

—Pero… después de lo que hizo…

—Después de lo que hizo y aprendió sólo por el sufrimiento de ella —siguió Stephen en voz más alta—. Ahora… ¿Si ella se le aparece con azucenas que se convierten en fuego? Y el fuego, ¿qué cree que es? ¿Si fue la única forma en que pudo aprender? ¿Así que entiende ya por qué me manda partir? ¿Si en algún lugar he… hecho lo mismo? Y algo ha salido de ello, algo… como… lo que tiene él. Mientras he estado acumulando el trabajo a solas. Para acabar aquí, o casi acabar corriendo hasta esas puertas, para aporrear las puertas de la iglesia, ¿entiende por qué me ha mandado partir? Vuelves la vista atrás, si nada más empezar a vivir, si has nacido en pecado, ¿entonces? ¿Y cómo lo expías? ¿Encerrándote en el remordimiento por lo que podrías haber hecho? O sobreviviendo a ello. ¿Encerrándote en el remordimiento por lo que sabes que has hecho? O volviendo atrás y sobreviviendo a ello. ¿Encerrándote con tu trabajo, hasta que se convierte en una superficie de gesso, toda preparada, limpia y lisa como el marfil? O sobreviviendo a ello. ¿Trazando líneas en tu mente? O sobreviviendo a ello. Si fue pecado desde el principio, y posible todo el tiempo, ¿saber que es posible y evitarlo? O sobrevivir a ello. Antes solía preguntarme cómo pudo Cristo ser realmente tentado, si Él era sin pecado, y rechazó la primera, y la segunda, y la tercera tentación, ¿cómo fue tentado Él…? ¿Cómo sabía Él, como lo sabemos nosotros, qué es ser tentado? No, Él era Cristo. Pero para nosotros, con ello desde el principio, y posible todo el tiempo, ¿seguir adelante sabiendo que es posible y pretender evitarlo? O… o haber sobrevivido a ello, y sobrevivir a ello, y seguir adelante sobreviviendo deliberadamente a ello.

Dio unos pasos colina abajo, y se quedó mirando el valle, donde el humo se elevaba del hacinamiento de tejados del pueblo, y más allá hacia las faldas de las montañas.

Parecía muy frágil allí, bloqueando el sendero ante la figura del traje irlandés a prueba de espinos, que parecía más alta por estar un poco más arriba. Pero Ludy no veía la forma de rodearlo, sino que estaba allí parado con aire indecisamente violento, esperando, atrapado una vez más, buscando algún detalle de vista o sonido, amenazado de nuevo con el tormento de pérdida que apagaba uno a uno sus sentidos, mientras oculto en alguna parte el cencerro contra la quijada rumiante punteaba el silencio.

—No puede seguir así —exclamó ante la espalda vuelta hacia él—, este vagabundeo… —y rectificó—, quiero decir, yo también viajo mucho, pero…

—¡Escuche!, hay un momento, viajando…

—Pero yo…

—Le ofrecieron cobijo, allí estaban, toda la familia en la cena…

—Por lo general trabajando en algo…

—Pero ella no llevaba por ahí sus pechos para que se los mordiera un desconocido, cuando dijo…

—Sin… reproche…

—Su hija…

—¿Qué? —Ludy bajó hasta su lado—. ¿Ha dicho que tiene una hija en algún sitio…?

Entonces se volvió tan deprisa en el sendero que Ludy se salió de él con un respingo, y el instante en que su pie se hundió en la espesa hierba se produjo allí una conmoción. Retrocediendo otro paso, Ludy tropezó y cayó, y el pájaro que había intentado levantar el vuelo quedó atrapado en la mano de Stephen por encima de él, batiendo frenéticamente las alas.

—Una hija, sí.

—Me he cortado —dijo Ludy desde el suelo.

—Sí —rio de pronto Stephen por encima de él, sosteniendo el pájaro, bajando la vista hacia donde se formaba una raya en la mano de Ludy.

—Pero estoy sangrando… no se, ¿por qué se ríe?

—Sí, ¿quién habría pensado que el viejo tuviera tanta sangre dentro…? —Stephen estaba allí parado mirando hacia abajo, y cubría al pájaro que tenía en la mano con la mano de los diamantes—. Pero no puedes calmarlo, no puedes consolarlo, moriría de miedo.

—Me ha asustado, tan cerca…

—Mire cómo está hecho…

—No, no… de lejos, volando, sí, son bonitos… —Ludy se incorporó con los codos—. Pero no, no tan cerca, de ese modo, me dan escalofríos… —Miró la tenue raya de su mano y repitió—: Estoy sangrando…

Stephen soltó otra carcajada, más fuerte, allí parado con el pájaro.

—Sí, sí, quién habría pensado que el viejo… —se rió con más fuerza de la raya delgada y tan tenuemente coloreada— ¡tuviera tanta sangre dentro…!

—Pero qué es esto… no —se estremecía Ludy en el suelo, incapaz de levantarse mientras tuviera el pájaro encima.

—¡Una hija, sí!, y no nacida del amor, sino gestada por amor, cuando ocurrió, la gestación, el presente rehizo el pasado. ¿Y el pretendiente? ¡Oh Cristo!, no hay que matar a los pretendientes, no, nunca, sino suplantarlos donde fallaron, tenderse donde abandonaron. Donde perdieron sus mejores momentos, y siguieron adelante, para confesarlos repitiéndolos en algún otro sitio sin revivirlos donde ocurrieron, intentando rehacer el futuro sin atreverse a rehacer el pasado. ¡Oh las vidas!, que se pierden en confesión…

—Estoy sangrando…

—¿Volver corriendo en busca de cada uno de ellos?, cada uno de ellos, no, es demasiado fácil, Penélope tejiendo una tela en algún sitio, y destejiéndola de noche, ¿y esperando?, o casarse con el error de otro, expiar uno tuyo en algún otro sitio, apagado y muerto empieza el día. Ya verá, escuche, escuche, escúcheme si la perspectiva del pecado nos atrae pero el pecado sólo es algo aburrido y muerto en cuanto ocurre, es sólo sobrevivir a él lo que lo redime.

—¿Adónde va?

—Salí temprano, y he llegado hasta aquí. ¡Oiga las campanas!, el viejo, saludando mi partida.

—Pero ¿el pájaro…?

—Hay historias, podría contarle lo de santo Domingo desplumando vivo al gorrión que interrumpió su sermón…

—Simplemente apártelo, simplemente, y déjeme levantarme, estoy sangrando.

—Se lo dije, hay un momento en el viaje en que el amor y la necesidad se vuelven lo mismo. Y ahora, si

ni siquiera los dioses pueden retirar sus dones, debemos sobrevivir a ellos, y redimirlos.

Stephen se había arrodillado lentamente junto al hombre mayor caído de espaldas en el sendero, que se había apartado lo mejor que pudo, corriendo su peso codo a codo, postrado aún por el frágil tormento del pájaro tan cerca, que le hizo exclamar:

—Pero ¿por qué me está haciendo esto?

—¿Haciendo qué? Me ha preguntado adonde iba.

—Pero estoy sangrando.

—Escuche, ¿quién emprendió un viaje alguna vez sin tener en mente el retorno? —El pájaro aleteaba en la mano rígida, casi cerrada sobre él. Stephen lo observaba con calma; mientras hablaba, sólo en los instantes en que su voz vibraba intensamente se destacaban las líneas de la mano tensándose, que el hombre tirado en el suelo observaba, la forma de la mano alterada sólo por la picuda cabeza forcejeante del pájaro, mientras desde arriba Stephen observaba su blando plumaje aleteante, su mano sólo una forma para contenerlo—. Si te lleva de vuelta al viento que sopla del desierto, allí está Biskra. O Nalut, y la luna creciente suspendida allí en el cielo, es toda mía, lo recuerdo. Cuando ocurre algo que no has planeado, donde no habías planeado que ocurriese… al norte el Atlas descuella de la tierra, en la puesta de sol todo parece como el mundo después del Diluvio, luego llega la oscuridad. No hay horizonte para separar las hogueras en la falda de la montaña de las estrellas bajas en el cielo. La única forma de saberlo es si un hombre pasa ante ti y el fuego sigue brillando, si tienes ese testimonio momentáneo de piel de cabra pasando por delante no era una estrella.

—Por favor… —dijo el hombre tirado en el suelo, haciendo ademán de levantarse, pero sus propios ojos le frenaron al clavarse en el pájaro—, ¿no… irá a matarlo, apretándolo tanto?

Y mientras miraba, la mano de Stephen se cerró, sólo lo suficiente para destacar sus tendones, y con un susurro igual de tenso dijo:

—Sí sí, pero ¿debería matarte?, ¿con mucho mimo?

Y cuando el pájaro quedó inmóvil en su mano, Stephen bajó la vista ante sí, hacia el viejo tirado en el suelo.

—¿Qué era? —preguntó.

—Pero qué era qué…

—Sí, ¿algo que quería preguntarme? Oh, ¿recuerda?, *varé tava soskei me puchelas*… mucho me he preguntado… pero no. —Stephen le sonrió desde arriba.

—Nada, pero… nada, verá, he estado escribiendo algo aquí pero yo… se trata de una experiencia de naturaleza religiosa y las oraciones, quería meter algo del servicio, pero el latín… por supuesto estudié latín, me empapé de Virgilio pero al oírlo, como no soy católico, el latín, quería algo para, algo así como para redondear las cosas, ¿no? Y ese viejo, ¿el prior?, ¿al final del servicio?, cualquier cosa…

—¿Del servicio?

—Pero en latín…

—Aquel exmaniqueo obispo de Hipo…

—¿Oh?, ¿es eso el viejo?, ¿el prior?

—¿Tiene un lápiz? Entonces escriba esto. *Dilige et quod vis fac.*

Stephen se inclinó lentamente sobre él, observando cómo se movía el lápiz.

—e. t.. qu. o. d.. v. i. s.. fac, ¿y qué significa? Estudié a Virgilio, pero he olvidado…

—«Ama y haz lo que quieras».

—¿Qué…?

Stephen se irguió, sin dejar de mirarle.

—¿Qué?, ¿es eso parte del servicio?

El pájaro estaba todavía caliente en su mano. La abrió, y el pájaro se movió contra sus dedos, mientras seguía con la vista baja.

—Puedo averiguarlo luego. Dilige… —El hombre tirado en el suelo se incorporó con los codos.

—Sí, mucho me he preguntado por qué has venido aquí a hacerme esas preguntas —rio Stephen por encima de él, apartándose. Abrió la mano. El pájaro la golpeó y quedó libre—. ¿Oye…? —Sonaron campanas lejanas al pie de la colina—. Adiós.

—¿Se va? —El hombre tirado en el suelo levantó los codos, mirando la delgada raya de su sangre.

—Si, están esperando —le dijo Stephen—. Ellos me están esperando ya… —Sus ojos reflejaron el destello de los diamantes a la luz del amanecer—. Sus pendientes —dijo—, ahí irán éstos. ¿Se lo había dicho?

La garganta de Stephen se constriñó, mientras miraba cómo luchaba por levantarse la figura tirada en el

suelo.

—Sí… —Sus ojos se empañaron sobre la figura cada vez más vieja a cada instante que miraba aquella lucha, y la mano donde la sangre se había secado del todo—. Adiós, ¿oye?, las campanas, el viejo saludando mi partida. Ahora, al fin, a vivir deliberadamente.

—Pero…

—¡Qué!

—Tú y yo…

—No, no hay más tú y yo —dijo Stephen alejándose lentamente colina arriba, con las manos vacías.

—Pero nosotros… todas las cosas que ha dicho, nosotros… el trabajo, ¿y el trabajo que estaba haciendo…?

—El trabajo sabrá su propia razón —dijo Stephen alejándose más y más—. ¿Oye…? Sí, simplificaremos. ¿Oye…?

—Pero…

—El viejo, saludando mi partida.

El hombre del traje irlandés a prueba de espinos parecía en verdad mucho más viejo, cuando al fin se recuperó y volvió a su cuarto al otro lado de los muros. Había pensado en lavarse nada más llegar, pero entró manoseando en el bolsillo un trozo de papel, que sacó, vio allí escrito con su letra: *Dilige et quod vis fac,* lo consideró sólo el tiempo suficiente para anotar: «¿Qué significa?», y antes de terminar su estancia allí lo encontraría, lo juzgaría una curiosidad desalentadora y lo tiraría al suelo (pues no había ninguna papelera).

Había dejado las ventanas abiertas, y el pájaro estaba posado en uno de los cuadros enmarcados cuando entró y cerró la puerta a su espalda.

Pero ya se había parado a hacer su anotación: «¿Qué significa?», antes de verlo, cuando salió revoloteando por la habitación hacia el otro cuadro, y aunque intentó frenéticamente espantarlo hacia la parte delantera, hacia las ventanas y el exterior, revoloteó más frenéticamente aún de un cuadro a otro, y cruzando y recruzando otra vez la habitación, mientras él pasaba en ambas direcciones ante el espejo, donde habría podido vislumbrar la cara de un hombre que tenía, o estaba a punto de tener (o como mínimo luchaba valientemente por no sucumbir a) una experiencia religiosa.

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En su primer día en Roma, Stanley fue rociado con pintura verde y se rompió un dedo. Ocurrió cuando la banda de Peregrinos a los que acompañó a visitar la basílica de San Juan de Letrán fue confundida por la vigilante policía con una manifestación de un notorio grupo político, y atacada con tanto ardor como el que mostraban los sarracenos acometiendo a aquellos peregrinos de antaño que se dirigían a Tierra Santa. Solo, cansado ya antes de empezar, acobardado por aquella violencia, irritado hasta el paroxismo por minucias tales como sus constantes reencuentros con la bamboleante mujer gorda de las uñas pintadas y el *cliclic* (¡tenga a la vista el Misterio!), cuando oyó mencionar la Via Flaminia recordó haberla oído nombrar una vez, acechando solitariamente en pasillos de hospital como ahora acechaba en Roma. Buscó a la señora Deigh, y la encontró con menos dificultades de lo que habría esperado. Al momento envió el *automobile* a recogerlo.

Como otros monumentos de la antigüedad de la Ciudad Eterna, el Daimler tenía una altura imponente, y se movía, cuando lo hacía, con toda la dignidad posible en circunstancias tan vulgares como la locomoción. Stanley se sentó delante con el chófer, y aunque rodaban imperiosamente ante calles y edificios para ver los cuales había cruzado el océano, pasó la mayor parte del trayecto mirando por encima del hombro hacia el interior vacío a su espalda, y el asiento único que había allí. Al fin y al cabo, la señora Deigh podía muy bien insistir en que había comprado aquel coche en el mismísimo garaje del Vaticano tras el ascenso de Benedicto XV a un paisaje donde no le habría servido de nada (pues, como señala un eminente español, el hombre mortal debe triunfar de la distancia y de la tardanza porque su tiempo vital es limitado: para los inmortales, los automóviles carecen de sentido). Pero por lo general era la primera en admitir su responsabilidad en la instalación de vidrieras de colores en las ventanillas.

Una vez llegados, el silencioso chófer abrió la puerta a Stanley, hizo sonar una campanilla y lo dejó en pie con aire desamparado junto a un grupo escultórico en bronce. Pero sólo por un momento. Una figura rubia vestida de organdí y zorro blanco se le acercó con paso solemne, extendió un brazo musculoso que, en un hombre, habría podido llamarse fornido, heló a Stanley con lo que, hombre o mujer, fue sin duda un guiño, y se fue. Stanley se apoyó con desmayo contra el bronce y dejó caer la mano que había tendido para saludar. Luego se enderezó, y fingía estar examinando el voluptuoso triunfo decimonónico de Judit sobre Holofernes cuando oyó pasos en el pasillo a su espalda.

—¡Así que éste es Stanley…! Y ya está admirando nuestro Donatello… —oyó, y se volvió—. Es su Salomé… pero bueno, tú ya sabías eso, por supuesto. ¿Estás bien, querido muchacho?

La señora Deigh era una mujer corpulenta. Llevaba una capa de piel hasta la rodilla, un vestido verde veraniego con el dobladillo festoneado, sembrado de lo que parecían estrellas de papel dorado, y un escote que dejaba asomar el borde de una prenda interior de lana. Avanzó con un nítido ruido tintineante, sostuvo la mano de Stanley en la suya y lo condujo al interior donde, entre gruesas colgaduras rojas, superficies de mármol, marcos dorados profusamente floridos que enmarcaban oscuros cuadrados y rectángulos, y más bronces Victorianos, lo hizo sentarse a contar su historia.

Animado por exclamaciones como «¡Estamos tan agradecidos de que Él te haya enviado directamente a Nosotros…!», Stanley habló de modo vacilante de las circunstancias de su viaje, aunque no llegó a mencionar que lo había hecho de otro modo que solo.

—Pero desembarcaste sin novedad. ¿En Génova?

—Bueno sí, sólo que…

—¿Qué, querido muchacho?

—Nada. En Génova se bajó un hombre, y encontraron un… en una de sus maletas encontraron un cadáver todo despedazado.

La señora Deigh sofocó un grito y se recostó entre más tintineos y un nítido ruido metálico.

—Dijo que eran sólo… sólo unos Santos Inocentes.

—¿Y lo eran? —preguntó ella, inclinándose hacia adelante ruidosamente, con interés.

—No, era… confesó que era sólo su mejor amigo.

—¡Oh! —dijo la señora Deigh con alivio y un leve suspiro de decepción. Entonces se oyó un lejano ruido de rotura. La señora Deigh pareció apenada.

—¡Oh, querido Dom Sucio…! —murmuró, mientras Stanley seguía hablando, en respuesta a sus preguntas sobre su trabajo, para contarle su interés por la música y mencionar sus ambiciones respecto a Fenestrula.

—Pero le ha… entonces ¿le ha escrito su hija…? ¿Sobre mí?

—¡Oh no, querido muchacho! ¡No! Nunca me escribe, no mantenemos correspondencia.

—Pero ella… usted sabe que ella…

—Ella está bien, sabemos que el Señor cuida de ella a Su propia manera. —La señora Deigh sonrió con una sonrisa que pareció acomodarla en su asiento, y la punta de un suntuoso crucifijo de nácar asomó por su pecho. Finalmente quedó claro que la mayor parte del tintineo que producía venía de una larga cadena de la que colgaba algo semejante a un gran huevo que oscilaba cuando andaba, y se anidaba en algún lugar de su regazo, como estaba ahora, cuando se sentaba. Como un huevo de Pascua ruso, aquella cosa tenía una ventanita en un lado provista de un cristal de aumento, pero al mirar, en vez de un nacimiento o un paisaje, se veía una partícula sumamente agrandada de Algo: el año pasado había sido una astilla de la Vera Cruz (que, como atestiguó Paulino, daba de sí fragmentos incesantes sin disminuir jamás); más recientemente, una esquirla del fémur de san Antonio. Sus ojos tenían un aire vagamente oriental, como si le hubieran estirado y tensado la piel, lo que realzaba su expresión contenida con la sensación de que allí podría brotar de pronto algún entusiasmo, si no fuera por el miedo a agrietar el extraordinario parecido con la cara que había debajo, que había logrado crear a base de maquillaje. Siempre se mostraba alegre, salvo en momentos devotos, cuando una vacuidad conmovedora se extendía por su cara, o en momentos de inquietud, cuando otros rasgos se precipitaban ansiosamente hacia su prominente nariz, como hicieron ahora al oírse unos gemidos en alguna parte. Se excusó diciendo—: Pobre Adriano, Nos necesita… —Y se fue con su tintineo, dejando a Stanley agarrado a la muela que acababa de encontrar en su bolsillo y paseando la mirada por la habitación.

Las pinturas con marcos dorados estaban consagradas por numerosas capas de barniz, cada una más oscura que la siguiente por la mugre acumulada sobre la anterior. Por eso era difícil adivinar qué representaban, lo que no dejaba de ser una cortesía, pues para la señora Deigh cada una era un episodio religioso al que ella asignaba tanto el asunto como la mano del maestro de la que procedía. En aquel momento, Stanley se inclinaba impertinentemente cerca para examinar una pequeña *Anunciación* de Tintoretto, con la impresión de que veía pasar un perro llevando un ave de caza por un rincón. Entonces un ruido de pasos precipitados le hizo volverse en redondo. «Eso es…», empezó, alzando la vista a la altura de los ojos, y pareció pasar un minuto entero antes de que pudiera bajar los ojos para encontrar la penetrante mirada de la figura que se acercaba anadeando por la habitación a su espalda. En ese instante salió disparado un brazo y Stanley reculó ante lo que, después se dio cuenta, debió de ser un gesto de bendición, mientras la sotana se alzaba y la pequeña figura desaparecía en el revuelo de una capa negra.

—¡Dom Sucio…! —llamó la señora Deigh, pisándole los talones—. ¿Ha pasado Dom Sucio por aquí? —preguntó cuando apareció.

—Ha pasado algo —logró decir Stanley.

—Oh querido, se ha vuelto a ir. Está tan ocupado —dijo, doblándose lentamente hasta sentarse—. Es tan adorable.

—Es un… un…

—Un dominico, y es tan amable con Nosotros. Tan protector… —Y se hundió en el sillón con—: Ahora debes contamos más cosas sobre ti.

Así que Stanley volvió a hablarle de su interés por la música, extendiéndose modestamente sobre la obra para órgano que había compuesto (que, como dijo, habría podido ser una misa de réquiem si la hubiera escrito tres siglos antes), y reiterando su deseo de visitar la iglesia de Fenestrula, y tal vez…

—¿Tocar el órgano allí? Pero, querido muchacho, nada podría ser más fácil. Fue el regalo de un americano, y por supuesto te dejarán tocar en él, un americano al que Nosotros conocimos muy bien, muy bien en realidad…

Después de eso, Stanley apenas pudo estar atento a la conversación. Todo lo demás parecía irreal, mientras aquella sola visión se elevaba ante él. Tenía los ojos clavados en un teléfono dorado al fondo de la habitación, y la muela tan apretada en el bolsillo que casi le mordía la palma; le había desaparecido el dolor de la mano vendada, y apenas oía contar a la señora Deigh cómo de niña, en el colegio, estudiando

conversación francesa, cocina y mandolina, había sabido durante todo el tiempo que le aguardaban cosas más grandes, aunque no había tenido idea de cuáles podrían ser hasta que un día, flotando desnuda de espaldas en las aguas azules de Portugal, la habían descubierto unos niños campesinos, que la tomaron por una aparición de la Virgen, y desde entonces, por supuesto, su camino había quedado claro. En realidad, hasta que no estuvo a punto de marcharse no reparó siquiera Stanley en su reloj de muñeca: sus cuatro agujas doradas formaban una figura delicadamente artificiosa, y las que señalaban las III y las IX estaban, al parecer, paradas. Las otras dos decían los minutos y las horas, y como eran exactamente las cuatro y diez cuando se marchó, no volvió a pensar en qué podría ser hasta que vino a comer al día siguiente, y su anfitriona lo saludó a las doce y media en punto.

Stanley había colgado su propio crucifijo, aunque seguía estando roto, en la pared sobre su cama de la habitación que había encontrado en Via del Babuino. Es verdad que cada vez que lo miraba se le aflojaban las rodillas, y cuando se dirigía a él, le temblaba por todo el cuerpo y luego brotaba una sensación de vacío, hasta que hundía la cara en las manos entrelazadas, y con toda la concentración que hace aún más vividas las imágenes del pasado, intentaba no recordar. Pero si estaba así mucho tiempo, de rodillas junto a la cama, el propio suelo parecía levantarse y caer impulsado por su palpitante corazón en el que resonaban las máquinas del barco, como en sus jadeos de náusea, mientras se levantaba tambaleante, resonábanlos jadeantes gemidos de la bestia que llevaba combatiendo toda la vida. Cerró los ojos para borrar la tarjeta navideña que había visto en aquel dormitorio de los barrios altos, y la imagen se destacó con más viveza aun sobre aquel oscuro tapiz de la memoria; los abrió ante la propia cosa amarillenta y rígida, con las piernas encogidas de músculos duros cortadas limpiamente por las rodillas, y volviéndose con aire atribulado decidió llevarla a arreglar al día siguiente.

Pero siempre había algo más. Primero, por supuesto, debió conseguir su folleto de identificación, la guía de Roma, el libro de oraciones y el broche para ponérselo e identificarse como Peregrino. Lo llevaba en la solapa de su segundo mejor traje (había sido su tercero y último, afortunadamente, el que sufrió el episodio de la pintura verde, y su mejor traje azul estaba colgado sin desdoblar y sin usar desde el funeral de su madre). Era con aquel mismo segundo mejor traje, comprimido entre colchones durante el viaje, y puesto con tímida anticipación bajo una portilla súbitamente ocupada por un paisaje estático en lugar del mar y el cielo, con el que se había bajado del barco, con ese lustroso aire aplanado de los marineros en tierra.

Sin embargo, mientras hacía la ronda desde San Juan de Letrán a la tumba de San Pedro, la basílica de San Pablo y Santa María la Mayor, requerida para las indulgencias, tenía un aire solitario. Cruzando el Ponte
Sant'Angelo
, donde ya habían muerto asfixiados y aplastados otros peregrinos, tenía un aire solitario. Pasando por la Puerta de las Campanas, entrando en la *piazza* de San Pedro y contemplando el obelisco egipcio y más allá los apóstoles en el tejado, y la cúpula de Miguel Angel, tenía un aire solitario. Todavía llevaba el pelo espesamente erizado en la coronilla, y había empezado a rizársele junto al cuello. Se había recortado el bigote, pero le había quedado desigual, y no dejaba de morderse ansiosamente las puntas con los dientes. Si alguien lo hubiera detenido y preguntado qué pensaba de todo aquello, habría contestado con su sorpresa al encontrar a Roma tan amarilla… pero nadie lo hacía. Visitó uno tras otro los lugares que se sentía obligado a visitar, y, es verdad, a menudo descubría al volver a la Via del Babuino que no se acordaba de cuál era cuál, que no estaba seguro de si había visto el *Laocoonte,* aunque tenía delante una foto familiar del mismo, que hasta en cierto momento llegó a confundir las capillas Sixtina y Paulina, y finalmente ambas con la Biblioteca Vaticana, donde estaba totalmente seguro de que no había estado. En cuanto a la estatua de san Pedro, con el pie desgastado por los besos, no mencionó a la señora Deigh que se había limpiado los labios después de besarla. Generalmente le informaba de sus excursiones, como hizo un día en que al entrar interrumpió sus quisquillosos murmullos sobre el periódico. «Vuelve a llevar en la mano derecha ese grueso anillo del pescador, lo que debe querer decir que está mejor de la artritis. Por supuesto Nosotros hemos rogado a la Santísima Virgen María…». Dejó a un lado el periódico, mostrando un libro nuevo titulado *Le cinque fonti sanguinose* en su amplio regazo.

—¡San Clemente! —repitió con fervor—. Pero habrá sido la iglesia *superior* la que has visitado, ¿no? Sí, con su precioso techo. Conocimos tan bien al prior Mullooly, sabes. Resulta consolador saber que pertenece enteramente a los dominicos. Pobre hombre, martirizado arrojándolo al mar con un ancla atada al cuello. Pero confiamos en que no hayas bajado hasta el *fondo,* ¿verdad?, porque alguien —y a menudo deletreaba las palabras que consideraba inadecuadas cuando Adriano andaba cerca— ha construido un templo p-a-g-a-

n-o justo debajo. Un oscuro cuartucho de piedra, húmedo y maloliente, donde iban a adorar al sol. ¿No era estúpido por su parte? Pero, por supuesto, todos fueron reprimidos, claro…

Aquí y allá veía a la mujer gorda del barco, con su folleto de lance sobre la Virgen y Mártir Moderna, aquél o algún otro, haciendo *cliclic* con su Máquina, y aunque lo aliviaba bastante que saliera huyendo al verlo, habría deseado que lo hiciese con una expresión de terror menos acusada. Una vez vio al padre Martin saliendo por la Puerta de Bronce, y estuvo a punto de saludarlo. Pero en aquel momento otro cura se unió al padre Martin y los dos se alejaron meneando las cabezas inclinadas en conciliábulo, dejando a Stanley mirando a una chica pálida que llevaba el libro de Forster *Donde temen pisar los ángeles.*

Podía haberse puesto a trabajar. Debería, puesto que el día que esperaba y que ahora podía fijar para interpretar su composición por primera vez, en la iglesia con la que había soñado innumerables veces, no estaba lejos. Hasta intentó, una o dos veces, sentarse ante el teclado de prácticas y revisar la copia que había hecho durante el viaje: pero un minuto después de sentarse ante las teclas impresas, mirando la pared desnuda de la habitación de Via del Babuino, todo el lugar pareció balancearse, el teclado plano levantarse bajo sus dedos, la propia pared estar tachonada con hileras de remaches que unían sus planchas traslapadas. Los dedos de ambas manos se cerraron en frágiles puños, y un torrente de impertinencias anegó su mente para oscurecer la idea que la poseía. Sintiendo errores en la obra que tenía delante, no los encontraba. En realidad no los buscaba en serio, sino que acaso alzaba de pronto la vista con algún recuerdo en mente como el de las alfombras orientales hechas con alguna tacha deliberada, para no ofender al creador de la Perfección emulando su grandioso designio.

Así, la cara angulosa que su memoria intentaba imponerle se veía siempre puntualmente transfigurada, rápidamente lastrada con carne para acercarse a la mujer gorda, o a algo bastante parecido a ella, rechazándolo y dejándolo con su anatema en los labios, «et eum a societate omnium Christianorum separamus…». O al padre Martin, volviendo la cara, «et a liminibus sanctae Matris Ecclesiae in coelo, et in terra excludimus, et excommunicatum…».

—Pero querido muchacho, no puedes querer ir *ese* domingo, pero si es el día de la canonización, esa pequeña mártir española, y Nosotros tenemos entradas… No puedes querer ir a Fenestrula *ese* domingo.

—Pero sí que quiero, yo… ése… ése es el día en que quiero… celebrar mi… la canonización a mi… de ese modo con mi obra, yo… usted lo entiende —terminó bruscamente con la apelación que nunca fallaba con ella, pues, como último recurso de caridad, la señora Deigh siempre «entendía». Cada vez pasaba más tiempo en su casa de la Via Flaminia; pues aunque con su prominente nariz no se parecía realmente a la mujer gorda del barco, cuyas mezquinas facciones se aferraban desesperadamente unas a otras como por miedo a perderse en la extensión de aquella cara, había una plenitud en la aceptación de la señora Deigh que contrapesaba y a la postre se imponía al distante rechazo de la mujer gorda.

Stanley se agitó en el borde de una silla reina Ana, y se encogió de hombros convulsivamente. El escapulario que la propia señora Deigh había hecho, y le había regalado, le picaba bajo la camisa. Reparó en el brillo del reloj de muñeca de la señora Deigh, y bajó la vista hacia el suyo.

—Por supuesto, querido muchacho, si eso es lo que quieres —dijo ella, y suspiró—. Sabemos lo importante que es tu trabajo, y así debe ser, pero Nosotros habíamos confiado… —La cadena tintineó.

—Sí, yo…

—Bueno, entonces, quizá esta tarde podamos ir juntos a visitar al cardenal Spermelli, estuvo muy relacionado con Fenestrula. Si Nos atrevemos a dejar a Nuestro Adriano durante tanto tiempo… —añadió, y meneó la cabeza.

Adriano no era, como Stanley sugirió vagamente un día (pensando en otra cosa), su hijo, sino un bull terrier bastante viejo ya, en tiempos blanco, y ahora aquejado por una grave infección cutánea provocada por un tinte con el que ella había intentado que hiciera juego con un vestido de terciopelo amarillo que llevaba a menudo en publico. Stanley había aprendido a vigilar sus pasos por la casa, después de pisar casi al pobre anciano un día en que había conseguido levantarse, pues aunque Adriano usaba un audífono y, por tanto, oía muy bien acercarse a Stanley, se movía con esa peligrosa seguridad de la vejez en todas partes, dando por supuesto que le cedería el paso. Y no es que Stanley no vigilara de todas formas sus propios pasos: también había estado a punto de pisar a Dom Sucio, y la mirada que recibió a cambio sólo se vio atemperada por la debilidad senil. En realidad fue bastante venenosa. Ahora bien, Stanley no sabía si Dom Sucio le había visto a él, cuando vio a la pequeña figura haciendo cabriolas en un escaparate del Corso Umberto vestida como uno de los nibelungos, en una especie de panorama wagneriano organizado para turistas alemanes y escandinavos, como tampoco sabía si se atrevería a contárselo a la señora Deigh; pues el hombrecillo protegía ciertamente su interés por ella con tanto celo como el que mostraban los nibelungos en guardar su tesoro escondido, y nunca dejaba de clavar en Stanley una mirada que provocaba escalofríos

en aquel espinazo tan poco sigfridiano, como hizo ahora al entrar.

—¡Querido Dom! —exclamó ella—. Vamos a salir a visitar al cardenal Spermelli. Creemos que a Stanley le gustará y sabemos que Stanley le gustará, siempre le gustan los chicos jóvenes, sobre todo los chicos jóvenes con talento musical. Stanley sencillamente no puede esperar a ver su arca musa-rítmica. ¿Está bien?

—¿Su qué? —terció Stanley.

Dom Sucio se sentó en un escabel con bordados y meneó gravemente la cabeza.

—Termitas —dijo.

—¿Qué?

—Termitas, querida señora.

—Pero Dom Sucio… usted me dijo que las termitas habían invadido el Vaticano, los propios archivos papales, pero…

—Se han abierto paso devorando el muro de seis pies de grosor del Cortile del Pappagallo, han devorado numerosos libros y una capa pluvial de un cardenal, y los guardias suizos han dado parte de la punta de lanza de un nuevo ataque masivo por la mismísima *piazza* de San Pedro.

—Pero ¿el cardenal Spermelli?

—Se queja de una sensación hormigueante en la pierna derecha. Lleva tanto tiempo trabajando, ya sabe, querida señora, siempre en la misma silla. La silla se desmoronó ayer.

—¡Oh! —gimió la señora Deigh, levantándose—. Esperemos que no esté tan mal como la vez que tenía la abeja en el estómago. Vamos, vamos, querido muchacho —dijo a Stanley, y él la siguió hacia la salida.

—Desearíamos que te cortaras el pelo, querido muchacho —dijo la señora Deigh cuando se ponían en marcha.

Pareció aconsejable, dadas las circunstancias, que Stanley la esperase en el *automobile.* Desapareció durante su buena media hora tras el pórtico amarillo ante el que se habían detenido, y él se quedó pacientemente sentado, lamiéndose el borde desigual del bigote, en el caleidoscópico interior del *automobile.* Al pie del amplio asiento individual, de cara a la mirilla y al tráfico que se acercaba por encima del hombro del chófer, había lo que parecía ser un reclinatorio. Su almohadilla *de petit-point* tenía bordadas las iniciales

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, pero aquélla, según le dijo la señora Deigh, era la «sillita» de Adriano, y allí era donde estaba sentado ahora Stanley, mientras el chófer la ayudaba a subir al coche y volvían a ponerse en marcha hacia la Via Flaminia.

Una vez se hubo acomodado, la señora Deigh le entregó una carta, «Para Fenestrula, querido muchacho…». Y apenas pudo darle las gracias. Pero ella se quedó mirando el techo de damasco, rechinando los dientes, así que intentó mirar afuera por uno de los vidrios de color más claros. Finalmente acomodado, con las rodillas encogidas bajo la barbilla, y mirando lo mejor que podía por los calzones del santo en el martirio de san Esteban representado a su derecha, cuando el coche redujo su marcha y paró por el tráfico gritó de repente y estuvo a punto de atravesar el techo de damasco.

—¡Allí está! ¡Allí está…!

—¿Quién está allí… querido muchacho?

—¡Allí está…! Sentada en esa… en esa mesa de ese café…

—Querido muchacho…

El *automobile* siguió adelante, y Stanley se recuperó un poco.

—Nada, yo… alguien que… alguien que conocí… una vez.

—Pero querido muchacho, estás tan pálido…

Se inclinó hacia adelante para cogerle la mano, que temblaba con la carta para Fenestrula, y le puso el reloj justo debajo de su vista. Al recordar más tarde con toda vividez aquella dislocada contorsión, recordaría también la hora: eran las seis en punto.

—Bueno, nos acostumbramos a la pobreza en España, así que aquí no nos molesta realmente —dijo la mujer alta sentada en la terraza del café la tarde siguiente. Se apartó de la figura que estaba de pie a su lado mirando hacia las mesas de más allá. Era Stanley, y se estaba rascando por debajo de la chaqueta. Cuando se alejó, ella se inclinó hacia adelante y susurró a su marido—: ¿Te pica? Puede que sólo sean imaginaciones mías, pero desde que salimos de… ninguno de aquellos monjes parecía haberse bañado realmente desde hacía años.

—Y como no querías acostarte conmigo di por supuesto naturalmente que no querías acostarte con

chicas, así que di por supuesto naturalmente que eras marica. ¿Qué estás haciendo aquí, eres católico?

La chica de la mesa de al lado alzó la vista hacia Stanley como si estuviera fisgando, pero él siguió mirando inquisitivamente más allá de ellos. En la mesa que tenía a la izquierda, un pastor protestante americano con gafas sin aros probó el Cinzano por primera vez, torció el gesto y dijo:

—Es sólo parte de esta gran obra que estamos llevando a cabo entre todos. ¿Conoces esa nueva palabra, *caprodío…?* Está formada con las primeras letras de católico y protestante y las…

—¿Católico yo? Cristo no, sólo he venido aquí a ver el arte.

—Bueno, desde luego has escogido un mal momento —dijo la chica, observando cómo retrocedía Stanley entre las mesas. Eran las seis en punto.

—No sé por qué se emocionan tanto con las ruinas de Roma, Berlín está ahora igual de bien.

—Siempre se ve mejor una ciudad antigua cuando ha sido bombardeada.

Stanley seguía mirando. Vio a la chica pálida que había visto antes junto a la Puerta de Bronce, cuando iba tras el padre Martin, y del mismo modo que su cara había ocupado el lugar de la suya entonces, ahora surgió ante Stanley la cara del padre Martin, y se volvió, mientras Stanley se apartaba de ella. Estaba sentada a solas, leyendo *Una habitación con vistas.*

—En realidad ya he terminado prácticamente esa novela, lo único que tengo que hacer ahora es meter el motivo —dijo un joven en la siguiente mesa junto a la que se paró—. He estado leyendo a Dante para sacar algunas ideas.

Entonces Stanley creyó verla, en una mesa con varias figuras vagamente familiares, en medio de la atestada terraza. Intentó avanzar a toda prisa hacia allí, la mente de nuevo llena con el torrente de impertinencias que no dejaban de afluir mientras la cara del padre Martin se inclinaba y quedaba borrada por la de la mujer gorda, frunciendo sus pequeños labios en silencio, perdiendo carne, agrandando los ojos, hundiendo las mejillas, para convertirse en la cara que perseguía ahora y creía haber visto hacía un momento, a no ser, pensó mientras chocaba con mesas y respaldos en su prisa, con las rodillas flojas, por lo que parecía llevar: un turbante blanco garbosamente anudado sobre la frente, puños blancos y un ancho cuello blanco sobre los hombros, los labios muy pintados y el vislumbre de una falda negra larga y estrecha.

—¡Stanley!

—¿Qué… eh…?

Don Bildow lo había agarrado de la muñeca a modo de saludo.

—Me pregunté qué te habría pasado cuando no te bajaste en Nápoles…

—Sí, yo… Tengo prisa, yo…

—Yo también, espera, escucha… —Don Bildow miraba con aire suplicante por sus aros de plástico. Su pelo parecía más ralo, su traje marrón más raído. La corbata amarilla y marrón empezaba a ensuciarse por el nudo—. Sólo una cosa, si tienes algún…

—Yo… ¡tengo que irme! —Stanley se soltó de un tirón, diciendo—: Y ni siquiera sé qué era eso que querías…

—No, eso ya está arreglado —dijo Bildow, agarrándole otra vez del brazo—, la metiltestosterona, conseguí eso, la enfermera del barco fue muy amable cuando se lo… Pero escucha, ahora necesito… ¿Sabes cómo se dice preservativo en italiano? Hay una chica esperándome y me… ¡Espera…!

Cuando Stanley llegó a la mesa en medio de la terraza, no había allí ningún conocido. Un chico rubio acababa de decir: «Y a mí qué me importa si san José de Cupertino volaba *realmente* por ahí y se posaba en los árboles. ¡Eso no tiene nada que ver con ello!».

—¡Te vi! —dijo una voz desde una cara vagamente familiar, y un largo índice rojo se apoyó en la mano de Stanley.

—Pero… ¿dónde? —preguntó, desconcertado, pues a pesar del traje azul oscuro y el pelo rubio corto, la cara pesada le resultaba familiar.

—*Chez* esa mujer perfectamente obvia, tú entrabas cuando yo salía.

—Pero era una…

—Yo. Fui a preguntar por una tienda donde comprar braguitas. Pero ¿qué hacía allí un chico como tú? No me lo imagino. —Entonces el dedo se deslizó hasta caer mientras se volvía y presentaba a Stanley a los demás de la mesa con—: Me temo, queridos, que es uno de esos odiosos Peregrinos, y ya lo han apedreado por la calle, fijaos en su mano. ¿Pero sólo es un dedo? ¿A qué guarrada estabas jugando…?

—Pero yo…

—Como os estaba contando, esta mañana he ido a esa iglesita descaradamente *recherché,* porque se supone que tienen un Tiziano de lo más auténtico escondido allí en alguna parte. Por supuesto había una cola, así que esperé mi turno, y ¿sabéis?, me encontré en una cola de madres embarazadas que esperaban la

bendición.

—¿Había una chica aquí? —interrumpió Stanley.

—Mi querido muchacho, déjate de indecencias o tendrás que largarte. ¿Qué *te* pasa, tienes piojos? Te estás rascando como Thomas à Becket.

—¡Mirad!

—Pues sí que lo es, es Herschel. ¿Veis ahora con lo que se ha casado? Su estudio le pagó a ella diez mil dólares. Algo llamado Adeline.

—Pero ¿tiene que llevarla a todas partes?

—Para eso le pagaron diez mil dólares. Por supuesto no tiene que llevársela a la *cama.* ¿Os habéis enterado de que después de todo no va a hacer de san Sebastián en esa película? En la escena del martirio, ya sabéis, tenía que estar prácticamente desnudo cuando le disparasen esas flechas horrendas, pero bastó una mirada a ese tatuaje tan divino que tiene en el…

—Por favor —volvió a interrumpir Stanley—, ¿alguno de vosotros…?

—E imaginaos, no me van a dejar tener al pequeño Giono hasta el miércoles, cuando me *reciban.* Pues vaya, si ahora mismo estoy en estado de gracia.

En un momento de silencio, mientras Stanley recuperaba el aliento, se elevó una débil voz en falsete al otro lado de la mesa con: «La Virgen María salió a pasear…».

—¡Eso es de ella!, tú… es una canción que canta ella…

—Cariño, ¿la conoces?

—Sí, tú… ¿dónde está? Estaba aquí, ella… ¿no? ¿No era la que llevaba ese absurdo…?

—Cuidado, cariño. Rudy lo diseñó especialmente para ella. Es su traje de novia.

—Su… ¿qué?

—Debería decir su ajuuarr.

—Pero tú… ella… ella se… ¿va a casar?

—Cariño, ¿no lo sabías?

—Pero con… ¿quién? ¿Con quién se va a casar?

—Quizá no sería discreto decírtelo.

—Pero debes, ella… yo…

—Vale, no *nombraremos* al novio. Puedes adivinarlo. Sólo te diremos que se va a meter monja. Ahora puedes adivinarlo, ¿con Quién?

—Pero tú… aggg… —Stanley sólo podía respirar entre jadeos.

—Cariño, no te lo tomes así, no queremos ningún pretendiente celoso.

—Aggg…

—¿No le sienta de maravilla el hábito de Rudy? Quiero decir el hábito que ha diseñado. De todas formas tiene un cuerpo muy elegante, ya sabéis. No todo lleno y redondeado como las mujeres.

—¿Mon… nnm… monja?

—Rudy dijo que había intentado darle un aire lo más dominico posible. ¡Y os imagináis a Rudy casaado!

—¿Se va a… casar… con Rudy? —logró decir Stanley.

—No es nadie que conozcas, tonto. No es nadie que alguien conozca, nadie entiende qué ve en ese, cuyo nombre me callo. Un tipo del montón. Corriente, vulgar, ordinario…

—Pero espera, yo… ella… ¿adónde ha ido? —preguntó Stanley, mirando desvalidamente a su alrededor.

—Rudy diseñó otro con un tocado aureola de lo más divinamente inspirado, y una faja magenta muy laarga y elegante con montoones de oro, hasta a mí me entraron ganas de tomar el velo cuando se lo vi puesto a *ella.* Pero ¿la habéis oído hablar?, de estigmas, y una lanza con punta de fuego dorado que le atraviesa el corazón, y agujeros llenos de pus en su frente que huelen a lirios y toda clase de detalles de lo *más* cruento. ¡Oh, no! «Lirios por fuera, rosas por dentro». Pero no eso. ¡Oh no! En su cara…

—Puro Caravaggio. Le dije que sabía que la había visto antes, pero me negué a preguntarle a quién conocía en Nueva York, no quiero volver a pensar jamás en esa pesadilla tosca y vulgar, jamás. Dije: «Haré simplemente como si te hubiera conocido en un cuadro». Puro Caravaggio. Pero ¿habéis visto a *mis* Rafaeles esta tarde? ¡Benito sólo tiene siete años!, y deberíais oírlo parlotear con esa exquisita lengüita rosada…

—Por favor, dime… —dijo ahora Stanley, bajando la voz hasta que casi pudo dominarla—, ¿adónde ha ido?

—¡Deja *ya* de rascarte! Prácticamente lo único de lo que hablaba era de ir a Asís, para entrar y salir corriendo por la puerta de esa iglesia de la Porciúncula y conseguir montoones de indulgencias para alguien que conoce en el purgatorio, alguien que bajó al mar celestial por una cuerda, no sé, sonaba todo demasiado amanerado.

—Pero… ¿se ha ido allí ahora?

—Quiere ir a toda costa, pero no sabe cómo llegar allí. Le dije que fuera simplemente descalza. Pon tu fe en Dios, cariño, le dije. Ella te protegerá.

—Pero… entonces, ¿adónde ha ido?

—Se ha ido con un tipo vulgar con una corbata de seda verde, que dijo que iba a hacerla entrar en un concurso de cine. Eso es simplemente todo lo que sé. Mira. Mira, ¿ves allí a aquel tipo con un aire toscamente universitario?, ¿con una corbata de seda verde?, sentado con ese tipejo raro…

—Gracias —dijo Stanley, volviéndose, y salió disparado.

—¿Es verdad que los cardenales pueden patinar sobre ruedas entre la *sala ducale* y la *cappella* Sistina?

—Ya mí qué me importa si a Moisés se le acusa de brujería en el Corán, ¿quién lee el Corán?

Stanley alcanzó al hombre de la corbata de seda verde al borde de la terraza, cuando se marchaba, e inmediatamente dio una descripción pertinente.

—¿Tú también la conoces? Es tremenda, ¿verdad? Ni siquiera sabía que fuera americana, salvo por eso tan estrafalario que llevaba puesto, parecía el vivo retrato de una *madonna,* ¿sabes lo que quiero decir?

—Sí, pero yo… ¿dónde está?

—Bueno, yo estoy aquí haciendo publicidad para esa película sobre la vida de la
S. V. M.
, y estamos haciendo un concurso para el papel protagonista. Ella sería perfecta. Sabes, me acerqué y le dije: «¿Spikka ing-glish?», tal cual. Nunca aprendí italiano, no lo enseñan en Yale.

—Pero ella…

—No que yo sepa, en todo caso. Así que le pregunté si había estado alguna vez metida en el cine, ¿y sabes lo que dijo? Dijo que una vez fue a ver una película sobre un hombre muy gracioso con un sombrero negro redondo y un bigotito…

—Pero…

—Otra vez vio Lo *cabaña del tío Tom,* donde suben al cielo a la pequeña Eva con cuerdas, así que le dije: No ir a ver una película, quiero decir si alguna vez has actuado en una. Tenemos una banda sonora en seis idiomas en esta vida de la
S. V. M.
, hemos alquilado un pueblo entero para hacerla.

—Pero…

—También hemos alquilado a toda la gente del pueblo. Va a ser en color. Estaría perfecta en el papel de la
S. V. M.
¿Qué te has hecho en la mano?

—Bueno, eso, me… hubo una especie de tumulto… —titubeó Stanley.

—¿Tú también estabas allí? Mira. Mi talonario, ¿ves? ¿Ves eso? Una bala. Me paró una bala. Tengo que irme. Un placer conocerte. ¿Ves a ese pobre imbécil que está conmigo? Tengo que cenar con él, es un exrey. Quiere un buen agente publicitario para ayudarle a recuperar su trono. Hasta luego. Un placer conocerte, si también la conoces. Es tremenda. Es perfecta… la viva imagen de la S. V. M…

—Pero ¿dónde *está?* —preguntó desesperadamente Stanley, agarrándose a la mano que había aferrado la suya con un gesto automático.

—¿Ahora? Ni idea. Te diré, sólo hablaba de que quería subir a un pueblo con una rosaleda, para ver allí arriba a un tipo que bajó por una cuerda al fondo del océano. No me quedó claro, la verdad sea dicha. Apenas nos dio tiempo a hacerle unas fotos. Es tremenda, hasta en 3-D sería tremenda, así que le dije que le mandaría un coche del estudio para llevarla adonde infiernos quiera que esté eso, esa rosaleda. Va a llamarme. Hasta luego.

—Sí, yo… hasta… hasta luego.

Stanley se quedó rascándose debajo de un brazo y miró cómo se alejaba ruidosamente el descapotable verde lima. A su espalda, alguien dijo:

—Por supuesto, el Vaticano es de una pobreza infame, después de Delfos.

—Querido muchacho, gracias al cielo que estás bien. He estado rezando.

—Pero… ¿qué?

—Un joven se tiró desde la bóveda de San Pedro, y pensé que podría… ¡Oh! Su cuerpo cayó delante mismo del altar mayor, delante mismo de todos esos turistas, y sentí que… aunque el periódico dice que era

un joven bien vestido.

Stanley la siguió a la habitación recargada, donde ella se sentó con aire distraído. La cadena tintineó cuando ladeó la cabeza hacia un lejano ruido de rotura, que les llegó un tanto apagado por las colgaduras rojas.

—Vaya día hemos tenido, y pobre Dom Sucio, lo está incordiando una mujer alemana muy ordinaria que quiere que canonicen a su hija. Hasta ha llegado a venir *aquí* a buscarlo, hemos tenido que esconderlo en el armario. Una tal Frau Fahrtmesser —pronunció enérgicamente la señora Deigh—, y dice que tiene a su hija consigo, en la consigna de equipajes de la Stazione Termini. —Entonces la señora Deigh se quedó mirando un momento a Stanley, que se agitó dentro de su chaqueta como pidiendo disculpas. Ella meneó la cabeza, hizo el familiar chasquido con los labios y repitió—: Gracias al Cielo que estás bien. —Mientras cogía el periódico—. Nuestro escapulario te ha protegido, gracias al Cielo. —Bajó los ojos hacia el periódico y meneó la cabeza sobre él—. Esperamos que los encuentren —murmuró.

—¿Qué?

—Los huesos de san Pedro. Llevan buscándolos tanto tiempo —murmuró, y siguió meneando la cabeza. La habitación estaba muy caldeada, y Stanley se inclinó hacia adelante en el borde de la silla reina Ana con las manos enlazadas entre las rodillas, mirando al suelo. Pareció a punto de hablar una o dos veces, y finalmente se recostó y se frotó los hombros contra la silla.

—Quería…

—El periódico nunca Nos cuenta cosas bonitas. A veces simplemente Nos trae más sangre de la que creemos que podemos aguantar. Y cuando mencionaste a Nuestra hija, no es así, sabíamos que había algo, y ahora Nos acordamos. Estaba segura de haber leído en el periódico que la habían ahorcado por asesinato. ¡Por asesinar a su marido! Y eso es un poco más de lo que podemos aguantar, incluso a alguien de tu propia carne y sangre. Y en Misisipi.

—Sí, ella… pero usted debería saberlo, ella…

—Siempre fue una niña caprichosa. Nosotros hicimos todo lo que pudimos, pero muy pronto vimos señales de su descarrío. Y cuando Nos confesó que había masticado la hostia… —La señora Deigh alzó la vista bruscamente, volvió a bajarla, y meneó la cabeza—. Qué tristes estamos de que no vayas a estar aquí para las ceremonias de canonización de la pequeña mártir española. Probablemente habrá cincuenta mil personas, y será la primera que se celebre al aire libre. Tenemos entradas para la columnata, sabes. Vaya, probablemente habrá al menos cien obispos, y Su Santidad llevará la capa roja del martirio.

Stanley estaba restregando la alfombra con el borde del zapato, cada vez con más aire de pedir disculpas, hasta lo siguiente que dijo ella, cuando se enderezó y casi se le animó la cara.

—Y hemos hecho la promesa de no salir de casa hasta ese glorioso día.

—Oh, yo… quería pedirle si podría… si quisiera ir a un sitio, ¿podría llevarme el *automobile?*

—Tendrías que decirNos adonde —respondió ella, y la cadena tintineó con leve reproche—. Sólo así podríamos Nosotros dar instrucciones a Orlando, dado que no te entiende.

—Bueno, a… a Asís, pensaba… quiero ir a Asís.

—¡El lugar de nacimiento de san Francisco! Por supuesto, querido muchacho. Esa dulce figura celestial, nos han llegado tantas historias. A visitar la Porciúncula, donde se arrojó al rosal espinoso en lo más crudo del invierno, para vencer su pasión… o más bien deberíamos decir la tentación de suavizar sus austeridades, pues es su pasión lo que veneramos, ¿verdad? Ya es casi la época en que florecen las rosas, y verás sus hojitas salpicadas con su sangre. DiNos, querido Stanley… —Se inclinó hacia él. El objeto ovoide se le resbaló del regazo, y osciló colgado de la cadena hasta llegar al suelo entre ambos. Stanley lo recogió y se lo tendió. Ella lo recibió sin una ojeada, mirándolo a la cara—. ¿Meditas tomar las Ordenes? Pues hemos leído en tu dulce carácter abnegado…

—Bueno, yo… yo… —empezó, cuando ella no concluyó sus palabras.

—¿Y es por eso por lo que quieres visitar el santuario del más desinteresado de los santos, el más humilde? ¿Y ver el sitio mismo donde rechazó las tentaciones del Maligno…?

—Bueno, yo… no es exactamente por mí mismo, yo… ¿De verdad es mudo Orlando?

—Pues sí, querido muchacho, pero ¿por qué preguntas eso? ¿Y qué quieres decir con…?

—Bueno, quiero decir, quiero decir no por mí mismo, quiero decir, lo que quiero decir es que no es sólo por mí mismo, quiero decir…

—Quieres decir no sólo por tu yo físico, tus sentidos —dijo ella, ayudándole a salir de su confusión—. Quieres decir también por tu yo espiritual, por supuesto que lo entendemos, querido muchacho. Por supuesto.

—Sí, yo… sí —dijo Stanley débilmente, y se recostó en la silla. La señora Deigh se quedó callada. Él

levantó la vista cautelosamente, preparado para afrontar sus ojos, pero estaba mirando al periódico y meneando la cabeza.

—Y aquí hay un pobre sacerdote jesuita expulsado —empezó pesarosamente, como prosiguiendo la conversación—, que está intentando emprender una cruzada mundial contra el papa. —Hizo otra vez el chasquido—. Y ya está excomulgado, no sólo *toleratus,* sino *vitandus.* Si entra en una iglesia, el servicio debe detenerse inmediatamente. Pero ¿qué es *toleratus?* —preguntó a Stanley, levantando la vista bruscamente.

—Bueno, eso… eso… —titubeó—, *toleratus* es cuando alguien no ha sido todavía… denunciado públicamente, cuando… y no pueden… echarlo a menos que intente… participar en la misa.

—¿Y adónde has ido a misa esta mañana? —preguntó ella, como cambiando ahora de tema.

—Yo… no he ido.

—Tú… ¡pero mi querido muchacho! Quieres decir que no has ido a la *primera* misa. Lo entendemos —dijo, acomodándose en la silla de forma que el crucifijo de nácar se elevó por encima del borde de lana de su escote. Stanley se lo quedó mirando. Se levantó y sintió las rodillas flojas.

—Debo… irme a casa —dijo. Su mano apretó la muela en el bolsillo—. Mañana…

—Sí, querido muchacho, hasta mañana.

Le sonrió, y luego frunció los labios sin hacer ruido, casi como la mujer gorda. Stanley intentó sonreír, pero se volvió, frotándose los ojos con una mano, y murmuró buenas noches. Entonces oyó su voz y se volvió a mirarla. Tenía la vista fija de nuevo en el periódico.

—¿Encuentren qué? —preguntó, mientras el brillo de su reloj de muñeca y el suave viso del crucifijo de nácar volvían a encandilarle, con las rodillas flojas y las palabras atravesándole, «et anathematizatum esse decernimus, et damnatum cum diabolo, et angelis eius, et omnibus reprobis in ignem aeternum indicamus…».

—Unos americanos en el monte Ararat. Están buscando el Arca de Noé.

Al día siguiente una revista ilustrada americana, cuya insidiosa pretensión de simplicidad le permitía tener una gran tirada, dedicó una página entera a una foto publicada anteriormente en el *Osservatore Romano* como demostración de las travesuras del sol sobre Portugal en la época de las apariciones de la Virgen allí. El propio papa (que había pasado parte del día bendiciendo a los conductores de un festival de motoescúteres, a los que elogió por su «valor y agilidad») había recibido, en otra inspirada ocasión, mensajes «silenciosos y elocuentes» del «agitado sol» y presenciado «la vida del sol bajo la mano de María». Y allí, como prueba, estaba la foto (de «origen rigurosamente auténtico») del sol cerca del horizonte a las 12.30 p. m., donde bien habría podido ser fotograbado si el horizonte hubiera sido el de Portugal y la hora la de Barbados, pues aun en aquel momento era casi mediodía en el Caribe mientras el toque vespertino del Angelus sonaba en alguna parte por encima de la cabeza de Stanley, que entraba en Piazza di Spagna con aire cansado e inquieto.

—¡Oh, no! —encontró energía para decir, cuando Don Bildow lo agarró del brazo y, en el mismo instante, vio a la figura alta que no había visto desde el muelle de Nápoles, con el flexible negro calado sobre la frente y el brazo ya no en cabestrillo sino metido en el bolsillo del abrigo Chesterfield.

—Sólo he venido a recoger mi correo en la American Express —dijo Bildow, sin soltarlo—. ¿Qué te pasa? ¿No estás bien?

—Me… tengo que…

—Supongo que yo también tengo un aspecto infame —dijo Bildow, mirándolo de arriba abajo—, pero acabo de estar con ese sastre, me va a hacer un traje muy bonito, cuarenta mil liras, voy a tirar éste en cuanto lo tenga. Todo lo demás lo he mandado a París, iré allí dentro de unos días. Voy a tirar este traje y llevaré puesto el nuevo para no tener que pagar derechos de aduana por él. ¿Has visto esto? —Enseñó el libro que llevaba—. Acabo de verlo en Piale. Es de Anselm.

Stanley, que había estado mirando ansiosamente hacia la figura que sólo conocía como el Hombre Frío, dio un respingo y bajó la vista hacia el libro.

—¿Anselm?

—Su confesión. Yo salgo aquí. Tú sales también. Todos salimos aquí.

—Yo… ¿de verdad? —dijo Stanley, mirándolo—. Pero yo creía que estaba en un monasterio.

—Y lo está. Esta es su confesión de lo que lo llevó allí. Me gustaría… ponerle las manos encima —añadió Bildow, apretando el libro con un puño blando.

—¿Me lo prestas? —preguntó de pronto Stanley.

—Pues… pues claro, si lo quieres. Todavía no lo he leído, sólo le he echado un vistazo. Salimos todos en

él. No quiero leerlo aún —añadió, tendiendo el libro, y Stanley lo aferró con ambas manos, poniendo el dedo roto vendado sobre el título—. ¿Y sabes lo que me pasó anoche? —siguió Bildow, con voz un tanto indignada—. No veo la hora de llegar a Francia. Esa chica que tenía esperándome, ¿te acuerdas?

—Tengo que irme —dijo rápidamente Stanley, sosteniendo el libro contra su pecho como para protegerse.

—Me la subí a la habitación y al principio no quería quitarse el sostén. Se había quitado todo lo demás, pero…

—Tengo que irme, adiós, gracias por el libro… —Stanley había vuelto a ver por un momento al Hombre Frío.

—¿Y sabes? ¿Sabes la mala pasada que me estaba jugando? Tenía uno de los pechos de madera.

—Yo… no lo quiero oír, suéltame, adiós…

—¿Todavía tienes prisa? Qué te parece eso, imagínate, tenía uno de ellos de madera, estaba hecho de madera, igual que… oye, ¿cuándo te volveré a ver…?

Pero Stanley no podía oírlo ya. Corría por la acera con el libro apretado con los antebrazos contra el pecho, lanzando miradas al frente, no muy seguro de dónde había visto aquel mismo perfil decidido y aquella barbilla estrecha, y los acuosos ojos azules, pero seguro ya de que los había visto mucho antes del Conte di Brescia. Pero con una pregunta mucho más importante, más inmediata, ardiéndole en la cara, Stanley lo siguió hasta un café, en donde el hombre entró, miró rápidamente a su alrededor y se sentó solo, dejando el sombrero a su lado, alisándose las puntas del pelo con las yemas de los dedos y apoyando luego la barbilla en la mano, doblada de tal forma que parecía estar mordiendo el anillo de sello de oro que llevaba en ella. Stanley se quedó parado con aire indeciso junto a una columna a su espalda, chupándose las puntas desiguales del bigote como para encontrar las palabras de saludo que buscaba de ese modo.

—Todo el camarote apestaba de mala manera —dijo la mujer alta sentada cerca ante un aperitivo—, sencillamente todas sus pastillas de vitamina B se habían derretido. Las toma para la resaca.

A la derecha de Stanley una chica dijo:

—Y cuando ella se marchó dejó todos los cajones llenos de frascos de bromo. ¿Has leído esto? Es de Firbank.

Entonces, cuando Stanley estaba a punto de acercarse, un hombre con una rígida cara oriental, tiesa pero no tensa, que sólo se movía levemente por las comisuras de la boca mientras se acercaba, se adelantó desde otra mesa. Era bastante bajo, y llevaba una trinchera. Se saludaron con aparente sorpresa, y el hombre de la trinchera empezó a hablar nada más sentarse.

—*Fenn és*…

—Hable en inglés, idiota…

Al oír aquella voz, aun apagada como sonaba tras las manos entrelazadas, Stanley recordó, y le tembló el labio. La noche entera le volvió, y bajó la caray se sentó medio oculto tras la columna, abrió el libro de Anselm y se quedó mirando una página: «Si entonces nos hubiéramos parado siquiera un minuto, un minuto de silencio…». Cerró los ojos con fuerza, y la cabeza se le llenó con el rugido del metro. Luego estuvo a punto de levantar las manos para averiguar si llevaba la camisa desabrochada, para abrochársela como había estado haciendo entonces; en cambio, sólo se estremeció, como se había estremecido entonces, y mientras la voz de una mujer que tenía al lado salía con: «Hay lucecitas eléctricas en las tumbas, y se pagan por horas, igual que antes había velas encendidas…», Stanley oyó el eco de la voz de la mujer del metro envolviéndole a él y al hombre que se tapaba la boca con un pañuelo, como ahora estaba allí con las manos entrelazadas. «Allí arriba donde está enterrado Keats, ¿o es Shelley…?». Su voz, y la masa enmarañada debajo de su falda envolviéndoles en la intimidad del horror, en el andén donde los líquidos ojos azules se helaron por encima del pañuelo blanco: «Esas, mi querido joven, son las criaturas que en tiempos quemaban en las cazas de brujas…».

—Una peste, por todas partes…

Stanley se enjugó la cara con la mano, como había hecho aquella mañana, despertando de repente, mirándose la palma, y luego la dejó caer y escuchó.

—No habría podido ser más simple, más tentador —decía en voz baja el hombre de la trinchera—. De hecho me invitó a ir allí, a ver la momia. ¡Había hecho una él mismo para mí! Oh, pero con qué habilidad, era realmente una obra maestra…

—Realmente, mi querido amigo…

—Confieso que no tuve corazón para terminar nuestro asunto inmediatamente, pasé unos minutos felicitándole. Se enfadó mucho cuando parecí cuestionar la… ¿autenticidad?, de aquella cosa, pero estaba muy orgulloso. Lo vi en sus ojos, estaba muy orgulloso, cuando terminamos nuestro asunto privado.

Se quedaron callados un momento, y el hombre de la trinchera crispó levemente las comisuras de la boca, mirando al techo, como si estuviera recordando con cariño algún encuentro agradable con el pasado. Luego se encogió de hombros, y añadió:

—Los españoles, sin embargo, no están… cuerdos, por supuesto.

El hombre que estaba con él apenas se había movido, salvo para correr un codo y dejar sitio a una copa en la mesa ante sí. Miraba más allá de la puerta del café con ojos ausentes azul claro.

—No tiene buena cara —dijo el otro—. Está más ojeroso que la última vez que le vi, allí.

—No duermo bien.

—Tampoco dormía bien entonces.

—Ni siquiera tan bien como… entonces.

—¿Un cigarrillo?

—No.

—¿Ya no fuma?

—No.

Tras un momento de atento silencio, el hombre de la trinchera dijo:

—¿Y piensa volver? —No recibió más respuesta que un leve gesto de cabeza. Apareció un camarero con más vino y un trozo de Gorgonzola—. Sí, entonces ¿está seguro de que quiere volver? Porque todavía hay tiempo…

—Y a usted… ¡qué le importa! Desde luego que voy a volver.

Sin embargo, este arranque de impaciencia apenas le hizo apartar la cara de las manos que tenía entrelazadas ante ella, y enseguida volvió a cubrírsela.

—¿Le ha quedado una mala cicatriz en el labio? —El hombre de la trinchera volvió a crispar convulsivamente las comisuras de su boca—. Sabe que eso puede arreglarse, por supuesto —murmuró, escuchando, observando con ojos relucientes.

—¿Qué quería decir con eso? Volver, por qué no. ¿Qué quería decir?

Las hombreras de la trinchera se encogieron ligeramente.

—Nada. Por supuesto, ¿rumores?

—Sí, sí, sí —susurró el otro con brusca impaciencia tras sus manos—. Y después de sus informes, ¿eh? Vigilándome… sí, cosillas como el momento en que mostré cierta consternación porque estaban malbaratando nuestros cuadros por dólares, ¿les contó eso también?

—Por favor, por supuesto…

—Sí, lo que demuestra de modo concluyente que debo estar trabajando por la restauración de la corona… ephhh… esa clase de lógica… Desde luego que voy a volver, ¿por qué no?, adonde… ¿qué si no? —susurró mirando directamente al frente. Luego bajó los ojos lentamente y se quedó contemplando el queso en el plato que tenía junto al codo.

—Por supuesto, quería decir, le entiendo…

—Por supuesto, ya explicó eso una vez. No…

—Sólo quería decir que las cosas no van bien, nada va bien allí. Todo lo de allí, la corrupción se ha extendido…

Su voz se apagó, se quedó callado con los ojillos relucientes, y dio un respingo cuando de pronto empujaron el queso hacia él con un codo.

—Tome, pruebe un poco de eso, saboréelo, la corrupción bien utilizada…

Y volvieron a quedarse callados; el hombre de la trinchera no tocó el gorgonzola, y finalmente dijo:

—¿Mañana? ¿Hay uno más?, ¿un cura, según me han dicho?

—Vestido de cura.

—Y usted, usted me lo indicará, ¿no lo confundirá?

—Sí, yo, yo se lo señalaré. No lo confundiré —murmuró su compañero tras sus manos, luego las separó y pareció escupir algo de la punta de su lengua—. ¿Y cree que podrá encargarse de él, en la calle, a plena luz del día?

—Por supuesto… —murmuró el hombre de la trinchera, y luego—: *A Veres költö*… ¿se acuerda de eso…?

—¿Usted? —Las manos entrelazadas cayeron por un momento, con un destello de oro, y la cicatriz del labio lo distendió en lo que pareció una mueca burlona—. ¡El poeta manchado de sangre…! —Volvió a levantar las manos.

—O… ¿usted?

—Basta…

—¿Estará en el tren mañana por la noche?

—Sí.

—Me gustaría tomar una última buena cena antes de que volvamos. ¿Eh? ¿El Piccolo Budapest? ¿Eh?

—Sí. Temprano. Hacía las siete.

—Entonces… ¿va a volver? —dijo el hombre de la trinchera, y estudió el perfil a su lado.

—Sí, sí, y ahora buenas noches. Buenas noches.

—Los asuntos personales ya no tienen prioridad, ¿eh? Buenas noches. ¿Hasta mañana? Bajo el Baldaquín de San Pedro… ¿eh?

Stanley bajó rápidamente la vista hacia su libro.

—Y habéis visto alguna vez algo tan francamente horrible como esto —se elevó la voz de la mujer alta —. Un poco de mugre encerrado para siempre en plástico transparente de por vida. ¡Dios mío…! Con un certificado de Origen Milagroso y el Sello de la Iglesia. Un poco de mugre de la iglesia de Caná en Galilea, donde transformaron el vino en agua, Dios mío. Mi marido está comprando toda clase de cosas, ya os podéis imaginar el estado en que debe estar después de lo que le pasó a

Huki-lau

…

Una voz lejana dijo: «Y a mí qué me importa que Juana de Arco fuera bruja, eso no tiene nada que ver con ello…».

Y otra: «Por supuesto todo el mundo sabe que a los franciscanos los canonizaron por las mismas razones que a los waldensianos los quemaron vivos…».

Y entonces Stanley alzó la vista como si le hubieran dado un golpe. Había un camarero ante él, y susurró roncamente: «Café», tratando de mirar por detrás del sucio mandil hacia donde había brotado la voz que había oído con tanta certeza. Cuando la vio ya estaba sentada, y aunque tan cerca, en la silla que había dejado libre el hombre de la trinchera, no le había visto, y no miraba a su alrededor, sino a sus manos en la mesa. En aquel instante Stanley habría podido levantarse de un salto, o gritar, o simplemente hablar empezando con alguna conjunción sobrecargada, como para reanudar una conversación interrumpida minutos u horas antes: y no fue la compañía de ella lo que le detuvo, sino la calma absoluta y absuelta de su cara, a pesar de la heridita que deslucía la delicada línea de su labio.

—Algo la mordió, quizá —dijo en aquel momento, contestando a una pregunta del hombre medio de espaldas a Stanley, y una sonrisa de reproche rozó su cara, todavía con la vista baja. Luego los dos se quedaron callados. Él sólo parecía haberle echado una ojeada, y después siguió mirando al frente.

—Por supuesto que Huki-lau no está muerta, está… —La mujer alta susurró algo—. Lo que es igual de malo. *Yo* no entiendo cómo ha podido ocurrir, ha tenido el cinturón puesto cada minuto que ha estado aquí. Aunque había una cabra, en España, que la miraba con malas intenciones. Se le veía en los ojos.

—Qué cansado pareces, como él parecía a veces, como un viejo al que no le queda nada que echar de menos. ¿Y eres viejo?, o todavía no te han cicatrizado las heridas de delante. Levanta la mano izquierda… no puedes, está ahí metida disfrutando otra cicatriz.

Se echó a reír, un sonido áspero, y lo dejó entre ambos, mirando sus propias manos sobre la mesa. Llevaba un sencillo conjunto gris oscuro, con una larga falda cerrada y una esclavina. No llevaba nada en el pelo.

Él murmuró algo.

—¿Qué? Bromeas. —Y se echó a reír de nuevo. Él había dejado la mano derecha en la mesa, y ella la cogió con la suya, y puso su mano izquierda sobre ambas. Sin embargo, él parecía seguir mordiendo el anillo de sello de oro de la otra, mirando al frente.

—Sin embargo…

—¿Hoy? En Asís, ella entró y entró y entró por la puerta. Nadie apareció en persona, otorgando indulgencias. Nadie, en una «radiante claridad celestial», nadie, ¿recuerdas? ¿Cuando nadie estaba en la puerta? Ahora otorgando indulgencias, oh frailes menores, ¿está en el purgatorio si se ahogó? Bajando por una cuerda, ¿te contó esa historia? Ahogado en el mar celestial, bajó por una cuerda para soltar el ancla enganchada en una lápida sin nombre, con una fecha, inclinada contra el fondo por la oscuridad, así que no es extraño que el ancla se enganchara, y él bajó por la cuerda. Si quedara tiempo…

—Escucha. Dime sólo…

—¿Sabes más? Su sangre en las hojas, yo la vi. Pero ¿ninguna espina?, entonces es de otro, pues yo lo vi entregado, allí abajo. Sí, rayado con el aceite de nadie y entregado, allí abajo, ese maldito andrógino negro que lo retuvo y lo perdió, allí abajo…

—Quizá no vuelva a verte.

Ella no alzó los ojos.

Stanley tragó saliva con esfuerzo consciente y fingió, ante sí mismo, encontrar su sitio en el libro que tenía delante. En otra mesa, un grupo se había puesto a diseccionar el dogma más reciente, el de la Asunción. Uno de ellos dijo: «Hay una explicación científica perfectamente válida…».

—Y luego, cuando volvimos, un monje volvió con nosotros. Ella llevaba el cinturón puesto, pero no *miré*…

—Habría muerto de asfixia a cincuenta mil pies.

—Se oyen cosas, sobre la vida en los monasterios.

—O si hubiera ido deprisa se habría consumido como un meteoro.

—¿Quieres casarte con ella?

Al oír esto Stanley alzó la vista, con los ojos bien abiertos pero los párpados caídos sobre ellos con incredulidad, como intentando ocultarse a sí mismo lo que oía; y ocultar lo que veía, pues ella tenía los ojos bien abiertos, y no se le veían los párpados.

—¡Casarme contigo! —dijo el hombre, y retiró la mano derecha de debajo de la suya.

—Vale, María era judía, ¿no? Una mujer judía, si subió corpóreamente al cielo, ¿cómo come?

—Este poquito de mugre, encerrado para siempre en plástico de por vida. ¿El plástico de por vida dura para siempre?

—¿Hay una cocina *kosher* en el cielo?

—Ya ves, él la puso ahí, y no la quitó.

Stanley se la quedó mirando. Su propia expresión, y hasta los movimientos de sus manos, empezaron a seguir los de ella, luego los del hombre cuando respondió, luego su cara la de ella y sus manos las del hombre, salvo los músculos intrincados en torno a los bordes y los ojos, y las comisuras de su boca, para rescatar su propia cara de aquella franqueza indefensa, y le temblaron las manos.

—¡Casarme contigo! ¡Yo!

—Pues él la puso ahí, y no la quitó como prometió, como siempre había hecho antes, como prometió.

—¡Yo!

—Toma el dogma de la Inmaculada Concepción. Intenta preservar a María de la mancha del Pecado Original, ¿y qué me dices de Isabel? Y así puedes seguir hasta el principio.

—Por supuesto conocimos a la gente que hace estas cosas. Novedades religiosas, y la mayoría de plástico. Y ella hasta admitió abiertamente que era una conversa. Pero mi marido puede distinguir a un judío a una milla de distancia.

—Así que la Propia María dijo a san Antonio de Padua que su cuerpo permanece incorruptible en el Cielo.

—San Juan de la Cruz dijo…

—¡Escucha! Escucha…

—Donde no hay amor…

—Esta es la última vez que te veo.

—Pero ¿por qué haces las cosas que haces? ¿Por qué vives la vida que vives?

Stanley observó cómo se encorvaban los hombros del hombre, observó cómo una mano agarraba la otra, y aunque no podía ver los acuosos ojos azules, los suyos estaban ahora abiertos con las mismas implicaciones de deseo que aquellos grandes ojos oscuros que buscaba.

—Porque… ¿entiendes? —dijo el Hombre Frío, hablando con tranquila claridad por primera vez—, porque cualquier refugio de poder… protege las cosas hermosas. Para mantener a la gente… para controlar a la gente, para darles algo… cualquier cosa barata que los satisfaga de momento, para mantenerlos apartados de las cosas hermosas, para mantenerlos donde sus manos no puedan tocar las cosas hermosas, sus manos que… tocan y profanan y… rompen las cosas hermosas, manos que odian las cosas hermosas, y temen las cosas hermosas, y tocan y profanan y temen y rompen las cosas hermosas…

—Oh no —le dijo ella.

—Porque hay tan pocas… hay tan poca belleza, hay tan pocas cosas hermosas, que preservarlas, mantenerlas…

—Pero hacer más… ¿cosas hermosas?

Mientras ellos se miraban, Stanley miró a ambos, desvalidamente suspendido entre sus ojos, esperando lo que cada uno buscaba en el otro.

—Ahora… si quedara tiempo… —dijo ella dulcemente.

—Y tú vas a entrar en un convento, vas a entrar en esa… esa vida —insistió de repente, y ella se encogió de hombros, bajando la vista una vez más.

—¿O cuál otra? Porque allí ella se hará novia.

—Mañana, sí, ya está arreglado, una audiencia, es lo mejor, mañana.

—¡Tan pronto!

—Mañana, sí. Todo está arreglado.

—Mañana ella… ¿besará el Anillo del Pescador? Si quedara tiempo, para hacerle preguntas sobre el purgatorio.

—Una vez compré un libro suyo, por error…

—¿Besar a san Pedro en la Barca, mañana?

—¡Aquí estás! Escucha, escucha esto, esta carta de mi mujer —exclamó Don Bildow, dejándose caer en una silla justo delante de Stanley.

—No, no, no…

—Escucha. Mi hija estaba toda hinchada cuando me marché, ¿recuerdas? Y creíamos que era… no sabíamos lo que era, ¿recuerdas? Bueno, ¿sabes lo que era…? ¿Lo que es? ¡Está embarazada! Eso es lo que dice esta carta de mi mujer, y sólo tiene seis años. ¿Me oyes? ¿Qué voy a hacer? ¿Por qué me miras de ese modo?

Stanley estaba callado, mirando a la cara de Bildow, pero con aire ausente, como si mirara más allá de ella.

—Es *Las excentricidades del cardenal Pirelli*.

—Pero ¿has leído *Justine*? En ése profana la hostia dentro mismo de ella.

—¡Dame eso! ¡Dame esa cosa!

Don Bildow arrancó el libro del regazo de Stanley.

—Mi marido está ahora en la habitación del hotel, con un libro de algún chino asqueroso y una botella de escocés.

Entró un chico italiano y se sentó en la mesa de al lado, donde ofreció en venta un grupo de turistas americanos.

Más allá había dos senadores americanos bebiendo whisky y discutiendo si Suecia tenía o no rey.

—Dice que está practicando el dulce arte de sentarse y olvidar. Dios mío, estoy cansada.

Don Bildow estaba intentando romper el libro. Primero intentó romper el lomo, pero no pudo. Luego agarró la mitad de las páginas con una mano, pero no pudo arrancarlas. Finalmente, sostuvo el libro contra su cuerpo y empezó a rasgar unas diez páginas cada vez. La mesa que había tras su estrecha espalda estaba vacía, y entonces cayeron sobre ella Victoria y Albert Hall, y Rudy, y Sonny, y Buster, y la Gran Anna, el sueco, y dos más, y se pusieron a discutir los problemas del viaje en tren a París, si Rudy y Frank estaban en estado de gracia no podían ir en el mismo compartimiento. Las páginas seguían cayendo. Una débil voz masculina protestó: «Caprodío…». Una voz de mujer dijo: «Judezno». Don Bildow seguía sentado a la mesa arrancando las páginas del libro, unas cinco cada vez.

Por detrás, cuando estaba inmóvil con aquel vestido de terciopelo amarillo, la señora Deigh recordaba bastante a un montón desigual de cojines de sofá. En aquel momento sólo Dom Sucio tenía esta perspectiva ventajosa, y no se paró a disfrutarla, sino que se volvió y echó a correr por un pasillo oscuro sujetándose la capa, mientras ella abría la puerta a Stanley. Nada más entrar se detuvo, para apoyarse en el brazo en que Judit esgrimía la espada: la cabeza de Holofernes osciló hacia él, y la cosa entera estuvo a punto de desplomarse.

—Mi querido muchacho, ten… ten cuidado con nuestro… Donatello —dijo la señora Deigh con voz entrecortada mientras el bronce se enderezaba por sí solo—. Es su… David, su famoso David —murmuró nerviosamente, dirigiéndose a la cabeza que todavía oscilaba un poco, como para pedirle disculpas. Siguió murmurando nerviosamente, retorciéndose las manos, mientras lo llevaba hacia la habitación recargada—. Desearíamos que te hubieras cortado el pelo. —Stanley se sentó en el borde de la silla reina Ana, y ella se quedó parada un momento ante él—. ¿Qué te pasa? ¿Qué te preocupa, querido muchacho?

—Nada, nada, nada —dijo rápidamente, y se sacudió su mano del hombro, y el brillo de su reloj de muñeca de la mejilla. Ella se apartó con aire ofendido y se sentó casi silenciosamente en el gran sillón. Allí empezó a hacer los familiares chasquidos.

—Yo… lo siento, yo… estoy cansado.

—Ha sido un día muy difícil para todos —dijo ella, de modo un tanto distante, y siguió mirando al techo. Como él siguió callado, con las manos apretadas entre las rodillas, dijo en el mismo tono—: Hemos tenido una visita muy difícil de unos israelitas británicos. Y el pobre cardenal Spermelli, las termitas han

destruido completamente su máquina de jugar al ajedrez. Ahora sólo habla de ir a Venecia, donde puedan llevarlo a descansar en su última morada con la dignidad de una auténtica pompa fúnebre, aunque esas pequeñas motoras de
Coca-Cola
…

—¿Es real? —saltó de pronto Stanley.

—¿Es qué?, ¿mi querido muchacho?

—No, no, pero si es un cardenal debería ser… nada. Nada.

—Estás trastornado, ¿verdad? —dijo mirándolo inquisitivamente mientras bajaba los ojos una vez más, y ella volvió a mirar al techo—. Sabemos que te gustaría, le gustan tanto los jóvenes, sobre todo los jóvenes con talento musical. Pero su arca musarítmica, ay…

—¿Qué es eso?

—¿No la recuerdas, querido muchacho? La máquina del siglo XVII que te enseñó, que compone música automáticamente. Ay, nunca volverás a verla. Las termitas… ¿qué pasa? ¿Qué te pasa? ¿Estás resfriado…? —Miró hacia donde estaba mirando él—. Ahhhh… —suspiró contriste afecto, pero no se levantó—. Es uno de los días en que puede dejar la cama —murmuró.

La flaca figura había surgido tambaleante de uno de los umbrales oscuros, y estaba apoyada en un ángulo precario contra la pierna de una figura en traje de baño, un bronce (identificado como *Hércules*, de Delia Robia). La débil luz arrojaba un lustre tenuemente amarillo sobre las manchas tiñosas de su lomo. Un trozo de alambre aislante unía su oreja con el objeto que le colgaba del cuello. La señora Deigh hizo otro chasquido, pero nada se movió.

—No había tenido un aire tan desanimado desde que se cayó en los baños del emperador Tiberio en Capri, y tuvimos que contratar a un Alpinista para rescatarlo. —Volvió lentamente la vista hacia Stanley—. ¿Recuerdas que me preguntaste por las iniciales de su sillita en el *automobile*?, ¿la sillita donde te sientas? Pregunté a Dom Sucio y, por supuesto, me lo dijo. «Impubis Hadrianus Semper». —Luego se aclaró la garganta. La cadena tintineó cuando se inclinó hacia adelante y habló con más dulzura—. Querido muchacho, estás dando diente con diente. Quizá…

—No, no, yo… estoy bien, no…

—Entendemos. ¿Quizá cogiste un resfriado en Asís…? No queremos preguntar qué peso te agobia el alma. Entendemos. A lo mejor te lo quitarías de la cabeza si nos contaras algo sobre Asís, ¿no? Hace tanto tiempo que no hemos paseado entre aquellas rosas, y tocado el sitio mismo donde…

—Me pidió que me casara con ella —soltó de repente Stanley.

—¿Qué?, ¿qué te qué? ¿Quién?

—Me pidió que me casara con ella, sí, y…

—Pero… mi querido muchacho, tú… nunca me has dicho que hubiera una… ¿una chica?

—Sí…

—Y no… ¿no te la llevarías allí? ¿A ese… ese sitio sagrado…?

La cadena tintineó, los objetos colgados de ella cayeron al suelo. Ninguno de ellos los recogió.

—Ella… ella entró una y otra vez por la puerta de la Porciúncula, ella… para ganar indiligencias para… ella se…

—¡Querido muchacho!, ¡querido muchacho!

La señora Deigh se había inclinado hacia adelante, medio sentada, medio de pie.

—No, ella… Si al menos quedara tiempo, decía una y otra vez. Está embarazada.

La señora Deigh volvió a hundirse en el sillón, se agarró con fuerza a los brazos mientras el crucifijo de nácar se le salía del escote, para volver a caer dentro cuando se incorporó. La cadena se levantó con ella.

—Usted… usted no lo entiende, ella no es una… una pu… una p…

—Querido muchacho, no llores. Nosotros…

—Si ella… quería compartir su belleza con cualquiera… con todos, ella… si ella…

—Entendemos, querido muchacho. Nosotros entendemos —dijo la señora Deigh con una mano cálida en su cuello, dándole allí suaves palmaditas, como hizo durante un minuto interrumpido sólo por sus sollozos, hasta que finalmente le dijo—: Y por supuesto le dijiste No. ¿No? Confiamos en que le dijeras No, cuando te pidió… eso. Confiamos en que le dijeras No, y le contaras que ibas a ir a Fenestrula, por tu trabajo, tu trabajo es lo que importa, tu trabajo es lo único que importa, verdad, ¿verdad, querido muchacho? Y tú le dijiste No, verdad que sí.

—Ss… sí. No.

—Eso es. Por supuesto que dijiste No.

—Sí, es… todo está hecho añicos. Me… —Stanley se levantó, y se pasó ambas manos por la cara. Luego se volvió hacia ella y exclamó—: Y su… Dom Sucio, él… ¿sabía que él… no es real?

—Pero querido muchacho —dijo dulcemente la señora Deigh—, es tan real como nosotros.

—No, lo que quiero decir es, quiero decir un monje, un monje de verdad, lo vi… yo… ¿sabía eso?

—Por supuesto, querido muchacho.

—Pero usted… ¿sabía desde el principio que no hay… ninguna Orden especial para… para enanos? Y él… los donativos que usted le da, él… sí, usted me lo contó, la gente se volvía a mirarlo por la calle y él… era muy sensible, pero yo… que lo tomaban por un crío vagabundo, pero yo… yo…

—Querido Stanley —dijo la señora Deigh, y se acercó para pasarle un brazo por los hombros temblorosos—. Eres un muchacho tan… querido.

Por un momento pareció como si Adriano fuera a mejorar su posición contra la pierna de bronce. Con gran cautela empezó a levantar una pata del suelo. En cuanto empezó a inclinarse en aquella dirección volvió a plantar la pata donde la tenía, pero demasiado tarde para hacer algo más que evitar desplomarse por completo, y así se quedó, pasado y olvidado para siempre el momento de audacia.

—¿Te unirás a nuestras plegarias, en nuestra pequeña capilla privada, Stanley? —preguntó mientras se separaban, lentamente, cada uno con una expresión de cauto interés, lo bastante cerca para olerse mutuamente por primera vez.

—Sí… sí…

Entonces se movió con más viveza, primero hacia Adriano, haciendo aquellos chasquidos. Adriano no levantó la cabeza.

—Debemos confesar que Adriano y Dom Sucio no son los mejores amigos del mundo —dijo con cierta aspereza, poniendo derecho a Adriano y hurgando en la caja que llevaba al cuello—. Dom Sucio le apaga el audífono, y a veces se pasa días enteros sin oír nada. —Mientras se enderezaba murmurando—: Pero había algo más… —Adriano volvió a hundirse contra la pantorrilla de bronce—. Oh, de Nuestra hija, algo que ha mandado, quería enseñártelo.

—¿Una carta…?

—No exactamente una carta. Aquí está. —Sacó un papel doblado de detrás del marco de un cuadro y se lo entregó—. Volveremos dentro de un momento, querido muchacho. Para las plegarias. —Y lo dejó con esto:

POR FAVOR AYUDE INMEDIATAMENTE

Esta dama sabe que usted necesita este Ritual
EL RITUAL

Jehová Dios
Ante mí san Rafael
A mi espalda san Gabriel
A mi derecha san Miguel
A mi izquierda san Auriel
A mi espalda brilla la estrella dorada
Y encima de mí brilla la Gloria de Dios.

Rece por esta dama enferma, para que su pelo sea negro y espeso, para que sus ojos sean fuertes, y tengan vista clara, para que su nariz crezca una pulgada más, grande, gruesa y sana, para que sus dientes y encías sean fuertes y sanos; rece también para que sus cejas y pestañas sean negras y espesas, y su piel blanca y sana, y por toda su Salud, y toda su Reconstrucción, y su marido.
Por favor ayude a esta dama; rece por ella con ahínco y tesón. Este Ritual viene de la India para ayudar a esta dama y para salvar y edificar a la humanidad.
Por favor rece por ella con ahínco para que vaya a la India a ayudar a la humanidad. Por favor difunda este Ritual por ella y su marido. Por favor use este Ritual o caerá enfermo y pobre. Por favor consiga a esta dama un montón de ayudantes y ayúdela a vivir en la India.
Después de decir este Ritual, rece a su manera todo lo que pueda. Ayude a esta dama o lo sentirá. Si hace este Ritual tendrá todo lo que necesita en este mundo. Envíe este Ritual a todos sus amigos y a los niños y a los parientes. Debe hacer esta obra o todo el mundo caerá enfermo y pobre y el mundo se hará pedazos.

TRANSMUTACIÓN

Necesita conocer esta ley superior añadida de la transmutación de poder dentro del género humano, dentro de nuestro propio sistema.

Usted sabe ya que todo nuestro poder mental debe ser utilizado para ayudar. También todo nuestro poder creativo debe ser utilizado para ayudar.

En vez de desperdiciar este poder creativo de los órganos genitales, debe utilizarse con el Ritual, rezando para que el poder ayude a esta dama enferma en su salud y su reconstrucción, para salir del sufrimiento.

También debe conseguir que los hombres transmuten poder a sus esposas enfermas para que sus esposas puedan ponerse fuertes y sanas y para que sus esposas puedan rezar por esta dama enferma.

También debe conseguir que todos los hombres y todas las mujeres y los ancianos adolescentes niños envíen su poder de las dos formas para *ayudar a* esta dama enferma. Esto tiene que hacerse rápidamente para salvar a esta dama y a su marido y para salvar y edificar a la humanidad, hasta las próximas enseñanzas, que todos ustedes recibirán por medio de alguna forma de publicidad mundial.

Por favor envíe copias de este Ritual y carta a todos los Médicos y Dentistas y Abogados y a toda la gente que pueda por todo el mundo.

Stanley retorció los hombros para aliviar la ardiente comezón que sentía bajo la camisa. La cadena tintineante sonaba a lo lejos, amortiguada por las colgaduras rojas, y su mano vendada buscó la muela en el bolsillo. Luego el calor se hizo más intenso. Venía saturado con el olor de las rosas, y una suave luz difusa iluminaba el papel que sostenía ante sí. «Siempre rezamos así nuestras plegarias… desde Portugal…». Alzó la vista lentamente, más allá de la figura de Adriano, silenciosamente vencido de nuevo hacia adelante, petrificado allí como a punto de saltar sobre algo que había caído a tierra mucho antes, mientras la luz que venía del fondo prestaba un suave lustre a las manchas amarillas de la pubescencia. «Nos hace sentir, de algún modo, más cerca de Él…». Había encendido dos cirios y llevaba uno en ristre, en la mano que brotaba del aro dorado del reloj de muñeca, y eso, junto con el elipsoide que aún oscilaba pausadamente en la punta de la cadena, era lo único que llevaba puesto, aunque Stanley seguía oliendo el aceite de rosas cuando pasó junto a la cabeza tendida del general de Nabucodonosor, resbaló, casi se ensartó en la espada de Judit y ganó la calle, donde un coche paró de un frenazo, tan cerca de atropellarle que se vio paralizado en el oscuro hueco entre sus faros, con la mano apoyada en su rejilla, donde leyó la palabra FIAT.

—Por supuesto que dije… No —susurró. Sonaron campanas en alguna parte.

El sol se ponía en Barbados.

El doctor Fell estaba parado en su porche con una mano en la bragueta de los pantalones, rascándose. En la otra sostenía una carta que empezaba: «Querido doctor: En casos de hiperacidez gástrica, el síntoma más corriente es la sensación de una hoguera en el estómago…». No estaba leyendo la carta, sin embargo, sino mirando hacia el sendero que llevaba a los restos del Proyecto Piloto y las cabañas de los nativos. Caían ya las sombras, y el doctor Fell parecía preocupado, pues sabía la dificultad que tenía su ayudante para mantener el equilibrio en la oscuridad.

—¡Gordon…! —llamó al cabo de un rato. No veía más que las palmeras a un lado y la orilla del mar al otro. Oía el ruido del oleaje—. ¡Gordon! —volvió a llamar, y luego, protegiendo sus ojos con la carta de la ausencia de claridad del cielo, miró hacia el sendero con ojos de miope. Apenas más firme que las propias sombras, cobró forma una figura, y emergió. El doctor Fell bajó los escalones y se acercó a ayudarlo con su peso de cajitas blancas. Gordon sólo podía utilizar un brazo, cargado con un montón hasta la barbilla, pues llevaba el otro en cabestrillo.

—Chis chis —dijo el doctor Fell—, qué pesadas se están volviendo. —Gordon le siguió al interior. Cuando todas las cajitas blancas estuvieron guardadas en la cámara congeladora, el doctor Fell se volvió y dijo—: ¿Qué te parece el trabajo a estas alturas, Gordon? No te agobia mucho, ¿verdad, Gordon?

—No. Pero ellos…

—¿Quiénes?

—Los hombres ahí en el campo, Ed y Max, y Anselm y Chaby…

—¿Te refieres a los nativos?

—Sí, ellos…

—Por qué les llamas Ed y Max y… ¿por qué les pones nombres como esos, Gordon?

—Ellos… simplemente… se parecen a ellos, a estas alturas.

—Será mejor que tomes un poco de Dramamina, ahora mismo, Gordon. —El doctor Fell abrió un inmenso botiquín. Todos los estantes estaban llenos de frasquitos—. También es buena para los procesos de fenestración, laberintitis y disfunción vestibular asociada con la terapia de antibióticos. Hoy he estado leyendo sobre ello. Hasta es buena para el embarazo. ¿Alguna vez te han entrado ganas de saltar por una ventana, Gordon? Chis chis… aquí puedes hacerlo, por supuesto, pero no tendría ninguna gracia. No tendría

más gracia que caerse de la cama. ¿Todavía te caes de la cama?

—Yo…

—Aquí la tenemos, Gordon. Ejem, chis chis, esto es lo último que queda de Dramamina. ¿Cómo quieres que te la administre, oral o rectalmente?

—Yo…

—Pero no te preocupes, Gordon, tenemos montones de cosas aquí —dijo el doctor Fell, hurgando entre los Frasquitos en busca del jarro de solución salina—. Mañana empezaremos con Roniacol, y cuando se nos acabe eso tenemos Lesofac, Gustamato, Diasal, Amchlor… Oh, nos han mandado de todo. El ácido nicotínico era lo mejor, verdad, a pesar de sus reacciones evanescentes, el hormigueo, los picores, la quemazón en la piel, el mareo, la debilidad, las sensaciones de calor… ahora inclínate, Gordon… molestias gástricas, rubor cutáneo, la movilidad gastrointestinal incrementada… ah… mmmp, ya está, Gordon. Dentro de nada te sentirás mejor. Es debido a la acción vasodilatadora.

—¿Cree que me quedará cicatriz…?

—¿Qué imaginas que significa vasodilatador…? ¿Qué?, ¿cicatriz?, ¿dónde?

—Cuando me quite estas vendas del brazo.

—Oh, desde luego, desde luego, Gordon.

—Pero… ¿como esta que tengo en la cara?

—Oh, mayor. Ésa te la podrás tapar con un bigote. Estarías guapo con un bigote, Gordon. Espera, no te vayas todavía. —El doctor Fell se había colocado un oftalmoscopio en la cabeza, y giró el espejo hasta situarlo sobre su ojo—. Echemos un vistazo al jodido laberinto —siguió hablando mientras trabajaba—. Oh, no es por hablar mal, entiendes, chis chis, me refiero a la hemorragia del laberinto del oído, tu oído, por supuesto… ¿Me oyes?, ¿me oyes por este oído? Sí, estás mejorando, creo que ya ha pasado todo. Bueno, no tardaré mucho en perderte, verdad… con todo ese dinero puedes largarte adonde quieras, puedes volar hasta la luna si quieres, verdad. He estado preocupado por ti, sabes, parecías un joven muy sensible, y me he estado preguntando cómo ha podido hacerte esto la enfermedad, dejarte con los ojos vidriosos y sin interés por nada más que por tu trabajo. Chis chis, quizá venga luego algo mejor, ¿verdad? No puede gustarte realmente salir por la mañana con las muestras de vitaminas y volver por la tarde con los… especímenes. Pero así es la vida, verdad, sí, chis chis… Eeepa… ten cuidado, Gordon, mira lo que estás haciendo. Mantén los ojos abiertos. ¿Quieres que te acompañe? ¿No? De acuerdo, pero ten cuidado, mantén los ojos abiertos. Sí… ¿y dónde crees que estará ese idiota tatuado? Es un inútil, un desecho, no hace más que beber y hablar de la pesca del tiburón y recortarse su bigotito, no me fío de él para nada. Creía que nos seguiría hasta aquí, pero no imagino por qué habría de seguir nadie a nadie hasta aquí.

—No… NO. Pas… Oh Crissto, dámela, yo lo haré, quiero decir Crissto yo lo haré, de todas formas tengo que hacer todo yo mismo tarde o temprano, y de todas formas es demasiado tarde para ponerlo. Pero quiero decir, Crissto, dame la pintura, ¿quieres soltarla de una vez, Otto? Quiero decir suelta de una vez el asa. Ahora dame el pincel, quiero decir, Crissto, simplemente pásamelo, no lo tires al suelo. Quiero decir mira a Hannah allí, cómo trabaja encerándolo, ¿sabes? Quiero decir Crissto, va a terminar con el sótano en un minuto. Ahora lárgate, ¿quieres? Quiero decir que después de un día como este quiero descansar un minuto, ¿sabes? Quiero decir Crissto, antes de hacer la cena para todos vosotros. Arriba en el salón de baile, ¿sabes? El salón verde con las tres arañas, sube allí a esperar tu cena mientras hago entrar a los demás. Y mira, al pasar dale a Hannah una patada, ¿quieres? Va a terminar encerando a mi viejo contra el suelo, y… Oh Crissto, tengo que hacerlo todo yo. Quiero decir mírale ahí sentado mirando al reloj con el sol en la cara, como si fuera a ir a alguna parte, y Crissto quiero decir que lo más que puede hacer es coger el teléfono y marcar y cuando llego allí está sentado sin más sosteniendo el teléfono y preguntándole quién llama. Crissto. Quiero decir que nunca volverá a colgar el sombrero en ese cuerno de búfalo en el Harvard Club, y a sentarse a comer una tortilla con cuchara. Ahora Crissto, dónde están todos. Max sigue todavía cortando el césped, aunque aún no hay ahí nada de hierba, cuando salga la hierba tendré que moverle de un lado a otro o seguirá recortando la misma franja hasta llegar a la roca. Y Crissto mira a Stanley pintando esa columna de *la porte-cochère,* quiero decir que debe de haberle dado ya cincuenta manos por un lado. Y dónde demonios está Anselm, o le dejé lavando la ropa. Ya habrá hecho agujeros a base de restregar en todo lo que tenemos, puede pasarse media hora con una camisa si no se la quitas y le pones otra cosa en las manos. Pero Crissto quiero decir cuánta ropa se puede lavar a la vez en un par de asquerosas poncheras de cristal tallado. Y Crissto podría muy bien tomarme otra copa y fumarme otro puro, porque eso es lo único que hay en la casa, y no esperarán que coma la comida para perros que les doy cuando sé que el inspector

del estado no va a pasarse por aquí, quiero decir Crissto no esperará que les dé otra cosa y encima pague los impuestos, a cuarenta dólares al mes por débil mental. Y tengo que hacer otro paquete para que lo abra mi madre antes de la cena, otra vez lleva esperándolo todo el día. Y menuda carta me llega: «Querido Compañero de Clase: Somos conscientes de que esta carta, la segunda petición que te hacemos este año, llega en un momento en que se te acaba de solicitar una contribución para fondos de reunión», quiero decir, Crissto. «Muchos compañeros de clase se han preguntado cuánto dinero se ha recaudado con vistas al objetivo de
100 000 $
en 1975». Crissto, escucha ese disco, está tan rayado que apenas se oye la melodía, quiero decir, que es igual tener un tocadiscos automático que tener a un débil mental que lo vuelve a poner cada vez que se acaba. «El lado soleado de la calle». Pero Crissto. Quiero decir, 1975. Quiero decir, Crissto.

«Querido señor Pivner…», escribió Eddie Zefnic:

Bueno realmente le interesaría el trabajo que estamos haciendo aquí ahora, y supongo que nunca podré agradecerle realmente todo lo que ha hecho ayudándome a empezar, y tratándome prácticamente como a un hijo y todo, quiero decir ayudándome a seguir mis estudios cuando realmente se enfrentan con los problemas de la humanidad y a aprenderlo todo sobre las cosas de la ciencia como el trabajo que estamos haciendo aquí. Me alegro de verdad de que se haya operado, y créame que hice todo lo que pude para que lo hiciese, incluso después de que hablé con usted y supongo que finalmente le convencí de que era una buena idea, porque ahora la ciencia moderna sabe lo que son esas cosas y cómo arreglarlas, no como en las Épocas Oscuras. Así que puede que convenciéndole para seguir adelante y operarse, y mientras yo estoy aquí trabajando en la vanguardia misma de toda esa clase de cosas, puede que así le esté pagando lo que le debo.

Déjeme contarle algo sobre el trabajo que estamos haciendo aquí ahora, primero estamos estudiando la neurosis de ansiedad provocando a algunos animales un colapso nervioso. O sea que tenemos una manada entera de cabritos (jaja, quiero decir, cabras pequeñas) que están todos conectados de forma que cuando la luz disminuye les da una descarga, así que al cabo de un rato, cuando la luz empieza a disminuir, el cabrito se mete en el rincón y se pone tenso, así que al cabo de un rato de eso tiene ya neurosis de ansiedad, porque al principio sólo está tenso pero luego cuando cambiamos todas las señales a su alrededor, entonces sí que tiene ya una buena neurosis de ansiedad. Entonces le haces eso unas mil veces, debería verlos dando coces con las dos patas traseras para no recibir la descarga sólo esperándola cuando no saben en qué momento va a llegar entonces agarran la neurosis de ansiedad que es un colapso nervioso, mientras nosotros no paramos de medirlo todo durante todo el tiempo para saberlo. Así que después de unas mil veces intentamos quitársela, y todo está grabado con todo detalle en el laboratorio y entonces acabamos con todo eso e intentamos quitársela, ya ve que es realmente interesante y lo útil que será.

Debe de tener una enfermera realmente maja allí, para escribirme su carta como lo hizo y todo. Estuve aquí en el laboratorio cuando desmontaron el cerebro de una oveja, así que pude ver lo que debe ser tener esos tejidos nerviosos entre los lóbulos frontales del cerebro separados del cerebro medio, que es donde tienes las emociones, así que entiendo por qué dijo el psiquiatra de la cárcel que podría venirle bien porque las cosas como la falsificación y el fraude no son crímenes de violencia sino más bien algo emocional que a lo mejor se embarulla, así que si lo separas entonces ya no puede volver a embarullarse y ya no quieres volver a hacer más fraudes y falsificaciones. Que aunque no son crímenes de violencia quieren decir como si algo estuviera mal en alguna parte.

Como ya le escribí la última vez la mayor parte de lo que hago aquí siguen siendo cosas como limpiar los corrales de esos cabritos y darles de comer si se les da de comer, si no, estamos probando algo con ellos o algo, y todo cosas como ésas, que me tienen muy ocupado porque el resto del tiempo lo paso sobre todo leyendo esos libros así que ni siquiera he ido a la iglesia desde hace tiempo, y ni siquiera enciendo la radio para oír música sino sólo las noticias, porque hay todo eso que quiero aprender y los científicos de aquí son realmente majos si quieres preguntarles cosas te lo explican todo, así que sigo estudiando para que yo también pueda algún día, quiero decir explicarlo todo.

Es una pena, o sea, que le hayan puesto ese niño para jugar y que le estén enseñando todo otra vez, o sea, cosas como ir al baño, pero ya nos hemos ocupado de lo principal, verdad, y bueno, si le he pagado lo que le debía convenciéndole de que se hiciera esa operación cuando hablamos en la cárcel, bueno ya sabe cuánto aprecio lo mucho que le debo y todo, y supongo que debe estar seguro de que nunca pensé nada malo de usted cuando pasó aquello, quiero decir, que fuera usted un criminal

o algo así, sino sólo que algo andaba mal en alguna parte que no era culpa suya, sino que había una buena explicación científica para ello, así que le he pagado de ese modo y estudiando de firme como hago y todo, entonces supongo que es lo mejor que puedo hacer para demostrarle lo mucho que aprecio todo lo que ha hecho por mí y todo, y desde luego estudio cada minuto, como la otra noche ese amigo mío que llegó con que si tenía entradas para un concierto cuando yo estaba estudiando y no paraba de pedirme que fuera y yo le dije que no.

Su seguro servidor,

Eddie

P.D.: Le adjunto algo que vi en el periódico sobre ese hombre que era un falsificador que llevaban mucho tiempo intentando atrapar, supongo que también era muy bueno en ello y lo que sirve para enseñarle que había algo mal en alguna parte, o sea que le encontraron en esa especie de hotel en España parecía que se había quitado la vida allí, así que supongo que ya nos hemos ocupado de lo principal verdad, quiero decir si un falsificador tiene que quitarse la vida de ese modo, y eso es una cosa, quiero decir devolver la vida después de la muerte que la ciencia no ha resuelto aún, pero estamos trabajando en ello.

«Querida amiga…», leyó la señora Sinisterra en una postal:

Todavía no hemos tenido noticias suyas respecto al recorte de periódico plastificado que le enviamos recientemente. Si desea conservar ese recorte «permanentizado» no tiene más que enviarnos un dólar en el sobre con sello y dirección que le adjuntábamos para su comodidad, o mandar su pago adjuntándonos esta tarjeta para la correspondiente identificación y cargo a su cuenta.

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MEMENTO ASOCIADOS

Rompió la tarjeta por la mitad y subió las escaleras sola. Al entrar se agarró un momento al borde del fregadero rebosante, el cuerpo encorvado como con dolor y la cabeza alta, escuchando; giró el botón de plástico de la caja que llevaba prendida de los pliegues colapsados de su pecho, la cabeza todavía alta, como escuchando. Luego se acercó a un botiquín que había al extremo del fregadero, lo abrió y adoptó la misma postura. «¡Tú…!», llamó en voz alta. De alguna parte llegó un ruido desagradable de respuesta. «Te llevaste mi…». Entonces se interrumpió, y se sostuvo la frente con una mano.

«Hábil, conmovedora, auténtica, al tiempo dura y compasiva… no es frecuente obtener una experiencia tan satisfactoria de una autobiografía». «Contada con una sensibilidad fresca, combinada con intuiciones magistrales, avanza a paso vivo y sin embargo pausado…». «Un estilo narrativo punzante, que conmueve hondamente en sus momentos de patetismo vivaz y desvela recuerdos de experiencias mundanas, sondeando grandes verdades casi dignas del autor de las *Confesiones*…».

—¿Intenta decirme que éstas son críticas de su libro?

—Sí, sí —dijo ansiosamente el señor Feddle, recuperando bruscamente las tiras de papel, y volviéndolas a meter en el libro que llevaba bajo el brazo. Había encontrado al crítico encorvado de la camisa verde de lana recorriendo pesadamente la Sexta Avenida como si caminara por nieve profunda, también con un grueso libro bajo el brazo, a punto de entrar en una sastrería para que le cosieran dos botones en la bragueta de los pantalones.

—¿Y cómo es que no lo he visto aún?

—Ha salido. Ha salido, acaba de salir —dijo el señor Feddle, retrocediendo.

—Creía que era poesía, cómo es que dicen esas…

—Autobiografía poética —dijo rápidamente el señor Feddle.

—¿Y cómo es que todas esas críticas tienen el título cortado por arriba?

—Oh… oh, eso es por lo… modesto que soy…

—¿Usted modesto? No intente tomarme… ¿es ése? El que lleva bajo el brazo, ¿es ése? Déjeme verlo.

—Sí, pero… un adelanto editorial —dijo el señor Feddle retrocediendo para ponerse fuera de su alcance, moviendo el libro bajo su brazo sólo lo suficiente para enseñar su nombre en la cubierta.

—Traiga, déjeme verlo, deje… de acuerdo, viejo cabrón estúpido, no, no quiero verlo.

—Pero usted… ¿ni siquiera me va a invitar a una cerveza?

—Vamos, viejo cabrón chiflado. ¿Cree que no sé qué son esas críticas? ¿Cree que no conozco el libro del que hablan esas críticas?

—Oh, ¿lo ha… leído? —preguntó desvalidamente el señor Feddle.

—No, pero conozco al hijoputa que lo escribió —dijo el crítico, volviéndose y entrando en la sastrería, donde encontró a su amigo el poeta rechoncho sentado sin pantalones en una cabina cuya puerta le llegaba a la altura de la cintura.

—¿Qué haces aquí?

—Esperando a que me arreglen la cremallera de la bragueta.

El crítico se desabrochó los pantalones y se sentó en la cabina siguiente.

—Ese viejo cabrón chiflado ahí fuera, enseñándome críticas del libro de Anselm y pretendiendo que son del suyo. Anselm…

—Anselm, la Iglesia lo ha agarrado bien. Cada vez que pienso en él me echo a reír, se retira del mundo y lo hacen agente publicitario de un monasterio. Y la importancia que intenta darse hablando de lo pecador que era, tiene que meter a todos los santos desde san Agustín a san… a algún otro santo para apoyarlo, por el amor de Cristo, agente publicitario de una central de energía espiritual. ¿Qué tal te ha ido hoy en el juicio?

—Ese mocoso jura que no me ha visto nunca, así que cómo podría haberme utilizado en su novela. Pero estamos demostrando que ha sacado pasajes directamente de mi vida…

—¿Y de qué te sirven a ti…? —Apareció el sastre con unos pantalones en el brazo. El poeta se puso los pantalones y el crítico se quitó los pantalones—. Dile que se dé prisa, tenemos que ir a la parte alta para conocer a ese tipo que va a poner dinero para una nueva revista.

—No puedo ir sin pantalones, por el amor de Cristo. Dale un par de minutos para que me cosa los botones.

Y luego se quedaron callados, inclinándose ambos hacia adelante, más y más cerca cada vez, para enfocar el libro que llevaba el otro con una mirada de reconocimiento miope.

—¿Estás leyendo eso? —preguntaron ambos a la vez, retirándose con sorpresa.

—No. Sólo lo estoy reseñando —dijo el más alto, volviéndose a encorvar en su camisa verde de lana—. Por veinticinco asquerosos dólares. Me llevará hoy la noche entera. No lo habrás comprado, ¿verdad? Cristo, ¿a ese precio? Quién demonios creen que va a pagar tanto por una novela. Cristo, podría habértelo dado, lo único que necesito para escribir la reseña es la nota de la solapa.

Era ciertamente un libro grueso. Un modelo de atrevida elegancia, las letras de la sobrecubierta se erguían en rígidas configuraciones de rojo y negro para dar a entender el origen del diseño. (Por alguna excéntrica razón no había ninguna foto del autor chupando una pipa con aire pensativo, *sans gene* con un cigarrillo, *sang-froid* sin corbata, reproducida en la contraportada).

—¿Leyéndolo? Cristo no, ¿qué te crees que soy? Lo que pasa es que he estado teniendo problemas para dormir, así que mi analista me dijo que comprara un libro y contara las letras, así que entré y les pedí el libro más gordo que tuvieran y me vendieron esta mierda —murmuró mirando el libro con íntima aversión —. Ya llevo ciento treinta y seis mil trescientas y pico y aún no he llegado a la página cincuenta. ¿Dónde están tus pantalones?

—Espera un segundo, no tardará nada. He recibido una postal de Max.

—¿Ya se ha enterado de lo de Charles Dickens?

—Le escribí una nota sobre eso en una reseña de su libro que le envié.

—¿Tu reseña? Pues sí que te lo va a agradecer.

—Me la cortaron, por el amor de Cristo, ya lo sabes. Que se vayan al infierno, de todas formas, están todos jodidos y lejos de casa, allí sentados ahora mismo pretendiendo que están en Nueva York pretendiendo que están en París… eh, espera, espera…

—No puedo, no puedo perder a ese tipo, te veré luego, en el Viareggio.

—Ese sitio, por el amor de Cristo, está tomado por los maricones. Espera…

Fuera, en la acera, el señor Feddle arremetió agitando los recortes de periódico.

—Lárguese, no me joda, quite de en medio, viejo cabrón chiflado, ya lo he oído todo sobre su libro…

—¿Sí?, ¿sí? ¿Ya ha oído hablar de él? Sí, ¿una cerveza?, una cerveza para celebrar…

Y en su entusiasmo, el señor Feddle se acercó demasiado. Le arrancaron el libro de debajo del brazo y se quedó allí agitándose desvalidamente, escuchando las carcajadas, y confiando un instante más en que no lo abriesen, en que la sobrecubierta que había hecho con tanto cuidado, rotulando su nombre con tal meticulosa claridad en la portada, pegando una foto suya sacada cuarenta años antes en la contraportada, pudiera aún ampararlo. Entonces las páginas aletearon, las carcajadas redoblaron.

—*¡El idiota!* ¿Ese es el título de su libro? *El idiota*… —siguieron las carcajadas—, ¿de Feodor Feddle…?

«"¡Os imaginabais que no había previsto todo este odio!", volvió a susurrar Ippolit…». El señor Feddle se enjugó el ojo, sentado minutos después aúna mesa vacía de una cafetería, sobre un cóctel de tomate que se había hecho con kétchup y agua, intentando recomponer la desgarrada sobrecubierta para que si alguien se acercaba pudiera ver enteros su foto y su nombre, con el libro vertical mientras las páginas se deslizaban bajo su pulgar, y una sonrisa como de satisfacción fija en los labios, la cansada satisfacción de la obra concluida, mientras la última página pasaba y el último párrafo bailaba ante sus ojos. «En ningún sitio

saben hacer pan decente, en invierno se hielan como ratones en un sótano…». Se tocó el ojo lagrimeante con el dorso de un dedo. «"Basta ya de seguir nuestros caprichos, es hora de ser razonables. Y todo esto, toda esta vida en el extranjero, toda esta Europa vuestra es pura fantasía… ¡recordad mis palabras, vosotros mismos lo veréis!", había concluido, casi enojada…». Alguien se acercó a su mesa. Tragó saliva con esfuerzo, preparándose para hablar. Era un cobrador de autobús puertorriqueño, con un fino bigotito. Las páginas retrocedieron bajo su pulgar.

«"Pase de largo a nuestro lado, y perdónenos nuestra felicidad", dijo Myshkin en voz baja.

"¡Ja, ja, ja! ¡Justo lo que pensaba! ¡Ya sabía yo que iba a decir algo así! Pero sois… sois… ¡Bueno, bueno! ¡Sois gente elocuente! ¡Adiós! ¡Adiós!"».

En la terraza del Flore estaba sentada una persona que se parecía al envejecido George Washington sin su peluca (por la época en que se despidió de sus tropas). Estaba bebiendo un turbio líquido bilioso, y leía, moviendo en silencio los labios, una pequeña revista de tapas duras. Cualquiera habría podido ver que lo que leía era la *Revista partisana,* si alguien hubiera mirado.

París se conservaba cumplida. Otras ciudades podían saciar los apetitos que alimentaban, pero esta serpiente del viejo Sena, prietamente gris y hondamente arrugada por el tiempo, seguía dando hambre donde más satisfacía, hasta en aquella colina donde de noche, al doblar las esquinas, alimentaba con el veneno más delicioso, donde, con «Eh, Joe, ¿tú ver "ciné" *cochon?, ¿deux femmes* folla-folla?», las cosas más viles seguían sentándole bien; donde de día pintores pintorescos infestaban callejuelas pintorescas pintando el mismo cuadro pintoresco pintado ya tantas veces: las espectrales pirámides bulbosas coronando la cuesta por donde se había acercado el primer obispo de la ciudad con la cabeza bajo el brazo en una marcha de dos leguas que siglos después provocaría un comentario digno de cualquier pensador anterior a él, en la pluma de una mujer cuyo instante perspicaz definiría y redimiría, por siempre después de él, al pueblo cuyo santo patrón llegó a ser.

Ahora, su entero semblante no más cambiado tras otra gran guerra que los de sus hijas que se exhibían por los Grands Boulevards, rápidamente restauradas con cosméticos tras sus breves batallas privadas, murmurando, como ellas, «Vous
m'emmenez
…?», París se preparaba para celebrar un aniversario. Era su dosmilésimo aniversario, y no de su nacimiento, sino de la primera vez que, bajo otro nombre, la violaron: un bocado para un monarca, Lutecia sucumbió tras una lucha, y más tarde, como sus hijas que ahora hacían la carrera entre la Madeleine y el Gafé de la Paix, adoptó un nombre más llamativo para sus fines profesionales, sepultando en la historia la inocencia de su nombre de soltera.

Brillante así con túnicas floreadas, como las que la ley griega decretaba para las cortesanas, París pronto ganó ascendiente, pronto destacó como aquellas prostitutas de Roma que, según se decía, «sólo podían distinguirse de las matronas virtuosas por la elegancia superior de su atavío y el enjambre de admiradores que las rodeaban». Como las modas han tenido origen en las cortesanas a lo largo de las épocas, pronto se convirtió en su árbitro. Y dado que era, como la mejor clase de putas en la antigua Grecia, una consumada actriz y anfitriona, no recaía más oprobio sobre los hombres distinguidos que la visitaban que el que cayó sobre Sócrates por visitar a Aspasia: también acudían estadistas y generales, como Pericles acudió a Aspasia, y aun después de que lo arruinara, y se viera acusada de impiedad, el gran hombre apareció en su juicio para defenderla, sólo para descubrir que su elocuencia le fallaba ante el tribunal: «sólo pudo estrechar a Aspasia contra su pecho y llorar».

Otras tierras no fueron tardas en reconocer su reputación como la autora de todas las innovaciones civilizadas del mundo occidental, y ya hace cinco siglos que los ingleses, los italianos y hasta los turcos admitieron de buena gana que los franceses habían enriquecido la civilización con la sífilis. París desterró a sus miembros demasiado civilizados al otro lado del río, a Saint Germain de Prés, que ahora se había convertido una vez más en un asilo para los lisiados por una nueva y contagiosa enfermedad. En este refugio se comportaban de modo muy parecido al de entonces, teniendo prohibido, como lo tenían en el siglo XV, «bajo pena de muerte, conversar con el resto del mundo».

En la terraza del Flore, un hombre pasablemente vestido que había elaborado una nueva filosofía estaba sentado en medio de algunos de los jóvenes sin afeitar, sin cortar el pelo y sin lavar que la defendían. Cuatro holandeses implacablemente bien organizados, con el traje pintoresco de su tierra natal, cantaron «Valle del Río Rojo» desde la acera, y pasaron un lindo zueco entre su público fascinado. Alguien susurró: «En realidad voy a unirme a la iglesia, la católica romana». Otro advirtió que el papa y todo el invento se

trasladaban a Brasil. Otro dijo que el casquete polar estaba creciendo, y que pronto voltearía la tierra. Al otro lado de la calle, en la terraza de la Brasserie Lipp, dos jóvenes con cabezas diminutas y trajes de franela gris comparaban brillantes pasaportes verdes, hojeando cuarenta y una páginas en blanco. Estaban con dos chicas de hombros cuadrados, cuyos pequeños pechos estaban sujetos bastante abajo para ajustarse a la moda que imponían los vestidos. Una de las chicas dijo: «Creo que mi *conçerage* está devolviendo todo mi correo marcado *unconú* porque sólo le di mil francos de "purbuar"». A su espalda, otro joven con traje de franela gris dijo que conocía a una de las chicas, estaba en la Cadena Daisy en Vassar. En la terraza del vecino Reine Blanche, un joven de pelo dorado dijo: «Sólo quiero decir que estar en París es una gran cosa gorda y maravillosa…», y a su lado, un joven cuyo penacho de pelo aparecía despeinado con laborioso esmero puso una mano sobre la suya y dijo: «Pegou tgaegse a tou pgopiou sshico de lous esteidous uniedous a Pagís es comou ig a un bancuette y llevagse el almuegso».

En la terraza del Royale Saint Germain, alguien dijo a Hannah que un amigo de ella iba a venir de Italia, Don… ¿qué era? Y ella respondió: «Anda anda anda, El que la tiene blanda, ¿me invitas a una cerveza?».

—He oído que colgaron uno de los cuadros de Max boca abajo en su exposición.

—Y qué —dijo Hannah con voz hosca—. Nadie lo ha notado hasta hoy, es un verdadero cumplido a la coherencia del diseño.

Estaba sentada a una mesa con un escultor australiano que hacía sandalias de cuero, una chica de color vestida de tartán Stuart, y un mexicano profesional de mirada inexpresiva. Hannah estaba mirando un recorte de periódico, con una nota garabateada en el margen.

—¿Quién era ese tal Charles del que estaba hablando Max? ¿El que dijo que al fin lo hizo?, ¿en el metro?, que tuvo parado el IRT durante veinticinco minutos…

—¿Quieres dejarlo ya? —respondió Hannah, para corregir su tono con—, ¿e invitarme a una cerveza?

El escultor australiano que hacía sandalias de cuero dijo que el dúo de Beethoven para viola y violonchelo le sonaba como dos mujeres corpulentas revolviéndose bajo una cama. A su espalda una chica dijo: «Por supuesto que me gusta la música, pero no simplemente escucharla».

—¿Y sabéis cómo los pinta? Se sube a una escalera con un trozo de cuerda empapado en tinta, y lo deja caer desde el techo sobre un lienzo en el suelo.

—Acabamos de comprar un precioso Pissarro grande…

—Mi tío tenía uno, era tan grande que no podía aparcarlo en ningún sitio.

—Max ha tenido buenas críticas de su exposición. El crítico de *La Macule* decía que…

—¿Y por qué no iba a decirlo? —interrumpió Hannah—. Llegaron pidiendo un diez por ciento limpio de cualquier cosa que vendiera si le hacían buenas críticas, y él dijo que sí, claro, cualquier buen agente publicitario te cobra el diez por ciento.

—Oye, ¿es verdad lo que he oído decir de Max?, ¿que su amante es la mujer de… —y entonces susurraron al oído de Hannah el nombre de un pintor muy conocido—… que le pasa a escondidas los lienzos sin terminar que su marido ha desechado y olvidado, y que Max los retoca un poco y los vende como originales?

—Mi tío terminó por escacharrarlo una noche; alguien que venía en una moto creyó que eran dos motos e intentó pasar entre ellas.

—Y luego me contó que había pasado dos días en la cama con esa auténtica puta de lujo que pescó en el Gafé de la Paix, después de decirle que no podía pagarle con francos, que sólo tenía dólares, y va y le enseña un momento ese fajo de billetes de diez y veinte y cincuenta, así que ella le pagó todas las cuentas en el George Sank y se lo hizo pasar en grande un par de días y luego le birló la pasta mientras dormía, dijo que le habría gustado verla intentando cambiar dinero de los Estados Confederados en el Banque de France. ¿Qué es eso, una reseña de su libro?

Hannah tendió el recorte de papel diciendo:

—El pobre cabrón que la escribió se la manda desde allá. Léela, verás que se le escapa la idea entera. Alguien del *Trib* [72] lo comparó con *Nightwood*.

—Por ahí viene, ¿no?

Hannah alzó la vista, para ver a Max acercándose, sonriente; para preguntar: «Eh, ¿me invitas a una cerveza?».

En la mesa de al lado, una chica dijo: «¿Plagiario? Qué es eso. Haendel lo hizo. Todos los hicieron. Hasta Mozart lo hizo, hasta se plagió a sí mismo, no tienes más que fijarte en los instrumentos de viento en la escena de la cena con Leporello». Alguien dijo que lo había atropellado un cura montado en una bicicleta con el sillín de felpa roja en la Rué Zheetliquer; otra dijo que la había atropellado una monja montada en una bicicleta en la Rué Dauphine: uno con barba dijo que nunca había visto ni a una monja ni a un cura en

la orilla izquierda, y añadió: «Yo acabo de conseguir un nuevo santón». «¿Un qué?». «Ya sabes, un psicoanalista. ¿Habéis estado en la exposición de cuadros pintados por locos del hospital de Saint Anne? Tenemos una buena sección, los de locos americanos. Algunos de ellos son la hostia de sucios».

Y alguien dijo: «No tiene nada de raro lo de Carruthers…», para concluir, de una vez por todas, la historia de aquel alférez y su yegua.

—*Maricones*[73] —murmuró el hombre del traje de zapa.

—*Wie Eulen nach Athen bringen*…

—*Maricones y nada más*.

Allí, en la terraza del Reine Blanche, Rudy y Frank hacían manitas bajo la mesa, y hablaban del banquete de bodas: caviar Volga, consommé Grands Viveurs, paillettes, homard au whisky, coeur de Charollais Edouard VII, perdreau róti sur canapé… champagnes, Mumm 1928, Château Issan 1925… «Y en la ceremonia sólo le dijimos que se saltara esa parte tan vulgar sobre los cuerpos del hombre y la mujer todo pegados para siempre. Luego dijeron que yo tenía un aire muy ingenuo».

—Sonny está terriblemente trastornado, ¡tan *celoso!* Intentó quitarse la vida, ¿te lo ha contado?

—¿Cómo?

—Golpeándose *salvajemente* en la sien con una pluma estilográfica. Pero ¿dónde estaba la Gran Anna? ¿También está celosa ésa?

—No, cariño, la Gran Anna telefoneó desde algún lugar absurdo de Italia. Iban a venir en el nuevo Renault de una persona cuyo nombre me callo, y estaban en alguna parte del valle de Fremola cuando empezó a ir mal, así que abrieron el capó para mirar el motor y allí no había nada más que un neumático viejo, debió caérseles el motor en marcha. Así que lo dejaron allí, era lo único que podían hacer. En el Paso de San Gotardo, era lo único que podían hacer.

—Rudy tenía una jofaina floreada monísima, pero se la prestó a alguien antes de que encontráramos ese sitio en el Quai
d'Orsay
, y ahora no quieren devolvérsela. Tienen plantado no sé qué en ella, y nosotros queremos *usarla*.

Al otro lado del río, en Montmartre, esa colina cuyo nombre ha sido tantas veces redimido desde que apareció san Dionisio con la cabeza bajo el brazo, un inmenso negro ladeado con charreteras vigilaba la entrada de un bar donde un jorobado jadeante tocaba un acordeón como una bestia haciendo el amor, una chica jadeaba como si estuviera a punto de vomitar, y su amiga decía seductoramente a un solitario desconocido: «Ella bailar, maravillosa bailarina. ¿Tú bailar?». «No». «¿Tú pagarme copa?». «No». «¿Tú "ingliss"?». «No». «¿Tú "suiso"?». «No». «¿Tú "jermn"?». «No». «¿Tú *hollandais*?». «No». «¿Tú bailar?». «No». «¿Tú pagarme copa?». El jorobado seguiría jadeando sobre su acordeón, la chica sobre la barra, el enorme portero en la puerta, pero no volverían a ver entrar a Arny tambaleándose, viniendo de su hotel en Rochechouart con la camisa del revés y el dobladillo de la chaqueta prendido con alfileres, pues ni siquiera el
Henry's
Hotel estaba ya en pie: el día había sido soleado, y Arny, tras acabar una botella a la hora del desayuno, la dejó vacía en el alféizar de la ventana y se sentó a intentar escribir una carta. «Querida Maude: Sólo estoy intentando explicarme las cosas…», empezó, y no siguió adelante, pues pronto se quedó dormido sobre ella, apoyando la cabeza en los brazos doblados. La luz del sol llenó la habitación, y el papel de la pared pareció que iba a caer y devorarle. Siguió durmiendo. El sol dio en la botella, que reflejó su luz y calor sobre un punto definido de las sábanas. Amy despertó envuelto en humo. Antes de que pudiera levantarse, fueron llamas. Se acercó a la ventana, donde alguien, posiblemente un bromista, había pegado un letrero: «On est prié de
n'ouvrir
pas ce fenêtre parce que le façade de
l'htel
lui compter pour se supporter…». Arny no leía en francés, ni siquiera cuando estaba escrito por un americano. Abrió la ventana con algún esfuerzo, el humo salió a borbotones, y la fachada del
Henry's
Hotel se derrumbó.

Abajo, en una zona de la ciudad más elegante, los turistas seguían paseándose por los Grands Boulevards, maravillándose de la cocina francesa, *côte de vean, côte de porc, entrecôte, biftec, bistek, pommes frites, pommes frites.* Los dos jóvenes de cabeza diminuta habían vuelto a traer a sus jóvenes damas a la orilla derecha para cenar, y avanzaban por el Boulevard des Capucines como los caballos de una cuadriga, los

sementales a los lados. «Por qué no te adelantas un poco, Charley, a ver si una de ésas se te acerca, fingiendo que no vas con nosotros; adelántate, quiero ver cómo lo hace…». Ninguna lo hizo. Siguieron adelante, rígidamente estirados con dignidad, capados y esterilizados, hasta llegar a un pequeño restaurante cuya pequeña muestra decía: «Son menu Touristique 400 francs, You Speack English». «Hors
d'oeuvres
veiyay pertoo, puis boeuf á la sale anglaise». «Comment,
m'sr
?». «Boeuf à la sale anglaise». «Comment?». «*Ici,* maldita sea…». Señaló la carta y lo repitió. «Ahh, oui, boeuf salé á
l'anglaise
, oui
m'sr
…». «Eso es lo que he dicho, maldita sea, quiero decir Cristo», añadió una vez se hubo alejado la camarera, «ni siquiera entienden su propia lengua».

Pero en la mayoría de los sitios todavía se apreciaba a los franceses según su propia valoración. Todavía se los consideraba los más sensibles *connoisseurs* del alcohol. Los bárbaros americanos, los bárbaros ingleses, bebían para emborracharse; pero los franceses, con gustos cultivados y sensibilidades civilizadas, se echaron al coleto aquel año seis mil millones de botellas de vino simplemente para regalarse sus refinados paladares: tan refinados, que un cuantioso subsidio gubernamental, y una camarilla capaz de derribar gabinetes, garantizaban la existencia de un despacho de bebidas por cada noventa habitantes; tan cultivados, que el diez por ciento del presupuesto familiar se iba en beber, el gusto iniciado antes de que un crío supiera andar, y la muerte por *delirium tremens* con diecinueve meses (bizco de Pernod) tenida por cosa fortuita; tan civilizadas, que uno de cada veinticinco franceses muertos había dado el último salto gracias al alcoholismo.

Todavía se los consideraba los árbitros de las bellas artes, y el comisario Clot de la Sureté Nationale podía demostrarlo señalando las paredes de su despacho decoradas con pruebas: los mejores pintores franceses modernos alcanzaban precios tan elevados, cambiaban de manos tan libremente, resultaban tanto más fáciles de copiar y, lo más halagüeño, no tenían historia, que nadie se molestaba en producir «viejos maestros». Inundado como estaba ahora mismo por las obras de alguien que estaba comprando originales, haciendo y vendiendo copias (perfectas), y vendiendo más tarde los originales en otro sitio, el comisario Clot seguía seguro de su presa: «Si los falsificadores se contentasen con una sola falsificación, casi siempre quedarían impunes…».

Hasta el final, los modelos de hombres libres más ejemplares del mundo (como atestiguaban su enérgica sucesión de gobiernos y su destreza singular en la evasión de impuestos); de frugalidad y economía doméstica previsora (con el equivalente en dólares de tres o cuatro mil billones del oro mundial muerto y enterrado en patios traseros); de sofisticada modernidad (uno no tenía más que marcar Odéon
84,00
para saber la hora, la disección del último minuto apenas comprensible pero, muy gastada como estaba, grabada por un famoso cómico francés); y todavía la hija predilecta de la Iglesia…

—Bueno, *ella* dice que cogió el pie de atleta en uno de los baños de Lourdes —dijo alguien entrando en el Louvre; mientras un italiano que salía comentó, a nadie, que las esculturas de Miguel Angel que acababa de ver estaban colocadas «coll' arte ben conosciuta di tradimento francese».

De nuevo en la orilla izquierda, el filósofo de la terraza del Flore había sido remplazado por una mujer rubia con un falso número de campo de concentración tatuado en el brazo izquierdo, que estaba moderando un debate sobre el Sufrimiento. A un lado, una partida de ajedrez se desarrollaba con dificultad, pues se discutía cuál de las piezas altas era el rey, y cuál la reina. Un americano que había estado viajando en coche por África dijo: «No te rías, no es nada gracioso. Atropellamos a uno. Hay unos treinta y cinco al día en Casablanca, sencillamente no entienden las máquinas. Me costó treinta y dos mil francos arreglar el coche, debería haberle dado de lleno. Hasta encontraron sus dientes en el silenciador».

Una parte del Deux Magots estaba homenajeando a un pintor que había sido descubierto por una revista de modas americana: hasta 1916 sólo había pintado botellas. Su revolución artística llegó en 1980. Descubrió el blanco.

Max se había ido del Royale. «¿Cómo lo hace, trabaja en algún sitio?». «Vive en un suburbio llamado *banlieu»,* dijo Hannah, «pinta cuadros para un pintor conocido que los firma y los vende como originales». «Pero son originales…». Doce niños árabes vendían cacahuetes que sacaban de lo alto de cestas y hachís que sacaban del fondo. Alguien dijo que había un pueblo en Francia llamado Condom. Muchos de los jóvenes

llevaban barba. «Nunca entendí el dinero italiano mientras estuve allí, era como confeti, confeti bastante caro…». Hannah dijo que tenía que irse a trabajar. Leía en voz alta sus poemas en una cueva local, desnuda. «Estoy estudiando arte aquí a cuenta del ejército americano», dijo una de las barbas, «be encontrado una escuela donde lo único que tienes que hacer es matricularte». Alguien recitó la profecía de Malaquías referente al papado. «Sólo quedan siete más, contando este». «¿Creéis que París vale una misa?», preguntó alguien, con un libro en la mano titulado *Les cinq fontaines ensanglantées.* «Nostradamus predice que durará hasta el 34250. d. C., claro».

En la terraza del Reine Blanche, el chico rubio dijo: «La semana que viene ha prometido llevarme a París…». «Pero, cariño, esto *es* París». Rudy y Frank se habían marchado, para volver a su nuevo piso con vistas al Pont
d'Iéna
en compañía de su alegre grupo, todo el cual se detuvo en el vestíbulo a admirar el gran cuadro que había sido el regalo de bodas de un conocido artista. Representaba a un hombre alto de pie, con un joven tumbado a sus pies, mirando fijamente lo que, tras un atento examen, no resultó ser más que un desgarrón en los pantalones del hombre alto. Luego uno de los invitados hizo ademán de ir a descorrer las cortinas de los ventanales, y se lo impidieron inmediatamente. «Porque Rudy buscó y buscó durante meses un lugar como éste, que diera al agua, y la mismísima primera noche que estuvimos aquí, aquí parados en este mismísimo sitio mirando hacia las luces y el Sena, una chica llegó al puente y se quitó los zapatos y se tiró, delante mismo de nuestros ojos, y eso sencillamente nos estropeó la vista para siempre a los dos…». Luego Frank se excusó para retirarse a escribir una carta a casa, en Ohio, mientras los demás se sentaban a tomar *friandises* servidas en una moderna vajilla de cristal finlandesa, a encender cigarrillos con cajas de cerillas rotuladas con *Rudy y Frank,* y a hablar de Copenhague. «Querida mamá», escribió Frank en el dormitorio, «sé que entenderás por qué quiero estar con él siempre, mamá, sé que entenderás que te diga que lo amo como tú amabas a papá…».

«El tiempo es una cojera…», leyó Hannah en el subsuelo, sus palabras elevándose despumadas entre el humo y la mezcla inconexa de lenguas, «emmerdant…», «les americains, alors…», mientras la ciudad parecía intentar dormir al raso aquel gran lapso de tiempo, preguntando: «¿Tenéis afectos?». «Sí, graciosa dama». «¡De veras!». «No de veras, señora… pero tengo afectos feroces, y pensad en lo que Venus hizo con Marte…». La trigésima tercera persona se tiró de la Torre Eiffel (aunque cifras extraoficiales elevaban su número hasta casi un centenar), esta vez desde los 348 pies de altura del segundo piso, y tras veinte años de investigación los Amigos de Cleopatra descubrieron que los restos que había en su tumba, en el jardín de la biblioteca del Louvre, no eran en modo alguno de aquella reina, sino el cuerpo de un soldado árabe muerto en París en una reyerta de café, y que la momia, como un apretado lío de harapos, había ido a parar ochenta años antes a una fosa común, todo para gozo del gusano. «Et toute nue… quelle envahisseuse!». «El tiempo es una cojera…», empezó otra vez.

Tras el tintineante bastión de platillos, la envejecida imagen del padre de su patria sin peluca seguía leyendo, y alguien dijo que podía pasarse allí sentada toda la noche, porque llevaba un Amigo del Policía. En la terraza del Deux Magots alguien dijo que aquella tarde había empezado una carrera de globos en el Bois. Alguien leyó el texto de una postal de un amigo que estaba recorriendo Tierra Santa: «Acabo de visitar el Muro de las Lamentaciones, y he tenido una buena llorera». Abajo, en el servicio de caballeros, alguien garrapateó «Vive le Pape» sobre un urinario.

America
Mi pais es sovre ti
Dulze terra de livertad
Sovre tí yo canto
Terra donde mis pares morieron
Terra del orguyo de tus peregerinos
Desde cada laderas de la montaña
Resuelle la Livertad

escribió un estudiante del Instituto Profesional y Técnico Masculino de Essex County, en Newark, Nueva Jersey.

La enésima persona se tiró del Empire State Building en Nueva York.

En San Francisco pusieron siete ramales de alambre de espino en el lugar de salto del puente Golden Gate, que ciento cincuenta personas habían elegido como punto de partida de este mundo desde que se inauguró el puente en 1937.

En Moscú, la *Pravda* anunció que la música de guitarra hawaiana había sido prohibida en Rusia.

¿Había acabado realmente el largo invierno?, y «la chimenea, las zapatillas y la cama que espera» no estaban ya allí para «proteger de sí misma a la persona deprimida… Esta línea de retirada retrocede a medida que los días se hacen más largos», informó la Organización Mundial de la Salud, encontrando, con estas floridas expresiones de aceleración primaveral, «difícil de soportar la interminable luz del día… y el glorioso sol se convierte en una maldición».

Cualquier ciudad que se considere moderna prevé todas las necesidades de sus hijos, basta el punto de erigir algo alto para que puedan tirarse desde allí: la Torre Eiffel se inauguró hace más de medio siglo; pero en todas partes la población rural debe improvisar para civilizarse con lo que tiene. En el suroeste de Francia, en la región de las Landas, en las primeras cuarenta y ocho horas de las vacaciones de Pascua apareció ahorcada una mujer en un granero, dos hombres en un bosque, uno ahogado en un río, y otro en el mar, mientras Deauville se preparaba ya para celebrar Pentecostés, con unas siete semanas de adelanto, emitiendo quinientos mil francos en fichas para el casino, por primera vez.

«Juramiento de fidalidad a la vandera», escribió el estudiante de Nueva Jersey, duramente apremiado por su educación progresiva: «yo juro fidalidad a la vandera de los estaos unios Americanos / Y a la repubica que rapresenta / Una nazion indibisivle / con livertad y gusticia para todos…».

Con «livertad y gusticia», la policía de Los Angeles confiscó una prensa hidráulica, los tintes y el compuesto de goma plástica con que los tres hombres detenidos estaban falsificando fichas de póquer, para canjearlas en los grandes casinos de Las Vegas al otro lado de la frontera.

En la «indibisivle», los agentes aduaneros de la «nazion» estaban importunando a un productor cinematográfico de Hollywood con motivo de los derechos de aduana de un *Estudio a la luz de las velas* de Vincent van Gogh. El comprador decía que era un «original» y que, por tanto, debía entrar en la «nazion» sin pagar impuestos, como garantizaban la «livertad y la gusticia» a cualquier obra de arte auténtica por muy valiosa que fuese; pero los guardianes de la «indibisivle» exigían una parte sustanciosa (el 10 por 100) del precio de compra (
50 000,00
dólares), aplicando la tarifa que esta dulce tierra impone a toda «imitación o copia» cuya entrada amenace el sustento de la inspiración que todavía resuella desde cada laderas de la montaña.

Los amantes de las cosas hermosas eran uña y carne. Parte de los cuadros valorados en setenta y cinco mil dólares robados de la catedral de Bardstown, Kentucky (entre ellos una *Venida del Espíritu Santo* de Jan van Eyck), aparecieron en el maletero de un coche en Chicago. Al otro lado del mar, el axioma de que la propiedad no realza el valor estético se vio refutado una vez más: un vigilante del Museo Victoria y Albert se había llevado a casa en veintitrés años mil novecientos sesenta objetos
d'art
escondidos en las perneras de sus pantalones.

La primavera llegaba a todas partes, como si fuera por primera vez.

Y por primera vez se encontró un uso civilizado a la Gran Pirámide de Keops en Egipto, donde un nativo se arrojó eficazmente por la pendiente de bloques de dos toneladas. En Sudamérica, con diecisiete muertos y 4990 heridos que precisaron tratamiento médico tras las festividades precuaresmales de Río de Janeiro, la propia Semana Santa se acercaba a su fin de modo comparativamente pacífico. Llegaron noticias de que trescientos leprosos marchaban sobre la capital de Colombia desde su colonia de Río Agua de Dios. Nueve peregrinos murieron pisoteados y veinticinco quedaron heridos al atascarse las puertas del Santuario de Chalma en México. Un pastor baptista de Rocky Mount, Carolina del Norte, quemó dos ejemplares de una nueva versión revisada de la Biblia porque sustituía las palabras «mujer joven» por «virgen», y un pastor luterano dijo que ambas eran erróneas: la palabra debería ser «doncella». En Chicago se cometía un crimen cada
12,5
minutos. Unos pollos explotaron en un pueblo cerca de Hannover, Alemania (habían comido carburo dejado caer por tropas británicas en maniobras y bebido agua). El jeque de Kuwait pidió que unos carteles que reproducían la Venus de Milo no se exhibieran en sus dominios, no remilgado por su pecho desnudo, sino porque la ley islámica castiga al ladrón cortándole una mano. El brazo derecho de san Francisco Javier llegó al Japón por vía aérea. En Moscú, la *Pravda* preguntó: «¿Dónde desapareció el Arca de Noé?».

En la capital de Hungría, el periódico *Esti Budapest* se quejaba de que no se enseñase bien a leery escribir a los niños en las escuelas estatales de asistencia social: una penosa confesión, a la vista de los avances que estaba logrando en educación progresiva su más formidable antagonista político, tan lejos de allí, en el Nuevo Mundo, donde aquel intrépido joven patriota del Instituto Profesional y Técnico Masculino de Essex County, en Newark, Nueva Jersey, se elevó a nuevas cumbres de entusiasmo cuando le pidieron que

escribiera la letra del himno nacional de su país… la «Vandera Semvrada de Estreyas».

> O deciz podéis ver con la primer luz de amanecer
> Loque tan orguyosos saludamos con el ultimo rallo del ocaso
> Cullas anchas barras y briyantes estreyas en la lusha
> Vimos hondear tan gayardamente sovre las murayas
> Y el rojo fugor de coetes las bomvas estayando en el aire
> Dieron prueva en la noshe que nuestra vandera aun estava ayí
> O deciz hondea aun esa vandera semvrada de estrellas
> Sovre la terra de los livres y el hozar de los balientes.

En un pasillo del hospital
Z***
de Budapest, junto a la puerta de una habitación privada, hablaban dos médicos.

—*Napok óta nem aludt.*

—*Hetek óta*.

—Seconal, Luminal, Somnadex, *mindent megpróbáltunk. Még amerikai szereket kényszerüsegükben*.

—¿Y sigue sin poder dormir? —dijo el hombre de la trinchera, dentro.

—Sí.

—Tiene la voz clara, quizá no fuerte pero clara. —Estaba de pie con las manos entrelazadas tras de sí, mirando por la ventana, de espaldas a la figura en la cama. Cuando se volvió, el vuelo redondo del faldón de la trinchera se venció desigualmente hacia adelante por el peso de la pistola en el bolsillo—. Y tiene los ojos claros —siguió—, quizá no fuertes, pero claros.

—Sí, los ojos, la voz… tengo la mente clara, todo está claro, pero ¿si no puedo dormir? Todo está claro, nunca he tenido la mente tan clara, ¿me oye? Nunca me ha funcionado la mente tan deprisa ni… con tanta claridad, pero esto… esto… sin dormir, pensando, pensando, pero nada de eso… ¿sin dormir?

—Dicen que ya no puede durar mucho —dijo el hombre de la trinchera, y se encogió ligeramente de hombros. Se le crisparon las comisuras de la boca, pero por lo demás su expresión no cambió en absoluto.

No había almohada en la cama, y la cabeza estaba echada hacia atrás, la barbilla saliente hacia arriba y todo el perfil afilado y duro en sus rasgos. Las manos yacían separadas sobre la colcha.

—*Nincsen oka…* —llegaron de fuera las palabras de uno de los médicos.

—Sí, no hay ninguna razón, no es razonable que… no haya ninguna razón, ¡ninguna razón! —exclamó entre jadeos, los acuosos ojos azules clavados en el techo, una vena en la sien latiendo visiblemente—. Alguien se rio —jadeó un momento después—, el labio de los Habsburgos, ¡sí! Hicimos nuestro trabajo allí, usted lo hizo, ¿verdad? ¿Encontró al padre Martin, en Roma?

—En la calle, «a plena luz del día». Fue cosa de un momento —volvió a encogerse de hombros el hombre de la trinchera, recogiendo el vuelo de su faldón al levantar el peso del bolsillo, acercándose a la cama—. Qué suelto tiene el anillo en el dedo —dijo—. Lo perderá.

—No… me toque, no… ¡se acerque tanto!

Se quedó mirando un momento la cara, que tenía debajo casi de frente, esfumada la fuerza del perfil, escurrida por la estrecha barbilla. Luego volvió hacia la ventana murmurando:

—Una cosa bonita, el anillo, el oro. ¿Y el blasón de su familia, en América?

—El blasón de mi familia en América es… jajggg, el blasón de mi familia, ¿eh? ¿Eh, mi querido amigo? ¿Te acuerdas?, ¿te acuerdas cuando dijiste: «Gracias a Dios que había que falsificar el oro»?

—No debería intentar reírse así —dijo el hombre ante la ventana.

—¿Eh?, ¿eh?, el blasón de mi familia en América, ¿eh? «Aetas parentum pejor avis tulit nos nequiores…», ¿eh? No podemos aseguramos contra el vicio inherente. No, maldita sea, tendré que sufrirlo hasta el fin, esta vez. ¿Entiende? ¿Entiende lo clara que… lo clara que tengo la mente? Pero todavía sin ninguna razón… ninguna razón, no puede… e… —Había hecho un esfuerzo por levantar la cabeza; y entonces gritó, rígido de terror, aferrando la colcha pulcramente doblada bajo su barbilla—. ¡Ahí!, ¡ahí!, quítelo… —Su voz recuperó bruscamente un control perentorio, pero habló con gran rapidez—: Lléveselo… lléveselo.

El hombre de la trinchera se inclinó sobre él. «Pero… ¿qué?». Lo único que vio fue un fino pelo rizado sobre la sábana blanca que temblaba subida hasta la barbilla, y alargó perezosamente la mano para quitarlo.

—Sí sí eso, lléveselo lléveselo…

Con la otra mano, el hombre de la trinchera hizo una seña a las figuras en la puerta, donde un médico

hablaba con un sacerdote que acababa de entrar: «Nincsen oka nem aludni…».

—¿Qué es eso, qué es ese olor?, ¿aceite?, ¿aceite?, ¿qué es eso?, ¿dónde está?

—Por supuesto no ha sido fácil, pero hemos conseguido que venga a verle un sacerdote.

—Sí, sí, aquí, aquí está, sí, pero ninguna razón, no puede… ¡no!, ¡no!

—*Nézzen rá, nézzen a szemére…*

—*… indulgeat tibi Dominus…*

—¿Te acuerdas? *Aut castus…* ¿Martin? ¿Martin?, maldita sea, maldito seas, ¡te acuerdas! *Aut castus sit aut… aut…* sí, *sit aut pereat,* ¿ves?, ¿qué clara tengo la mente? *Aut castus…* ¿ves?

—*Nincsen oka, nincsen oka, nincsen oka…*

—*… deliquisti per oculos…*

—¡Martin! ¡Martin! ¡Maldita sea! ¡Maldito seas! Ves qué clara… ¿te acuerdas? «Sé puro o perece», *aut… aut pereat,* ¿ves?

—*Quidquid deliquisti per manus…*

—*… et pereat!* ¿ves?

En un porche de cañas, Fuller arrojó una lenta nube de humo de cigarro hacia el sol naciente. Desde su *bungalow,* situado al extremo de lo que recientemente había pasado a ser el Proyecto Piloto, veía salir y ponerse el sol, y saludaba ambas ocasiones de la misma manera.

Pero el sol estaba ya entero en el cielo, y aún no aparecían las figuras habituales, el joven pálido con un brazo en cabestrillo que marcaba un paso lento a sus ayudantes, acercándose «con las píldoras de vitamina y las cajitas blancas…», por la mañana; y apareciendo otra vez por la tarde, para recoger los especímenes uno tras otro en los *bungalows,* «una cosa peculiar para ir por ahí recolectando, aunque todo lo hace con gran corrección y decoro. Me parece recordar la cara de ese joven tan ocupado con las cajitas blancas. Una vez le he echado el ojo a un hombre, no lo olvido».

Pues al rayar el día había habido mucha agitación en el centro del Proyecto Piloto, donde el doctor Fell había salido corriendo hacia el *bungalow* de su ayudante.

—¡Lo sabía! ¡Lo sabía! Y te lo advertí, ¿o no? Te advertí que no te fiaras de ese… ese tatuado… no quiero decirlo, pero ¿no es así? ¿No te lo advertí? Y ahora se ha largado, te ha robado todo el dinero y se ha largado. Nos siguió hasta aquí, te siguió hasta aquí, sólo para robarte el dinero. Sí, ¿no te lo advertí?

Miles de dólares, ¿verdad?, ¿no te lo advertí? ¿Por qué sonríes? ¿Estás bien? ¿Gordon? ¡Gordon! ¿Estás bien? Ahora tendrás que empezar otra vez desde el principio. Lo sabía. Él sabía que tenías problemas en la oscuridad, ¿verdad?, ese idiota… tatuado, lo sabía, ¿verdad?, así es como se ha aprovechado de ti, y ahora se ha largado y te ha robado todo el dinero. ¿Qué vas a hacer? No puedes hacer nada. ¿Qué vas a hacer ahora? Tendrás que empezar otra vez desde el principio. ¡Gordon…! ¿Qué tienes?, ¿por qué sonríes…? ¡Gordon!, para ya, no puedes arrancarte las vendas de ese modo, no puedes… pobre… ¡Siéntate!, ¡deja de reírte!, deja… de arrancarte las vendas, deja… ¡piensa! Puedes… debes… empezar otra vez desde el principio.

Soplaba una brisa suave del sur, y las campanas llamando al Angelus matinal sonaban por toda la costa desde Bridgetown.

Era cerca del mediodía en Roma, donde la paz había llegado la noche anterior a los tejados del Vaticano, si no a otra parte, con la muerte del gatazo negro perteneciente al cardenal bibliotecario y archivero, y del gato ratonero gris propiedad de un monseñor caballero y camarero secreto del papa. Los periódicos informaban de que llevaban algún tiempo luchando por la supremacía, y que sus cuerpos habían sido hallados «todavía enzarzados en combate mortal» en el Patio del Belvedere, tras una caída de setenta pies.

Al doblar la esquina de la Via Umiltà, Stanley tenía un aspecto mucho más frágil del que había tenido en años. Hasta levantaba la vista nerviosamente cada vez que veía un reflejo, pues el corte de pelo, su última concesión a la señora Deigh, parecía haberle quitado kilos, y uno o dos años, de encima. Sin embargo, su cara mostraba un nuevo viso de intensidad; y puede que ni siquiera él habría sabido decir al momento si se debía a la desesperación y conquista que lo habían consumido durante los sucesos de los últimos días, o simplemente al corte de pelo. Pero quizá la misma forma arrebatada en que hablaba ahora de su obra, sobre todo de aquella parte que iba a interpretar tan pronto en Fenestrula, dejaba vislumbrar los abismos cuya realidad le habían revelado por primera vez las experiencias que lo habían llevado bruscamente a su nuevo estado, experiencias que habían arrancado las máscaras infantiles de ansiedad de la cara del pavor

permanente, sacando a la luz conflictos que todavía no entendía, planteando preguntas que ahora no podía contestar, y que tal vez, según sentía, nunca podría. Las dos tragedias habían ocurrido tan próximas entre sí que bien podían haber estado asociadas; así lo estaban en él, y en eso se cifraba el conflicto imprevisto en las exigencias de su nueva madurez, en que no había sufrido directamente por ninguna de ellas.

Avergonzado de haber salido huyendo aquella noche de la casa de Via Flaminia, después de todo lo que ella había hecho por él, el peso de la carta para Fenestrula que le había conseguido lastrándole el bolsillo con su muestra de ingratitud, había recobrado el ánimo y vuelto sobre sus pasos, aunque esta vez fue la mujer la que lloró mientras él desgranaba sus disculpas entrecortadas. Lo primero que había hecho era cortarse el pelo, para complacerla.

Fue el mismo día en que se enteró de la primera tragedia. Con ella, todas sus ansiedades volvieron redobladas, sus incertidumbres se dispararon en todas direcciones, sus temores por cada momento del pasado y el futuro se espolearon entre sí, y la culpa le invadió más opresivamente que nunca. En uno de los primeros momentos de aturdimiento, ya fuera para confirmar la única perspectiva segura que le quedaba, ya para confirmar el recelo que de pronto sintió incluso hacia ésa, abrió la carta para Fenestrula y sólo encontró dentro una lista de la compra. En aquel trance intentó obligarse a no pensar en nada, a no intentar entender ni resolver nada, hasta que pudiera encontrar al padre Martin, y tuvo la suerte de conseguirlo, y confesó todo lo que al rehuir precisamente un encuentro así se había intensificado en cada detalle de las últimas semanas. El sacerdote estaba obviamente ocupado, y pronto quedó claro que su trabajo consistía en algo más que el mero guiar a Peregrinos de un santuario a otro, que los asuntos que le concernían abarcaban problemas más amplios que el confesionario. Sin embargo pasó una hora, quizá dos, mientras el padre Martin escuchaba, su cara perdiendo la jovialidad, recuperándola por un momento, volviendo a sus rasgos de severidad medieval, mientras Stanley le contaba todos los detalles de lo que le había ocurrido desde que se embarcó en el Conte di Brescia. Todos los detalles, hasta el del crucifijo roto, las cuentas rodando por el suelo, la mujer gorda, y los dientes de Stanley castañeteaban a veces mientras hablaba, y en medio de la narración se interrumpía con alguna urgente incoherencia, como: «Brujería, maleficio, viene de "maldiciendo", eso viene de "male", de "fide sentiendo", quiero decir, ¿significa eso que es obrar mal por pensar mal en asuntos de fe…?». Y ahora aquella última tragedia; y su trabajo, y Fenestrula.

El padre Martin lo escuchó, y le habló, con extraordinaria dulzura y severidad a un tiempo, con una calma que nunca era complaciente, una fuerza de comprensión (aunque nunca dijo que comprendiera), un interés que no era curiosidad patente para disculpar respuestas manidas (pues no dio ninguna), y una simpatía paciente por las figuras de las que hablaba Stanley, una cualidad que mostraba por sí sola el rasgo más profundo de su carácter, la realidad más duramente ganada y rara vez realizada de la madurez, que era la compasión. Era un hombre extraordinario, como atestiguaría el suceso posterior. Cuanto más hablaba Stanley, más a menudo se refería a su trabajo, y a la importancia que tenía para él. El padre Martin no llegó a animarlo abiertamente, aunque al fin dijo: «Vivimos en un mundo donde cada día es más difícil alcanzar la experiencia de primera mano, y si la alcanzas por medio de tu trabajo, quizá no seas afortunado de la forma en que la mayoría de la gente sería afortunada. Pero hay cosas que no voy a intentar explicarte. Las aprenderás por ti mismo si sigues adelante, y en eso sí puedo ayudarte». Inmediatamente arregló las cosas para Fenestrula, y Stanley se marchó con aquella seguridad para paliar el desconcierto de su corazón por todo lo demás, un desconcierto doblemente exacerbado, mientras Fenestrula se convertía en la única salida posible, cuando poco después mataron a tiros al padre Martin a plena luz del día.

Aun ahora, mientras entraba en la Via Umiltá, le bailaba en la cabeza gacha una canción que no podía sacudirse de encima. Cada palabra traía consigo las sombras de ansiedad del mar arrastrándose de nuevo hacia él, las trepidantes cubiertas, y aun ahora, mientras andaba, buscó la muela en su bolsillo y recordó que la había perdido: en un instante, la punta de su lengua encontró el hueco cicatrizado de su encía, y alguien saltó al bordillo desde un descapotable verde lima y le cogió del brazo.

—Maldita sea, me alegro de encontrarte. —Era el hombre de la corbata de seda verde, aunque hoy la seda era amarilla. Tenía un estampado de tuercas y tornillos—. Tengo que encontrar a esa chica, esa chica flaca que estabas buscando la otra noche. Tengo que encontrarla. ¿Dónde está?

—Ha muerto —dijo Stanley con claridad, y los dos se quedaron parados un momento, mirándose como si lo hubiera dicho otro.

—Espera, no puede… ¿Qué has dicho?

—Murió —dijo Stanley con voz más débil, y desvió la vista de la cara del hombre hacia las tuercas y tornillos.

—No… no puede hacer eso. Tengo que encontrarla, ha ganado ese concurso para la

, como le dije que ocurriría, no puede… esfumarse… sin más, ella… ¿ha tenido un accidente?

—¿Un accidente? —repitió Stanley. La tensa calma de su voz, en vez de quebrársela, le había dejado sin habla. Se le quedó mirando.

—Esto es serio, ahora escucha… ella…

—Iba a casarse conmigo.

—Muy bien, pero una oportunidad como ésta, no puede… se lo habría montado.

—¿Montado?

—Te lo dije, se lo dije, ella… hemos alquilado un pueblo entero para esta cosa. Aunque nos hayan cambiado el argumento un poco, ahora van a hacer la *Divina Comedia* de Dante, en vez de una simple vida de la
S. V. M.
, ¿entiendes? Así que puede que sólo tenga un papelito al final, pero eso está bien. De todas formas todo el asunto va a parar a eso, ¿entiendes? Cuando él se la encuentra al final. Todavía no he leído el guión, pero ya tienen uno técnico a punto para esta cosa, ¿entiendes? Esta *Divina Comedia* de Dante…

—Está muerta —insistió de pronto Stanley, y luego volvió a quedarse callado.

—Pero… ¿qué pasó? ¿Qué pasó?

—Murió, tenía… tenía una cosa en el labio, una herida, una… y se le infectó, era algo como… infección por estafilococos, y ocurrió así de pronto, en un par de días, ella…

—Cómo pudo pillar una cosa como esa así como así, ella…

—Se consumió, tan deprisa como si… como si no tuviera ganas de vivir, y dijo… dijo —se estremeció Stanley—, por besar a san-Pedro-en-la-Barca, dijo: «Para algunos peces, el mar, el mar…».

—Vamos, domínate, no puedes… —El hombre lo agarró del hombro, meneó la cabeza y murmuró—: Sí, ella… maldita sea. —Se quedó mirando a Stanley, que miraba aleladamente los dibujos de la corbata de seda—. Y… maldita sea, lo teníamos todo preparado, ese concurso, lo teníamos todo preparado con esa canonización que van a hacer, y esa cosa de la Asunción, toda esa maldita publicidad para ese concurso, maldita sea, era la viva imagen de la
S. V. M.
, lo tenía en el bote. Ahora es demasiado tarde para hacer maldita la cosa. —Entonces, mientras los ojos de Stanley seguían clavados en una tuerca de seda marrón, volvió a agarrarlo del hombro y dijo—: Cristo. Vamos. Sube y ven a tomar una copa. Nos reanimaremos.

—No, tengo que irme. Tengo que coger un tren.

—Vente a tomar una copa. Cristo. Mira, ese cretino que tengo en el coche es un exrey que quiere recuperar su maldito trono, tengo que ir a comer con él. Pero vente a tomar una copa con nosotros. Conocerás a ese cretino. Joder, qué mala suerte. Te reanimarás… —Entonces se quedó mirando la acera entre él y Stanley—. Maldita sea —dijo—, yo tenía un amigo, un tipo que estuvo conmigo en la universidad, acaba de matarse en un accidente aéreo, decía que todo el asunto es como ese pañuelo y esa bala de cañón cayendo en ese vacío: caen a la misma velocidad, ¿sabes? Y vayas adonde puñetas vayas, y hagas lo que puñetas hagas, todo sigue siendo el mismo puñetero pañuelo y la misma puñetera bala de cañón cayendo en el mismo puñetero vacío.

En el tren vespertino, Stanley vio a Don Bildow demasiado tarde para evitarlo. Don Bildow llevaba una caja grande bajo el brazo. Retuvo a Stanley durante el tiempo suficiente para decirle que iba camino de París, y para preguntarle adonde iba, pero no le dio oportunidad de contestar. «He tenido suerte», siguió, «el chico del sastre llegó a tiempo al tren con esto, éste es mi traje nuevo, y he estado a punto de perder el tren. Voy a ponérmelo antes de que lleguemos a la frontera suiza para no tener que pagar derechos de aduana».

—Sí, pero disculpa —dijo Stanley, posiblemente la primera vez que hablaba a Bildow con aquel tono de brusco rechazo—, estoy cansado. Disculpa.

—¿Qué te pasa? Oye, me sorprende que no te quedes en Roma para esa cosa de mañana. La canonización de esa santa…

El tren avanzaba traqueteando hacía el norte. La segunda clase no era más sucia que en la mayoría de los trenes, pero Don Bildow conservó puesto su viejo traje ajado y manchado, su camisa y corbata sucias, hasta que el último recodo del Lago Maggiore se esfumó del paisaje fugaz. Entonces entró en el servicio de caballeros, y se quitó la ropa. Se lavó lo mejor que pudo, aunque sus gafas de montura de plástico se le caían continuamente al lavabo. Luego se puso una camisa italiana nueva, en parte de seda, que sacó de un paquetito que llevaba enrollado en el bolsillo. Todas sus pertenencias, su dinero, pasaporte, tabletas de

testosterona y preservativos, y unas cuantas cartas, estaban metidas en una revista de tapas duras en el suelo. Se había pasado por el cuello una corbata nueva amarilla y marrón cuando se dio cuenta de que debía deshacerse de algún modo de la prueba de la ropa vieja. La ventanilla no podía abrirse, así que, una a una, con sus mangas nuevas remangadas, fue empujando las prendas hasta hacerlas desaparecer por el retrete. Cuando llegó a la chaqueta se coló fácilmente, pues para entonces el retrete estaba ya bastante limpio. Luego abrió la caja del sastre romano. Lo único que contenía era un traje de marinero para un niño de siete años, con pantalones cortos. Eso sí, los pespuntes a mano eran muy finos, y las costuras dobles estaban cosidas con exquisito cuidado. Hasta había una gorrita redonda con cintas, y el nombre del primer acorazado italiano, Dante Alighieri, bordado en oro entorno al trencillo.

«Puede que…», dijo con voz entrecortada, mirándolo. Luego se puso las gafas y volvió a mirarlo. «Stanley, puede que Stanley… tenga algo…». Pero su amigo se había apeado hacía un rato, en Milán, para cambiar de tren hacia Fenestrula, y se quedó tambaleándose en el suelo oscilante, sosteniendo la blusa a la distancia de un brazo con la manga arremangada, y mirándola a través de las gafas con montura de plástico. Todo el conjunto estaba hecho con tanto cuidado como cualquier traje a medida para un adulto, según pudo comprobar, incluso con aquella luz, mientras el tren seguía traqueteando hacia el Simplón.

A la luz de la mañana siguiente, la iglesia parecía mucho más pequeña de lo que había imaginado que sería, y diferente de como la había visto Stanley la noche anterior, cuando llegó en la oscuridad y se acercó a mirarla nada más dejar sus escasas posesiones en el cuarto de una pensión del pueblo. El pueblo entero era diferente de lo que había imaginado en la oscuridad. Las masas y sombras habían desaparecido, y no encontró ningún indicio de que hubieran existido. En una dirección completamente diferente de la que había creído seguir, se acercó a lo que había tomado por una especie de capilla vallada, débilmente iluminada y posiblemente privada: resultó ser un urinario público. Y la propia iglesia era mucho más modesta contra la vasta conciencia del cielo iluminado de lo que las sombras indefinidas la habían elevado por la noche, una imagen, como se dio cuenta al verla a la luz del día, que nunca volvería a ver.

Los muros de la iglesia eran gruesos, y estaban agrietados en algunas zonas. En uno de ellos, cerca del suelo, se veía el relleno de cascajo.

Aquella mañana Stanley iba vestido con su mejor traje, el azul, que se ponía por segunda vez. Caminaba con las manos entrelazadas ante sí, pues al ponerse los pantalones había descubierto con desmayo agujeros de polilla junto a la bragueta. Llevaba una camisa blanca, y una corbata roja, y nada, absolutamente nada, era como había pensado que sería.

Volvió a su cuarto tras la misa temprana, donde también había echado un vistazo al gigantesco órgano (pues era un regalo de un americano), y confirmado sus preparativos para tocar en él más tarde por la mañana, y también, o más bien antes que nada, pedido la intercesión de aquella santa a punto de ser proclamada aquella mañana por las campanas en favor de tres almas igualmente queridas, e igualmente bellas.

Y era en ellas en quien pensaba, y no en la obra, cuando se quedó solo en su cuarto mirando la obra, que era lo único que le quedaba. La miró con súbita malignidad, como si en aquel momento se hubiera salvado a expensas de todo y todos los demás, y lo más terrible, de cada una de aquellas tres almas: pero ése era el aire que tenía allí parado, pasándose la mano por el pelo corto, subiéndose el cinturón, y mirando aquella obra, que desde que estaba concluida ya no podía llamar suya: aun ahora, era en las expensas de aquellas tres en lo que pensaba, y no en la suya.

Estaba de pie como si esperase que algo se moviera; y nada se movía. Nada se movió en la habitación hasta que un escalofrío le agitó los hombros, y se volvió a mirar tras de sí, los labios preparados para hablar, pero no había nadie allí. Sin embargo, seguía aún de pie, inmóvil, vuelto a medias, esperando, cuando las campanas lo liberaron, y recogió rápidamente las hojas que necesitaba, y salió a toda prisa a la calle.

Las llevó apretadas ante sí, y no levantó la vista hasta llegar a la misma iglesia. Allí explicó que había venido temprano, para ensayar aquella parte que tocaría después; lo explicó lo mejor que pudo, es decir, con las manos, las hojas, señalando el órgano, a sí mismo (la corbata roja), pues aquel cura no entendía el inglés, y le hablaba en italiano, un torrente incesante de palabras mientras guiaba a Stanley hacia el teclado, llevándolo con una mano en el brazo, luego en el hombro, y Stanley inclinó la cabeza, escuchando atentamente las palabras que no entendía, mientras se sentaba y tocaba las teclas, levantando un traste tras otro mientras atendía, y no comprendió por qué meneaba el cura la cabeza y volvía a poner dos de ellos mientras hablaba (y volvió a quitarlos cuando el cura se marchó, al parecer con prisa para ir a algún sitio

antes de que el siguiente servicio lo hiciera volver). «Prego, fare attenzione, non usi troppo i bassi, le note basse. La chiesa è così vecchia che le vibrazioni, capisce, potrebbero essere pericolose. Per favore non bassi… e non strane combinazioni di note, capisce…».

Cuando se quedó solo, después de quitar los trastes uno tras otro (pues así lo exigía la obra), Stanley se enderezó en el asiento, se apretó el nudo de la corbata roja, y atacó las teclas. La música se elevó a su alrededor, con el rabillo del ojo entrevió el brillo de su reloj de muñeca, y aunque leía la música que tenía delante, y veía su pulgar y su meñique bajar una y otra vez con tres teclas negras entre ambos, forzando las cuartas, la obra que había copiado a bordo del Conte di Brescia, forzando aquel acorde del intervalo del diablo a todo lo largo de los treinta pies de los tubos del bajo, no se detuvo. Los muros temblaban, pero no vaciló. Todo se movía, y aun cayendo, se elevaba en expiación.

Fue la única persona atrapada en el derrumbe, y más tarde se recuperó también la mayor parte de su obra, y todavía se habla de ella, cuando se menciona, con alta estima, aunque casi nunca se interpreta.

— FIN —

William Thomas Gaddis Jr. (29 de diciembre de 1922 - 16 de diciembre de 1998) fue un escritor estadounidense, considerado uno de los grandes novelistas norteamericanos del siglo XX. Escribió cinco novelas, de las cuales dos ganaron el National Book Award.

Gaddis nació en la ciudad de Nueva York, aunque creció en Massapequa. Una vez finalizada su educación, comenzó a trabajar en Nueva York para el periódico The New Yorker; en esta época, Gaddis pasaba su tiempo libre en compañía de algunos escritores de la Generación beat, tales como Allen Ginsberg o Jack Kerouac, habitués del barrio bohemio Greenwich Village. Gaddis realizó muchos viajes, abandonó Nueva York y viajó extensamente por México y América Central, donde se unió a los rebeldes de Costa Rica durante una breve guerra civil. Más tarde, pasó alguna temporada en España y, desde aquí, llegó hasta África.

«The Recognitions» fue reimpresa en una edición rústica y publicada en el extranjero, lo que supuso para Gaddis el comienzo de su reputación como escritor «underground». En 1974, «The Recognitions» se volvió a editar masivamente en una edición rústica, pero en esta ocasión la crítica elogió a Gaddis, que fue calificado de «escritor experimental» y su trabajo identificado con el de Thomas Pynchon. Con su siguiente trabajo, la obra titulada
J R
(1976), consiguió el premio National Book Award.

Gaddis falleció a los 75 años, el 16 de diciembre de 1998 en East Hampton, víctima de un cáncer de próstata.

OBRAS

- *The Recognitions* (1955).
- *J R*, premio National Book Award de Ficción (1975).
- *Carpenter's Gothic* (1985).
- *A Frolic of His Own*, premio National Book Award de Ficción (1994).
- *Agapē Agape* (2002 obra póstuma).
- *The Rush for Second Place* (2002 obra póstuma).

Notas a pie de página

NOTAS AL PIEPARTE PRIMERA

[1] *¡Despidan a esos desgraciados!*, trad. de Rubén Martín Giráldez, Alpha Decay, 2012. [N. del T.] < <

[2] *The first turn of the screw: screw* significa «tuerca», pero también «hélice», de modo que también se puede leer *la primera vuelta de la hélice.* [N. del T., como todas las que figuran a pie de página, a menos que se indique otra cosa.] < <

[3] En español en el original. < <

[4] En español en el original. < <

[5] En español en el original, como el resto de cursivas de esta página. < <

[6] Un excomulgado vitando es aquel con quien no se podía lícitamente tratar ni comunicar en aquellas cosas que se prohibían por la excomunión mayor. [N. de los E.] < <

[7] En español en el original. < <

[8] En español en el original. < <

[9] En español en el original. < <

[10] En español en el original. <<

[11] Célebre juicio al que se vio sometido en 1925 el profesor de enseñanza media John T. Scopes, acusado de haber violado la ley del Estado de Tennessee que prohibía enseñar la teoría de la evolución. <<

[12] En español en el original. <<

[13] En español en el original. <<

[14] En español en el original. <<

[15] En español en el original. <<

[16] Corrupción inglesa de *chic*. <<

[17] En español en el original. [N. de los E.] <<

[18] En español en el original. [N. de los E.] <<

[19] En español en el original. <<

[20] En español en el original. <<

[21] En español en el original. < <

[22] *God* («Dios»), *dog* («perro»). < <

[23] *Art* («arte»), *fart* («pedo»). < <

[24] Todas las cursivas de esta página aparecen en español en el original. [N. de los E.] < <

[25] *Play:* obra de teatro; *manuscript:* original, manuscrito. < <

[26] En español en el original. < <

[27] En español en el original. < <

[28] En español en el original. < <

[29] Todas las cursivas de esta página aparecen en español en el original. < <

[30] *Party* significa «partido» y también «fiesta». < <

[31] *To suck:* «chupar». < <

[32] En español en el original. < <

[33] *Another blue day: blue* significa «azul», pero también «triste», «melancólico». < <

[34] *Foolproof:* «infalible»; literalmente, «a prueba de tontos». < <

NOTAS AL PIEPARTE SEGUNDA

[1] Así en el original. < <

[2] Que padece paresia. < <

[3] En español en el original. < <

[4] Hace referencia al poco conocido comentario al *In Sancta Lumina* de Gregorio Nacianceno que escribe Nono de Panópolis. < <

[5] Cita distintos rangos de la iniciación mitraica («Oculto», «Soldado», «León», «Persa», «Emisario del Sol», respectivamente). En el mitraísmo existían siete niveles de iniciación: *Corax* («Cuervo»), *Cryphius* («Oculto»), *Miles* («Soldado»), *Leo* («León»), *Perses* («Persa»), *Heliodromus* («Emisario del Sol») y *Pater* («Padre»). < <

[6] Hace referencia a la novela de Robert Graves *The Antigua Stamp (El sello de Antigua)*. [N. de los E.] < <

[7] Why Not Try God? < <

[8] Morro Castle era un crucero de lujo que se incendió en 1934 [N. de los E.] < <

[9] En realidad el título de la pieza de Haendel que el personaje cita erróneamente es *El triunfo del tiempo y la verdad.* [N. de los E.] < <

[10] Palabra compuesta a partir de *bati-* (raíz prefija del griego *bathys,* «profundo», que encontramos en batiscafo, batimetría, etc.), *sidero* («hierro» en griego), *dromo* («vía», «camino» en griego) y *fobia* (del griego *phobia* «miedo»). Es decir, vendría a significar, miedo al metro, a lo subterráneo. [N. de los E.] < <

[11] *Faggot:* maricón. < <

[12] *Jewels*, «joyas»; *Jews*, «judíos». < <

[13] *Pope* se refiere aquí al poeta inglés Alexander Pope, pero también significa «papa». < <

[14] *Crack* significa «grieta», pero también (en *slang*) «raja del culo». < <

[15] Sic. < <

[16] *Live:* vivo, vivir; *lie:* mentira; *life:* vida. < <

[17] *Arse:* culo; *Ars gratia artis:* el arte por el arte. < <

[18] Viene ahora una sucesión de frases incompletas y / o sin puntuar. Se respetan tal cual aparecen en el original, como sucede con otras tantas peculiaridades tipográficas de Gaddis que ya han aparecido en el libro. [N. de los E.] < <

[19] En español en el original. < <

[20] En español en el original. < <

[21] R. A.: miembro de la *Royal Academy of Arts* (Real Academia de las Artes) de Londres. < <

[22] *May* significa «mayo», y también es nombre de mujer. < <

[23] También conocida como guitarra *lap steel.* Consiste en una guitarra de acero que se coloca sobre el regazo del músico y sobre cuyas cuerdas éste desliza una barra de vidrio o de metal para obtener su peculiar sonido. < <

Notas al pieParte Tercera

[1] En español en el original. <<

[2] *Arsole* suena como *arshole* y como *asshole,* que significan «ojete» y también «capullo», «gilipollas». <<

[3] En español en el original. <<

[4] En español en el original. <<

[5] En español en el original, como el resto de expresiones en cursiva de la página. <<

[6] En español en el original. <<

[7] En español en el original. <<

[8] En español en el original. <<

[9] En español en el original, como el resto de expresiones en cursiva de la página. <<

[10] En español en el original. <<

[11] En español en el original, como el resto de expresiones en cursiva de la página. <<

[12] En español en el original. <<

[13] En español en el original. <<

[14] En español en el original. <<

[15] En español en el original. <<

[16] En español en el original. <<

[17] En español en el original. <<

[18] En español en el original. <<

[19] En español en el original. <<

[20] En español en el original. <<

[21] En español en el original. <<

[22] En español en el original, como el resto de expresiones en cursiva de la página. <<

[23] En español en el original. <<

[24] En español en el original, como el resto de expresiones en cursiva de la página. <<

[25] En español en el original. <<

[26] En español en el original. <<

[27] En español en el original. <<

[28] En español en el original. <<

[29] En español en el original. <<

[30] En español en el original. <<

[31] En español en el original. <<

[32] En español en el original. <<

[33] En español en el original. <<

[34] En español en el original. <<

[35] En español en el original, como el resto de expresiones en cursiva de la página. <<

[36] En español en el original. <<

[37] Todas las palabras que pronuncia Pastora en esta página están en español en el original. <<

[38] En español en el original. <<

[39] En español en el original. <<

[40] En español en el original. <<

[41] En español en el original. <<

[42] En español en el original, como el resto de expresiones en cursiva de la página. <<

[43] En español en el original. <<

[44] En español en el original. <<

[45] En español en el original. <<

[46] En español en el original, como todas las palabras pronunciadas por el guardia civil y todas las expresiones en cursiva de esta página. <<

[47] En español en el original. <<

[48] En español en el original. <<

[49] En español en el original. <<

[50] En español en el original. <<

[51] En español en el original, como todas las expresiones en cursiva de esta página. <<

[52] En español en el original, como todas las expresiones en cursiva de esta página. <<

[53] En español en el original. <<

[54] En español en el original. <<

[55] En español en el original. < <

[56] En español en el original. < <

[57] En español en el original, como el resto de cursivas que siguen. < <

[58] En español en el original: traducción cómica de *Cómo ganar amigos e influir en la gente* de Dale Carnegie. < <

[59] De Evémero (Messina, Sicilia, ca. 330 a. C. - Alejandría, Egipto, ca. 350 a. C.), en griego llamado Ευήμερος, *Euémeros,* que fue un escritor y hermeneuta griego de la época helenística, padre de la corriente hermenéutica conocida como «evermerismo». [N. de los E.] < <

[60] En español en el original. < <

[61] En español en el original. < <

[62] En español en el original. < <

[63] En español en el original. < <

[64] En español en el original. < <

[65] En español en el original. < <

[66] En español en el original. < <

[67] En español en el original. < <

[68] En español en el original. < <

[69] En español en el original. < <

[70] Sic. Este texto lleno de tachaduras, errores, dudas, imprecisiones —palabras mal tecleadas, por ejemplo — pretende reflejar los cambios y las indecisiones propios de la escritura a máquina. [N. de los E.] < <

[71] En español en el original. < <

[72] Herald Tribune. < <

[73] En español en el original. < <